Facing the Challenge of Being a Woman Officer in the Belgian Army: Personality Profile and Coping Strategies

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Abstract

Forty years ago, the first women soldiers joined the Belgian army. Since then, much progress has been made in the feminization of the staffs, particularly through various laws and policies implemented on this purpose. However, female staff is still a largely under-represented group in the Belgian army. This could be mainly explained by the fact that the characteristics traditionally assigned to women do not match the military culture, primarily based on so-called "male" values.

Given this situation, we tried to identify the personality profile and the coping strategies of those women who chose to pursue a leadership career, as army officer, in a male-dominated environment. We therefore conducted a survey with a selected sample of 38 female military officers. Four tools were used: an anamnestic questionnaire, the Revised NEO Personality Inventory, the Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations and the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory. From the main sample, we then extracted a subsample of 17 officers who agreed to participate in a semi-structured interview.

The results of the personality inventory revealed high marks in the areas of extraversion and consciousness, and a low score in neuroticism. The CISS allowed us to demonstrate that our subjects do not use a specific style of coping and the CSEI highlighted that their self-esteem is within the average range. The semi-directive interviews confirmed these results and allowed us to observe that most of our subjects do not perceive discrimination relating to their career development even if the access to promotions is still limited.

Keywords: Woman officers, Belgian Army, Personality Profiles, Coping strategies

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Introduction

Forty years ago, the first women soldiers joined the Belgian army. Since then, much progress has been made in the feminization of the staffs, particularly through various laws and policies implemented on this purpose. However, female staff is still a largely under-represented group in the Belgian army (7.6% vs 10.3% on average in the armed forces of NATO member nations in 2014).
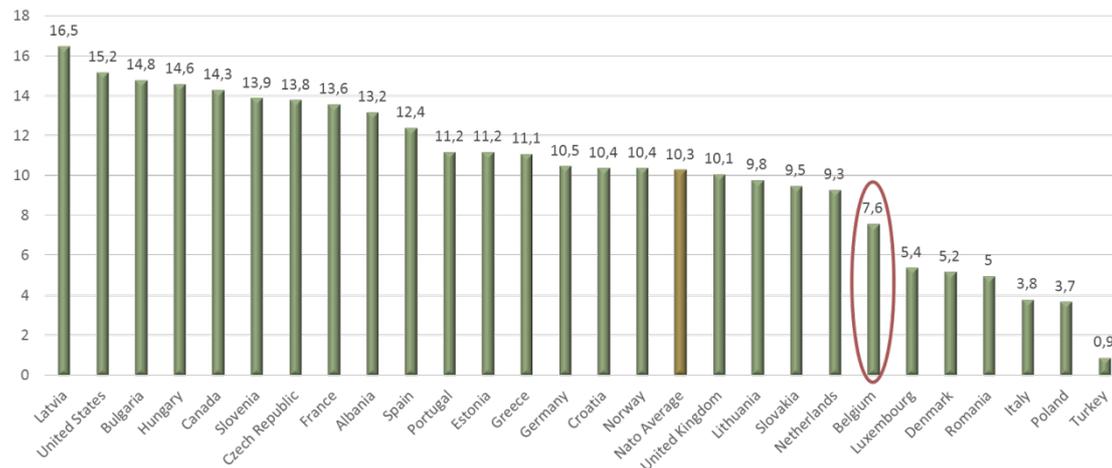

Figure 1: Women in the armed forces of NATO member nations,
by country in 2014 (NATO, 2016)

This could be mainly explained by the fact that the characteristics traditionally assigned to women do not match the military culture, primarily based on so-called "male" values. Since early childhood, girls and boys are indeed educated in a differentiated way and this gendered approach very deeply defines what is socially expected of a woman and a man. Later, these learnings reinforce a divided view of the world of work and restrict access to certain gender-centered professions, such as the military career. According to these stereotypes, women should show dedication, caring for others, greater emotional sensitivity and some mental flexibility. On the other hand, they are also often described are less strong than men and even, as physically vulnerable. This profile does not correspond to the one that define a good soldier: physical and mental strength, courage, self-control, obedience...

In the army, these stereotypes remain very present and hamper women's access to high hierarchical levels. This could explain why many studies focus on gender stereotypes and more specifically, on the possible links between sexual stereotypes and leadership efficiency (Boldry et al., 2001; Boyce & Herd, 2003). Moreover, the studies rarely focused on senior women army officers and these successful women are rarely studied in the scientific literature through their psychological characteristics. Our research attempts to fill the gaps by approaching these women 'own personality, skills and talents and by analyzing, among other things, the strategies they used to succeed their professional career.

