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## **Military Women: Navigating Complicated Gender Boundaries in the Pursuit of a Career in a Masculine Gendered Organization**

In spite of the totalitarian rule the U.S. military has over soldiers' lives, many members of the armed forces find ways to confront and resist certain social and cultural principals and standards integrated into military policy, which undermine various groups' participation within the institution. This resistance challenges particular facets of military policy, specifically those associated with social stereotypes, without undermining the overall goals of the institution. Women are one such group who find themselves facing rules and regulations that demonstrate the military's ambivalent relationship with their service. The military has a hard time deciding on women's roles and place within the institution. While the Army has long since reconciled itself to the necessity of women's presence and participation (Manning 2005), and even fights to maintain or extend their current level of involvement (Jervis 2005), it still has not after all these years figured out how to successfully integrate women. The military continues to struggle with regulations regarding women's membership in the Armed Services. From hairstyles and uniforms to training expectations and physical standards, the official policies for women's participation in the military leave women under pressure to fit into an "Army of One" where the one is not female, nor does the Army know what to do with females. Complicating matters further are the social and cultural expectations of gender individual members of the military bring with them to their roles. Gender has thus become a matter of great ambivalence within the military; women are acknowledged as necessary, yet their presence complicates the military's mission of uniformity and also challenges the maintenance of a hegemonically masculine institution. While the contradiction present within this ambivalence leaves women precariously placed within the institution, female soldiers find ways to overcome the limitations placed on them based on their sex in order to succeed within the institution.

Within military organizations there are two main levels of approach to any given problem: strategy and tactics. A strategy is an overarching plan designed to accomplish a particular goal, while tactics are the discrete means by which the plan is enacted. Female soldiers employ a similar philosophy in their navigation of the incongruity inherent between their traditional feminine social roles and the military's more masculine gender expectations. While the cultural atmosphere of military life often prevents women from making a unified offensive, many still have a common goal of becoming integrated members of the armed forces, even if this means challenging some of the regulations and cultural practices that composes one dimension of the institution. So while it does not come in a cohesive action, many individual women strive in remarkably similar patterns to accomplish their goals through the employment of three main strategies that allow them to effectively navigate the boundaries of potentially contradictory social and cultural expectations of gender performance. These three strategies (emphasizing the feminine, minimizing the feminine, and constructing a more balanced gender performance) are composed of a large variety of tactics, applied in varying combinations. Some of these tactics entail bodily manipulation and control (management of biological sex or physical manifestations of femininity), while others target emotional or affective responses (management of socialized gender performance). Each strategy has benefits and drawbacks, both to the women as individuals and female soldiers as a group, but each is employed in an attempt for women to gain more complete access within a traditionally masculine institution.

As previously mentioned, within my research I found that there are three basic strategies women use to counter the existing prejudice and stereotypical ideas about women's roles and ability to succeed within the military, which also act as a challenge to problematic or obsolete policies. Some females play into their expected roles, and even exaggerate them. Their solution

to the problem of prejudice is to play up the stereotypes already attributed to them. Other women reacted differently, working harder to fight against the stereotypes, breaking down barriers whenever possible. Many women did this through overcompensation, instead of doing as well as their male colleagues, they did their best to exceed them. The final category consisted of the women who focused their attention on invisibility; they neither played into stereotypes, nor attempted to break them. These women mostly tried to stay under the radar, drawing attention to themselves neither for success nor for failure. Individual women do not necessarily employ any one of these three strategies in a singular, consistent manner. In my observations, many women adapted their strategies regularly in order to reflect their current situation or feelings. Even those women who remained fairly unswerving in their dedication to a single strategy would on occasion dip into tactics related to the other two strategies. Almost all the women in my study used at least one tactic that could be categorized under each of the three strategies over the course of training.

One complication of the use of these various strategies is that when a female soldier acts, her actions do not only reflect on her as an individual, but also on women as a group (Acker 2001, Acker 1992, Moss Kanter 1977), either reaffirming or challenging gender stereotypes. Women have varying reactions to the scrutiny on their actions. While some women focus on their own success, rather than the advancement of all women, other women are conscious that their actions affect the treatment and evaluation of all of their sex (Schneider and Schneider 1988). This can result in an increase of their own performance, as well as an increase in the standards to which they hold other women. So while some women may try to avoid the generalization of their performance into the greater category of their sex, just about all women at some point or another are confronted by the reality of the significance of their actions, either

through direct observation, or through indirect means wherein other women call attention to the issue (Herbert 1998, Schneider and Schneider 1988). What this means is that awareness becomes an integral part of women's gender performance in the military. Female soldiers' actions and responses are more often than not conscious decisions enacted to confront, combat, or avoid gender roles, regulations, standards, and stereotypes. Although some of women's gendered performances are unconscious acts that reflect years of gender socialization, many reflect awareness of their complicated gender position and pro-active attempts at acceptance, integration, or concealment (Barkalow 1990, Herbert 1998, Schneider and Schneider 1988).

