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Swedish military officers through other nations' eyes: Experiences related to leadership theory, stereotypes, identity and military contextual history

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Abstract

Purpose – Globalisation of working life means that many organisations are manned by people from different countries. A potentially critical factor is how members from various nations are looked upon by their partner countries. Such perception may be more or less accurate and affect organisational outcomes. The military is no exception as modern warfare is characterised by multinational composition of task forces. The aim of this paper was to gain a deeper understanding of how military officers from other nations perceive Swedish military officers and their leadership qualities in particular.

Design/methodology/approach – Interviews were conducted with 20 military officers representing ten nations. Interview questions were deduced from the Developmental leadership model. Responses were first coded inductively according to the constant comparative method. Generated categories were then deductively related to this leadership model.

Findings – The analysis resulted in positive and negative patterns. The positive picture included Swedish officers being perceived as calm, competent and generally good at exhibiting exemplary leadership behaviour, showing individualised consideration and creating an inspiring atmosphere. The negative side included opinions such as Swedish officers being too emotionally restrained, exhibiting poor self-confidence, discussing too much before making decisions and having difficulties giving negative feedback. The results are discussed in relation to the Developmental leadership model and the stereotype concept.

Research limitations/implications – Small sample size and a focus on military organisations imply a low degree of generalisability.

Practical implications – Three suggestions regarding Swedish officer education are presented: officer students should be given an increased awareness of how they are perceived by others, decision-making without group support and giving negative feedback in a constructive, straight forward, but still considerate way, should be practiced and more attention should be paid to emotion management.

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Originality/value – The paper addresses an increasing tendency in work organisations – a multinational composition of the work force. The foundation of study in leadership theory and the stereotype concept is new.

Keywords Sweden, Leadership, Perception, Military, Stereotyping, Officers

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Globalisation of working life means that many organisations to a high degree are manned by people from different countries. A potentially critical factor is how members from various nations are looked upon by their partner countries. The military is no exception and one of the characteristics of modern warfare is the multinational composition of task forces. This has been the case in the last decades in operations headed by the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Acting in an allied fashion has obvious political and economic advantages. At the same time, it presents a challenge to coordinate different competencies, cultures and praxis patterns in highly stressful conditions.

Sweden, like other small countries, usually fills a plug-in role in the multinational missions, which are led by the major nations (Ohlsson *et al.*, 2014). These missions are typically characterised by frequent rotations of personnel which creates a fragmentation and seasonality of social encounters with others (Tallberg, 2007). An important aspect, particularly for the smaller countries is how their military officers are perceived by their partner countries under these conditions. Such perceptions may be more or less accurate and have favourable or unfavourable effects on trust and on the achievement of the mission goals (Fors Brandebo and Larsson, 2013).

Literature review

One point of departure when trying to understand how other people perceive a certain group is *the stereotype concept*. The term was introduced by Lippman (1922/1991) and explained as an internal organisational process which we use to simplify perceptions of others. Stereotypical characteristics encompass typical physical features, behaviours or personality traits and constitute a kind of schematic thinking aimed at sorting the vast amount of information we encounter every day. National stereotypes have been described as shared beliefs about the features of a typical representative of a particular nation (Lönnqvist *et al.*, 2014; Terracciano *et al.*, 2005). Stereotypes have been suggested to represent genuine efforts to understand one-self and other humans. However, the more actual experience one has of those other humans, the more complicated this understanding tends to be (Boster and Maltseva, 2006).

Research on national stereotypes has shown that nations that are close geographically and in terms of culture and language, tend to be viewed similarly, especially if they are far from the rater (Hřebíčková and Graf, 2014). Conversely, neighbouring countries are differentiated much more, sometimes caused by rivalries that lead to a focus on differences (Boster and Maltseva, 2006). It has also been shown that national character stereotypes vary substantially across different subgroups (McCrae *et al.*, 2013). Further, the level of agreement among raters from different countries appears to depend on the target country. Some countries, especially the bigger ones, are more well-known and perceived more similarly (Hřebíčková and Graf, 2014).