2. Methodology

2.1. Purpose of the research

The purpose of our research was to identify the personality profile and the coping strategies of those women who chose to pursue a leadership career, as army officer, in a male-dominated environment.

2.2. Research questions

Our research questions were: What are the main personality traits that characterize the female officers in our sample? What type(s) of coping strategies do the female officers use to overcome the difficulties they encounter in their workplace? What is the level of self-esteem of our female officers? What were the personal motivations which led our female officers to join the army? Do the female officers consider that it is difficult to be a woman in the army? What are the factors that enable these women to effectively combine work and family life?

2.3. Instrumentation

In order to investigate our research questions, five tools were used: an anamnestic questionnaire, the Revised NEO Personality Inventory, the Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations, the Coopersmith Self-esteem Inventory and semi-directive interviews.

2.3.1. The anamnestic questionnaire

The first tool, the anamnestic questionnaire, gave us the opportunity to collect information about individual life course. This information was completed by some identifying data (age, army, and years of service). The anamnestic questionnaire authorized us to offer a description of the sample's characteristics.

2.3.2. The Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI-R; Costa & Mc Crae, 1992)

The NEO-PI-R is a personality inventory based on the idea that personality traits are hierarchically organized: from the most general to the most specific. It assesses the Big Five personality traits (Plaisant *et al.,* 2010): Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness to Experience. Additionally, the inventory assesses six subordinate dimensions (known as facets) of each of the main personality factors.

The NEO-PI-R is a self-administered questionnaire of 240 items (descriptions of behavior) answered on a five-point Likert scale (ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"). At the end of the pass, all the notes of the subject are transferred to a profile sheet. The individual is then located in relation with each dimension and facet according to a reference group. The administration of the full version takes between 30 and 40 minutes.

The French translation of NEO-PI-R was carried out by Rolland and Petot in 1994. This translation was first validated in a preliminary study involving 447 students and then in an examination of 801 adults (Rolland 1998 in Bouvard, 2009). The French adaptation of the tool has satisfactory psychometric qualities.

2.3.3. The Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS; Rolland, 1998)

The CISS is an instrument of self-assessment strategies used by people confronted with stressful situations. "Coping strategies refer to the specific efforts, both behavioral and psychological, that employ people to master, tolerate, reduce, or minimize stressful events". It is based on three main dimensions: Task (the participant seeks a solution to the problem by action), Emotion (it is quickly overwhelmed, missing distance, and gives emotional responses) and Avoidance (it tries to reduce the stress either by distraction or social diversion, which are two subscales of the inventory). This questionnaire includes 48 items (16 items for the dimension of the task, 16 for emotion, and 16 for avoidance). The Avoidance-oriented scale resulted in the identification of two subcomponents: Distraction (8 items) and Social Diversion (8 items). This tool gave us the possibility to identify common patterns of coping strategies in the sample (Endler & Parker, 1990).

2.3.4. The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (Coopersmith, 1984)

The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory is a 50-item measure of attitudes toward oneself. For each item, participants answer whether the statement provided is "like me" or "not like me". This brief self-report questionnaire has no time limit, but assessment usually takes fifteen minutes. Five subscales yield scores for self-esteem in relation to general, social, familial and professional self. The scores from these subscales are combined for a general self-esteem score. The scale is accompanied by an eight-item lie scale to assess defensiveness. In the field of psychology, self-esteem is considered as an important component to good mental health and stability.

2.3.5. Semi-directive interviews

We used semi-directive interviews in order to investigate some of our research questions. This instrument is interesting because it respects the interpersonal dimension of communication. In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer generally has a framework of themes to be explored. This is why he generally has a prepared interview guide. Interview guide helps the researcher to focus on the selected topics without constraining them to a particular format. Our interview guide was centered on topics related to the personal motivation and the difficulties experienced but also on work and family life reconciliation.

