Expanding organizational routines while preserving professional identity: Introducing female officers into combat roles in the Royal Air Force

Women have always played a crucial role in the armed forces. However, they were still banned from taking part in ground combat until 2018. We follow the first female intake into ground combat training within the Royal Air Force and focus on the transition from an all-male to a mixed-gender course.

Our research combines routine dynamics with professional identities; it makes sense as it is individuals who make patterns of action possible, and these individuals are, in turn, embedded in professions which shape their actions (D'Dadderio, 2011; Seele & Grand, 2016).

Our preliminary findings point towards professional identity as a source of stability in routines. Despite attempts by the training design team to incorporate adjustments in the course's programme, we found that routine participants resisted the changes as it threatened their professional identities.

Track: Strategy-as-Practice

Word count: 2049

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Introduction

Women have always played a crucial role in the British Armed Forces. However, their contribution has been more commonly seen in supporting roles such as medics, logisticians, signals, and engineers whilst their participation in ground combat historically restricted. Although there are documented cases of women's participation in battle, they were banned from close combat as the Ministry of Defence feared it could undermine team cohesion and consequently affect operational effectiveness (Cawkill *et al.,* 2009)

After several policy reviews, in 2016, the British Prime Minister announced the government's intent to lift the ban on women serving in ground combat roles – the process was only completed in October 2018 when all combat roles became open to female soldiers and officers (MOD, 2018). This change brought many implications to the Armed Forces and to British society as a whole; nonetheless, it also posed some practical challenges too: how did those Corps adjust its routines to accommodate women into a historically all-male environment? What impact did this have on the professional identity of those serving and of those joining up?

To answer those questions, we look at the literature on Routine Dynamics (RD) (Feldman, 2000; Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Parmigiani & Howard-Greenville, 2011) and Professional Identities (Ibarra, 1999; Karali, 2021; Kosmali, 2005) and follow the first female intake into ground combat training within the Royal Air Force.

Combining RD and professional identity literature enhances our understanding. Although the impact of professional identity on routines is already recognised in RD: individuals make patterns of action possible, and these individuals are, in turn, embedded in professions which shape their actions (D'Adderio, 2011; Sele & Grand, 2016), as argued by Kho & Spee (2021), the intersection between the two fields remains underexplored with considerations merely scattered within the wider RD literature.

The journey to become a RAF Regt officer includes the 26-week gruelling Junior Regiment Officers' Course (JROC). Focused on ground combat training, it includes soldiering skills, fieldcraft, weapon proficiency and leadership lessons to command and lead troops. It is very physically and mentally demanding with a pass-rate of just under 50% based on the last four iterations of the course. Our research focuses on the transition from an all-male to a mixed-gender course and the implications this had on a few selected, relevant organizational routines within the course.

Our preliminary findings point towards professional (and aspirational) identity as a source of stability in routines, despite the necessary adjustment taking place in the organizational routines to accommodate female officers. Despite attempts by the training design team and the staff to incorporate adjustments in the course's programme, we found that routine participants (including the female officers) resisted the changes as it threatened their (aspired) professional identities; to our surprise, it was not the male but the female officers who mostly objected the changes – as they aspired to become part of the RAF Regt they did not want to see the identity of a Regiment Officer changed, modified, or discounted.

Theoretical Framework – RD and Professional Identities

Routines are defined as "repetitive, recognizable patterns of interdependent actions, involving multiple actors" (Feldman & Pentland, 2003, p.96); the performative aspect and the focus on actions and actors are thus central in this definition of organizational routines as generative systems. RD scholars study how routines are performed by specific actors at specific times in specific locations (Pentland and Feldman, 2005), questioning the previously adopted routine's definition as structural and representational recurring patterns that guarantee stability (March and Simon, 1958; Cyert and March, 1963). The routine participants, as described in RD, hence play an important role in generating stability as well as change in routines as they exercise agency in the daily enactment of the routine (Feldman *et al.*,2016).

The intersection here is that routine participants exercise agency to varying degrees across the performative repetitions of the routine to produce stability or change (Howard-Greenville, 2005; Safavi & Omidvar, 2016). Feldman and Orlikowski (2011) highlight that routines cannot be understood if the agency that produces them is not taken into consideration; we also know from the extant literature that the professional identities of such routine participants influence their exercised agency (Kosmala, 2005). As a "relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role" (Ibarra, 1999, pp. 764-765), these professional identities shape and in turn are shaped by routine enactments (Karali, 2021).

Despite the clear relationship between RD and professional identity, not much research has been done on the intersection between the two important organizational concepts. Thus, as argued by Karali (2021), there are many avenues for future studies. In light of this, we ask to what extent do professional identities influence routine stability and change through daily enactments? If threatened by routine design changes, how can professional identities act as a source for routine stability?

Changes to a routine may threaten the professional identity of routine participants and, in this case, individuals may resist the modifications to protect those identities (O'Connor, 2008). Although change can be designed in routines (Frithjof & Glaser, 2021; Glaser, 2017), the enactment by the routine participants themselves plays a deciding factor in resisting or complying with those changes (Safavi, 2021; Safavi & Omidvar, 2016).