The ultimate goal of all these strategies and specific tactics is for women to find ways to successfully navigate between the gendered expectations of their masculine roles as soldier and the preconceived association between female sex and femininity, not to mention the expectations that come from their feminine roles (as daughters, sisters, mothers wives, etc) that sometimes contradict their position as soldier. Most women try to strike a balance between these multiple gender expectations; they attempt to balance their characteristics in each role, maintaining those characteristics, which they find important across roles. This was evidenced in that over time, no one woman stuck to a strictly masculine or a strictly feminine persona. They utilized characteristics from both genders in order to attempt to strike a balance in both their work and their personal presentation of self.

The variation in performances does not have to do with which role is at the forefront, but rather who is around and what is going on. Each woman chose her tactics based on the particular situation she was in, and based on the people with whom she was working. Using Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, the women's performances depended greatly upon the scene and the audience (1959). While Goffman's concept of performance refers to the management of all

human interactions, and there were very obvious performances of gender for both men and women, the stakes for women in this case were much greater. Part of their training was not only to learn the tasks and expectations of military success on an organizational level, but also to be able to identify and correctly perform certain gender identities based on individual male expectations. They had to be able to classify those men who were more comfortable with diminutive women, versus those who needed to see that women could pull their own weight. Women consequently had to stringently manage their presentation of self, when there were multiple and somewhat contradictory expectations of self to present. This is a prime example of DuBois' idea of double consciousness and Hill-Collins's concept of the outsider within. It was impossible for any of the women to shed any of their identities, and thus important and necessary to maintain all identities in spite of their contradictions. According to Herbert (1998), the women's performances endeavor to sort out how to be a woman in a masculine institution. The question each woman in essence has to come to terms with is whether one can "truly be a soldier and a woman and not be viewed as deviating either from what it means to be a soldier or from what it means to be a woman" (Herbert 1998, 10).

In spite of women's carefully crafted performances and attention to detail, all the women in my study ran into many barriers in their attempts to harmonize their incongruous roles. In spite of their individual histories, women's actions almost always provoked concern either about their soldiering or about their femininity. Women who performed admirably at many or all of their assigned tasks but yielded to tears on occasion were subjects of suspicion and concern. Similarly, quiet women whose dispositions were generally peaceful provoked fear and shock through their skill with rifles and grenades. While extended displays of gender were the most

problematic, isolated instances such as these, which should have helped the women balance out their images, also instigated analysis of women's suitability as soldiers, or failure at femininity.

Deviations on either end of the spectrum have very real and potentially harmful career consequences. If a woman demonstrates too many feminine traits, others question her abilities as a soldier. If she is weak, docile, quiet, or frail, others question her ability to succeed in the masculine world of power, aggression, loudness and strength. If she exhibits forms of femininity associated with sexuality, specifically heterosexuality, even if that just means traditional physical beauty, people (men and women alike) question how she achieved her success and often assume it had to do with "sleeping her way to the top" (Barkalow 1990, Herbert 1998, Schnieder and Schneider 1988).

On the other hand, a lack of obvious heterosexuality or extreme success in too many masculine arenas is also problematic. Because of the association in American society of gender performance with sexuality, any deviation from traditional femininity means women's sexuality is questioned. In an institution that associates femininity with weakness, the lack of femininity with masculinity, and masculinity with success, this is particularly problematic. In order to effectively perform as soldiers women must demonstrate proficiency at traditionally masculine characteristics, tasks, and goals, but by so doing open themselves up to criticism and allegations of homosexuality. Since in the military one cannot be openly gay or lesbian, any allegation of homosexuality can be career ending. The particular harm of the association of masculine women with lesbianism is evident in the effects of the "don't ask, don't tell policy." The 2008 results of a study commissioned by the Palm Center, "found that women comprised half of U.S. Army and Air Force personnel discharged under the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, despite the fact that women comprise only a small percentage of those branches" (Welsh 2008). As paradoxical as it

sounds, this astounding statistic signifies the very real trouble women's successful soldiering poses to their military careers.

The trouble lies in that fact that within the military any direct indication of femininity is seen as a weakness, and for females certain masculine qualities are also still seen as inappropriate, even within the military context. This indicates the significance of the outcome of women's gender performance and the necessity of maintaining both identities within a double consciousness, or all identities within a multiple consciousness. It also demonstrates how vital to women's survival within the military are the strategies and tactics they assume in order to balance on the fine line of both acceptable femininity and tolerable masculinity. Because the military has yet to figure out how to reconcile the masculine expectations of being a soldier with people whose biology does not align socially or culturally with the requirements, female soldiers continue to have to straddle two competing sets of expectations. The ways in which women accomplish this balance allows them not only to find success in an otherwise restricted institution, but also to challenge both hegemonic gender ideologies as well as some of the ideological foundations of the military.

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