2.4. Samples and research planning

38 subjects composed our first sample; all of them were female military officers. These 38 subjects answer the questions of the anamnestic questionnaire and were assessed by the three standardized tests (the Revised NEO Personality Inventory, the Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations and the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory). The second sample is a subset of the first one (17 subjects) and was selected in order to participate in the semi-directive interview.
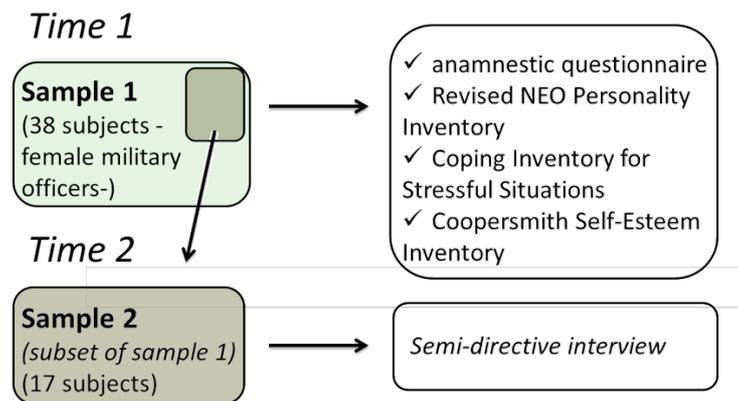

Figure 2: Research planning

3. Main results

3.1. Anamnesis information

The average age of our first sample is 33.87 years (with a standard deviation of 6.13). The youngest participant is 25 years old, the eldest is 56 years. Our officers experienced on average 13.34 years of service with a minimum of 2 years and a maximum of 38 years.

SAMPLE 1 (38 subjects)			
Army: 17	**Air Force:** 8	**Medical component:** 8	**Navy:** 5
Mean age: 33.87 years ($\sigma = 6.13$; min = 25; max = 56)			
Years of service: 13.34 years ($\sigma = 6.92$, min = 2; max = 38)			

Table 1: characteristics of sample 1

The average age of our second sample is 34.35 years (with a standard deviation of 7.27). The youngest participant is 26 years old, the eldest is 56 years. Our officers experienced on average 15.29 years of service with a minimum of 2 years and a maximum of 38 years.

SAMPLE 2 (17 subjects)			
Army: 6	**Air Force:** 4	**Medical component:** 4	**Navy:** 3
Mean age: 34.35 years (σ = 7.27; min = 26; max = 56)			
Years of service: 15.29 years (σ = 8.16, min = 2; max = 38)			

Table 2: characteristics of sample 2

3.2. Revised NEO Personality Inventory

What are the main personality traits that characterize the female officers in our sample?

The results of the personality inventory revealed high marks in the areas of extraversion and consciousness, and a low score in neuroticism. These results highlight an important emotional stability.

Figure 3: Results of the Revised NEO Personality Inventory

. Neuroticism (low)

A low "neuroticism" score indicates that, compared to the population average, our female officers tend to feel less negative affects (such as guilt, sadness, fear...). They are characterized by a low anxiety level and low stress vulnerability. They are thus able to adequately control their impulses and to successfully face stressful situations. They are little affected by the distress of others and by failures.

. Extraversion (high)

A high "extraversion" score indicates that they have a positive perception of reality, of themselves and about life in general. They are optimistic and show high energy, cheerfulness and sociability in everyday life. They preferably look for stimulating environments rather than calm ones and enjoy working with many people around them. They appreciate to live a hectic and busy lifestyle.

. Conscientiousness (high)

A high "conscientiousness" score indicates that they are driven by a wish for self-improvement and success. They are determined and persistent. Professionally reliable and self-disciplined, they feel well-prepared to face the challenges and are confident in their own skills. They are very attentive to their moral obligations.

These results are in line with those of Detrick and Chibnall (2006) which analyzed the psychological profile of the most able police officers. According to this study, the best police recruits (men and women) also have high "conscientiousness" and "extraversion" scores while they have a low "neuroticism" score. These results show that a particular personality is maybe required to perform a function such as military or police, both for women and men.

3.3. Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations

What type(s) of coping strategies do the female officers use to overcome the difficulties they encounter in their workplace?

The CISS allowed us to demonstrate that our subjects do not use a specific style of coping: all scores are in the mean zone, except the task-oriented coping score which is a very little higher (56.87). Therefore, we can say that our female officers seem able to adapt their strategies according to various encountered situations.
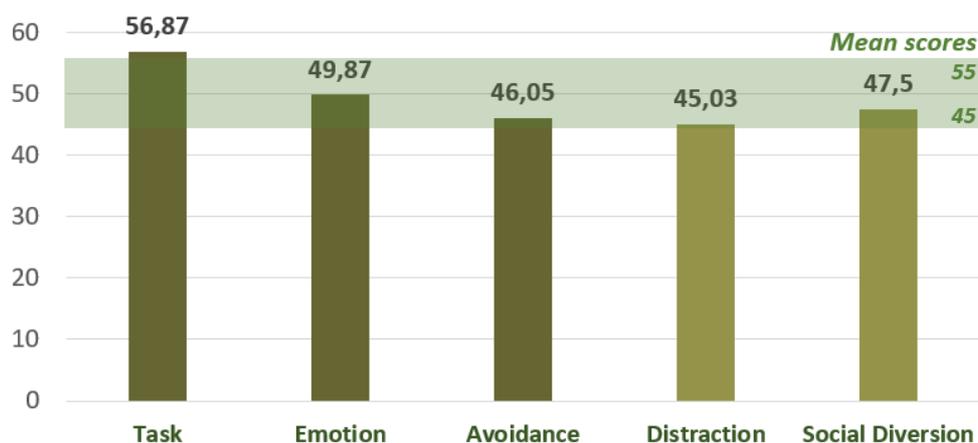