Another point of departure that may be relevant to the understanding of perception of other groups than one's own is *identity based on group membership* and professional group membership in particular. The content and strength of group-based identity obviously varies across different groups. Military officers have traditionally been regarded as a group with a strong professional identity, the term *esprit de corps* is frequently used (Manning, 1991). This can mean that military officers from different countries may see themselves, and be seen by others, as more similar than other people from their home countries. The same may be the case among military subgroups, air force pilots from different countries may be viewed more similarly than, for example, air force pilots and infantry officers from the same country. However, as pointed out by Bolin (2008), there is a general trend of a weakening of the military profession identity. The military profession is nowadays dependent rather than dominant in relation to the civilian society and the military organisation has to an increasing degree become multi-occupational.

Summing up, the concept of national character stereotypes might be said to exhibit unrealistically large differences between nations and similarities within nations (McCrae *et al.*, 2013). The professional group-based identity perspective, on the other hand, tends to reduce the importance of national origin. The present study explores the case of Swedish military officers. In addition to this limitation of target nation and profession, a further narrowing down was to focus on one of the key aspects of the military officer role – leadership.

The focus on leadership, which must be regarded as a very well researched area (Bass and Bass, 2008), required consideration of established *leadership* models as point of departure. In the present case, the developmental leadership model (Larsson *et al.*, 2003), which has been the official leadership model of the Swedish Armed Forces since 2003, was chosen. This conceptualisation of leadership behaviours is heavily influenced by the two dominating leadership models in the last decades: the transformational leadership model and the authentic leadership model (Bass and Riggio, 2006; Gardner *et al.*, 2005). However, some alterations have been made from the original American models to make it reflective of the Swedish culture (Larsson and Eid, 2012).

A basic assumption underlying the developmental leadership model (Larsson *et al.*, 2003) is that leadership can be understood against the background of individual and contextual interacting factors. This concept of leadership therefore implies an acceptance of an interactional person-by-situation paradigm (Endler and Magnusson, 1976).

Two main classes of leader qualities are identified in the developmental leadership model: basic prerequisites and desirable competencies. Somewhat simplified, the basic prerequisites include individual characteristics such as physical fitness, intelligence, creativity, personality and view-of-life (Yukl, 2005). The model includes four desirable competences: task-related competence, management-related competence, social competence and capacity to cope with stress.

The basic prerequisites affect the development of the desirable competencies. The more favourable basic prerequisites a leader has, the greater the potential to develop the desirable competencies and vice versa. The model also implies that a favourable combination of these two characteristics is a necessary condition for successful leadership. However, neither of them is sufficient in itself and one cannot compensate for

the other. Although important, they do not constitute a guarantee for successful leadership because this is also affected by contextual characteristics.

Leadership behaviours labelled as developmental have three characteristics:

(1) The leader acts as an exemplary model;

(2) The leader shows individualised consideration; and

(3) The leader demonstrates inspiration and motivation.

Leadership behaviours labelled "conventional" have two sub-forms: demand and reward; and control. Each of these has a more positively and a more negatively toned expression, respectively. Finally, the model includes a non-leadership dimension labelled "*laissez-faire*".

Contextual background

Although Sweden has contributed to UN-peacekeeping missions since the 1950s, it is still a non-aligned country which has not been at war for 200 years. Therefore, it is not surprising if Swedish officers would display certain leadership behaviours deviating from prevailing international norms within the military profession. Since the mid-1990s, however, when Sweden joined the EU and became a member of NATO's Partnership for Peace Program, the country's armed forces have been more exposed to international influences, frequently participating in international exercises, as well as in NATO and EU-led operations in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Congo, Kosovo, Libya, Somalia and other places. Nowadays, some 15-20 Swedish senior officers are also permanently serving at different NATO, EU and US Command Headquarters (*International Defence Cooperation,* 2014).