In this paper, we report our observation of how the JROC was pressured to change to accommodate the intake of female officers into the RAF Regt and allocated a team to design the routine expansion. More interestingly, we saw how these proposed changes challenged the professional identity of its soldiers and the aspirational identity of those women joining the Corps.

Research setting

This research is based on a case study within the RAF Regiment (RAF Regt) which is a specialist Corps of the Royal Air Force (RAF) focused on ground combat. The RAF Regt was founded by Royal warrant in 1942 with the purpose to defend the RAF from the ground and has roughly 2,500 personnel (officers and other ranks) spread across the UK or deployed overseas.

The RAF Regt was established as all-male, and it remained so until 2017 when it began to accept applications and transfer requests from female candidates (it was only in 2020 that the first female officers completed training and were admitted into the Corps). The first author is

an officer in that unit and thus our study focuses solely on the officer stream where, as of February 2022, two women have attempted and successfully completed the training.

We had unique access to the training programme as a participant of an all-male JROC in 2019 and, in 2020, followed closely the first mixed-gender course from which the two female officers graduated. The timing was very privileged, and we had the opportunity to follow the JROC routines prior and after the admission of the first women officer trainees.

Methods

Data collection

To address our research questions, the study was designed as an explorative, ethnographic case study and was based on participant observation, document analysis and interviews (Emerson et al., 1995; Van Maanen, 1979; Yin, 2009).

The RAF was chosen as a high-reliability organization (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007) and a generous access to data was granted based on the personal links of the first author. It is an extreme case due to the nature of the organization (military) and how it deals with crisis (armed conflicts). As a high-reliability organization, the case offers interesting insights since "this kind of organization has to skilfully handle the tension between carrying out error-free, reliable (stable) performances while being able to constantly respond to the dynamic (changing) setting" (Danner-Schröder and Geiger, 2016, p.634); nonetheless, we believe it can still contribute to theory building as the findings can be applied in various organizational settings grappling with improving inclusion and diversity.

Our data collection was based on three sources. First and most importantly, the first author is part of the RAF Regt and took part in the JROC in 2019; therefore, his experience and insider-access to the training was a big part of our data collection. Second, we gathered official and unofficial documents released by the RAF Regt (including guidelines, training programmes, emails, and other internal documents) to illustrate the process of change and adaptation to prepare the corps for its first female officers. Third, four semi-structured interviews are conducted so far with personnel including the JROC staff, training design team and former students.

The research is still ongoing and thus we expect to collect more data over the coming months.

Data analysis

Data collection and analysis are being done concurrently since 2020. The process to analyse the data is fairly conventional and the main focus has been to qualitatively examine interview contents, written material and the first author's notes from his observations of the JROC. We class the process as iterative because, as themes and findings are emerging, we keep alternating our focus between data and concepts in an inductive approach. As outlined by Clark *et al.* (2010), we are closely scrutinising our data in an effort to identify themes which are then being further condensed into theoretical concepts within the intersection of RD and professional identities.

Lastly, we are discussing the preliminary findings with the members of the RAF Regt that were interviewed. We have already received feedback, validated our thought process but also allowed the participants to reflect on the results (Yin, 2009). This has been helping us to significantly

improve our findings' reliability and validity, together with the triangulation of our data sources.

Although data collection is still ongoing, the preliminary findings are reported in the next section.

Preliminary Findings

The RAF Regt was informed that two female candidates were joining its Junior Regiment Officer Course starting in February 2020. As the RAF Regt had been an all-male unit since its creation in 1942, the JROC training team conducted a training need analysis to identify the changes that were needed to accommodate its new participants.

Some of the changes were led by the RAF Regt training team whereas others dictated by the wider RAF. The training team, for instance, assigned dedicated female toilets in the school buildings and in the accommodation blocks. The RAF, in support, outlined the need for a female instructor to join the team to aid the process of incorporating the new female officers into the course. The RAF also established a medical policy for female candidates – they were given dedicated medical support to prevent injury from carrying excessive loads during their training.

Although such changes to the programme were introduced to the JROC, there was still an unwritten effort to maintain the standards. All physical training activities remained the same and the mixed-gender course went through the same arduous training as the all-male course did. The students were still required to carry heavy loads in their rucksacks and to conduct long-distance patrols whilst living in the field for weeks at a time. Similarly, the pressure of the leadership lessons and assessments were also very similar and the mixed-gender JROC was just as challenging as it had previously been.

In their desire to become RAF Regiment Officers, the female students were the first to reject the concessions made to accommodate their intake. Despite having dedicated showers and toilets, they made clear to their male colleagues that everyone could and should use any of the facilities; they were also not phased to live and sleep in the field with the other students – this included personal hygiene and changing clothes; they carried the same loads as their counterparts who often weighted twice as much as they did – thus much heavier in relative terms.

There was a lot of pressure and expectation from the wider RAF and the higher hierarchy to graduate the female students. The ban of having female gunners in the RAF Regt was lifted in 2017 and, in early 2020, no woman had yet succeeded in attending or completing a JROC. Nonetheless, the routine participants resisted most of the changes as they did not want to weaken the professional identity which they aspired to join (imagined identity). This is in line with the concept of aspirational identity as outlined by Thornborrow and Brown (2009) in their study of the Parachute Regiment. Similarly, this indicates that professional identity can be a source of routine stability as suggested by Karali (2021) despite designed changes to the routine performances.

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