Figure 4: CISS results

According to the findings of Firth-Cozen and Morisson (1989), women would use more coping strategies centered on emotion whereas men would prefer task-oriented strategies. We can observe the opposite in our sample. It therefore appears that

women tend to deploy coping strategies closer to those of men when they have to deal with a gendered job.

3.4. Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory

What is the level of self-esteem of our female officers?

According to Lasser and Priou (1998), women in a so-called male occupation show high level of self-confidence. Surprisingly, the scores obtained by the subjects of our sample (41.58/50) do not reveal very high self-esteem. Indeed, in reference to the calibrated total scores, their own total mean score is between the 32nd and 69th percentile (class 3 of 5 - scores between 41 and 45). The self-esteem of our subjects is therefore within the average range (Coopersmith, 1984) but, during the semi-directive interviews, they explained that their self-esteem had grown stronger whenever a challenge had been overcome.

	General	Social	Familial	Professional	TOTAL	*Lie*
Mean score	21.1	6.76	6.63	7.08	**41.58**	*3.76*
Scale maximum	26	8	8	8	**50**	*8*

Table 3: SEI results
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These results also show that senior women officers have less integration difficulties because of the respect for hierarchy that characterize the Army, as well as the obligation of respect and obedience towards all officers.

We can also notice that the results of table 3 show that they have a higher self-esteem in the professional subscale (7.08/8) than in the family (6.63/8) and the social (6.76/8) ones. This confirms a true personal achievement through their professional activity.

Finally, if we compare the officers' lie scale score with the reference population's one, we find that our sample has a slightly higher mean score (3.76 vs. 3.22). However, since the gap between these two scores is relatively small, we don't believe that any defensiveness has influenced the results of the test in any way.

3.5. Semi-directive interview

What were the personal motivations which led our female officers to join the army?

The main personal motivations of our female officers to join the Belgian army were the opportunities offered by this corps in which physical fitness is a job requirement: moving, traveling, sport training and facing challenges. Taking part in humanitarian missions was also an appreciated dimension of the job. Their choice was moreover conditioned by the opportunities for personal development and self-perfection, as well as by the emphasis on moral values. At last, earning a wage during schooling is an important aspect that, according to them, shouldn't be ignored.

Do the female officers consider that it is difficult to be a woman in the army?

Our subjects have a positive perception of their professional experience even if they are sometimes confronted with sexist jokes. They develop positive relationships with male colleagues but they regularly feel obliged to prove themselves more than the male officers. They do not perceive discrimination relating to their career development even if the access to promotions is still limited.

What are the factors that enable these women to effectively combine work and family life?

Most of the women of our sample are married (14/17), 8 of them with a soldier, and 3 are single.

Our subjects do not want to sacrifice their family life in order to succeed in their career. However, they sometimes feel guilt and frustration of not being able to do both as perfectly as they would like. They need to be very organized and able to plan their everyday life. They also need to implement different external supports (help from the spouse, cleaning person, for housework, babysitting, etc.).

It seems that the military husbands pay particularly attention to the career of their wives: they do all they can to allow them to fully live their live as officers because they know how involving this profession could be. They share everyday tasks and intensively participate in the education of children. They also take over when their wives are absent. Our subjects report that the Ministry of Defense ensures not to send the two members of a couple abroad at the same period.

4. Conclusion

Being a woman in the Belgian Army is still a challenge but discrimination seems to be less intensive than some years ago. The professional experience in a male environment is clearly positive even though it requires a great motivation and a good adaptability. Military women officers are very sensitive to moral values and demonstrate high emotional stability. Even if they do not have a high self-esteem, they can take advantage of their flexibility and can adapt their coping strategies according to the encountered situations. Because they love their job, they show great organizational qualities and unfailing motivation to achieve the goals they have set for themselves. As they don't want to be torn between their roles as mother and officer, they do everything they can to keep a good balance between work and family life.

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