Military, Metaphors and Masculinity: The Construction of Gendered Practice in Leadership Studies

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Introduction

In this paper, we critically examine the use of military as a metaphor for masculinity in leadership literature and discuss what consequences (idealized and unreflexive) use of the military metaphor has for the gendered nature of leadership studies as well as broader organizational practices. We do so by addressing three streams of literature, the traditional leadership literature, the critical literature that mainly deconstructs (darker sides of) leadership as well as literature on gender and leadership. The uncritical use of the metaphor is further discussed through two illustrations of how the military itself in fact performs leadership in gender transgressive ways.

Theoretical positioning

Traditional leadership literature is typically cast in terms of highly masculinist associations. Here metaphors of military, sports, and sexual conquest chief (e.g. Amernic et al., 2007; Grint, 2000; Spicer, 2012). The military metaphor is used to display (and idealize) masculine behavior as aggressive, violent, disciplined and competitive (Bartone et al., 2007; Hardy et al., 2010; Harms et al., 2011, Wong et al., 2003).

The critical leadership literature then sets out to deconstructs leadership and exposes the darker sides of this harsh masculine behavior. Although critical of the effect of such harsh militaristic leadership style, the military metaphor is still used to represent masculinity through referring to ‘tough guys’, ‘alpha males’ or ‘predators’ (Grint, 2014; Spicer, 2012; Paunonen et al., 2006).

A long tradition of gendered leadership literature takes a critical stand to the very glorification of the masculine ideal itself as its point of critique and criticizes leadership literature for promoting men and male heterosexual bodies. In this way, this literature exposes the masculinist underpinnings of military metaphor
but replaces it with feminine and/or feminist metaphors (Beyer, 1999; Boyce and Herd, 2003; Furst and Reeves, 2008; Pini, 2005).

The argument

The problem, however with all three strands of literature is that they’re all stuck in the gender binary and, specifically, an affiliated hard-soft binary. This seems to happen in three ways:

1. Traditional leadership literature: advocates military metaphor
2. Critical leadership literature: deconstructs (darker sides of) military metaphor
3. Gendered leadership literature: exposes masculinist underpinnings of military metaphor and replaces with feminine and/or feminist metaphors

Despite their disagreements, our argument here is that all three strands of literature hinge on a static/fixed reading of the military metaphor as necessarily bound to the extreme masculine/hard pole with an emphasis on hyper-strong bodies, courage and self-sacrifice, hierarchy and chain of command, top-down strategy, clear role/task divisions, a ‘firm hand’ that coordinates conquest, emotion limited to bonding/cohesion toward ‘hyped-up’ group morale, etc. (See e.g. Rich et al., 2012). The gender binary is in this way at work in all 3 strands of leadership literature and reproduces the binary with its not-so-subtle rendition of hard v soft leadership (see also Muhr, 2012; Muhr and Sullivan, 2013).

Such fixed binary reading fixes leadership literature – as well as practice – in static gender organizational practices and gendered organizing won’t be transformed until we loosen and replace these static uses of metaphors. Thus, the crucial distinction of our approach is that we neither endorse hard military imagery (i.e., #1—embrace the old metaphor), nor surface its underbelly (i.e., #2—critique the old), nor advocate its replacement with softer imagery (i.e., #3—call for new metaphors). Rather, we challenge the flat, unilateral masculine interpretation of ‘military’ on which all 3 current approaches are founded. Instead we want to investigate new and nuanced readings of old metaphors (including those presumed hard and masculine, such as sports & sexual conquest, as well as those deemed soft and feminine) with an eye toward shattering the gendered hard-soft binary and queering leadership imagery.

Illustrations

To illustrate such queering of the gendered stereotype of ‘military’, we turn to two vignettes from the Danish and Norwegian military, respectively.

1) The first vignette is based on interviews with high-ranking military officers about leadership. Here, in the narratives told, successful leadership and successful advancement in the organization is explained with a mix of masculine and feminine metaphors.
2) In the second vignette, which is based on participant observations from a leadership development workshop with the Norwegian military, femininity and masculinity is bizarrely skewed and mixed in the way a belly dancer was used as a body consultant for the participants – all highly ranked military personal.

We will in the vignettes show how none of the three scholarly explanations above can explain the use of masculinity and femininity in the description of leadership, thus questioning how the metaphor of the military is used in all three strands of literature. What is interesting about both vignettes, is that hyper masculinity and hyper femininity is at play at levels which other organizations (not typically associated so strongly with masculinity) normally don’t embody.

**Preliminary conclusions**

Still, however, the military is unreflexively and uncritically used as a metaphor for hyper masculinity in leadership literature. We therefore add to the body of literature that questions the binary constructions of gender in leadership and organizational practice (see also Philips et al., 2013; Muhr and Rehn, 2014) by showing how the use of the military metaphor reinforces such binary construction. With our vignettes, which ‘queer’ accounts of military leadership we also show how such theoretical binary not necessarily is reflected in practice and thus lays ground to how the constructions of the metaphors we use in leadership should be constructed differently beyond multiplicity, as sketched above toward seemingly contradictory hybrid notions like ‘The Seductive Soldier’, or ‘The Officer Empath’, or others. These sorts of fusions can move us past the binary because they suggest more than Yin and Yang contained in one body that somehow alternates between them, or honors both but maintains their separation. Rather, these fusions evoke a more genuine hybridity, where multiple possibilities entwine to create Queer Figures, which render neat dualisms difficult to maintain.

**References**