To function better in this new environment, the Swedish armed forces have in later years adapted their recruiting and career systems to fit better with international standards. Conscription was abolished in 2010, whereas career NCOs (which were gradually abolished in 1972-1983) have been reintroduced. The late Cold War Swedish military, however, had to rely heavily on conscript and reserve officers. Mobilised civilians were expected to man some 95 per cent of all commanding positions after mobilisation. It is reasonable to assume that this historical heritage has contributed to civilian norms heavily influencing military leadership behaviour (Åselius, 2005). A survey in the early 2000s among students at the senior staff course at the Swedish Defence University demonstrated that Swedish officers (holding the rank of major/lieutenant commander) defined good leadership in the same way as would any corresponding group of civilians (Bolin, 2008).

As conscription formed the basis for the recruitment of officers, by the mid-1900s, the officer-corps had acquired a broad social basis compared to other groups of academic professionals in Swedish society (Andolf, 1984). The Swedish officer-corps is also unique in that Sweden – together with Austria – is one of the few countries in the world that allows not only military personnel to form unions but also (at least formally) to engage in labour conflicts and even to go on strike (the forming of military unions is prohibited in many NATO countries such as Canada, France, Great Britain, Greece, Portugal, Turkey and the USA – Caforio, 2003). The first military unions in Sweden were formed by NCOs in 1907-1908. In 1932, the regular officer-corps – frightened by drastic defence cuts and by the impact of the depression – also started to organize. Work-time for military personnel had been regulated since the 1960s, and, in 1971, during a labour

conflict in the public sector, Swedish military officers were even threatened by lockout from the special government agency negotiating wage-contracts (Pernstam and Molin, 2001). After 200 years of peace and with working conditions that for a long time have been very similar to those of other state officials, military officers in Sweden presumably share much of their collective identity with government employees in general. This is confirmed by the aforementioned study of Swedish officers by Bolin (2008). She concludes that the work of the military profession has, to a large degree, come to be seen as an "eight to five-job" (p. 139).

Given the abovementioned limitations of study focus, no current study regarded as relevant was found. This lack of relevant research called for an open, qualitative *Verstehen*-oriented approach. Thus, the specific aim of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of how military officers from other nations perceive Swedish military officers and their leadership qualities in particular. The more general purpose was to illuminate perceptions of the military officer profession, using the special case of Swedish military officers as empirical illustration, when analysed in relation to general leadership theory, the concepts of stereotypes and group-based identity and using a military historic framework to contextualise the specific qualities of the Swedish armed forces.

Method

The methodological approach could be summarised as follows. In-depth interviews (see below) were performed with military officers from different countries using an interview guide based on the developmental leadership model. Following a qualitative analysis of the interview responses (see below), an attempt was made to summarise the findings descriptively according to the themes derived from the leadership model. Finally, suggestions of how the results can be understood are presented in the discussion section. These suggestions take their point of departure in the stereotype and professional group-based identity concepts respectively, as well as the military historic context presented above.

Selection of informants

The interview process started out with just a few informants, known by ourselves or by colleagues at the Swedish Defence University. Additional names were provided by the initial informants, which means that so called snowball sampling (Esaiasson *et al.*, 2003) was used. In total, there were 20 participants representing the following ten nations: Austria (1), Bosnia (1), the Czech Republic (4), Estonia (1), Finland (3), Germany (1), Great Britain (2), Latvia (2), Norway (2) and the USA (3). All informants but three were men and the ranks ranged from Lieutenant to Colonel, the majority being Lieutenant colonels. Most informants had their experience of interacting with Swedish officers in operational staff environments, but some had also field experience of serving with Swedes.

The informants were initially contacted by e-mail and informed about the aim of the project and use of data. Communicating with the informants by e-mail was a conscious strategy to give them time to reflect on whether to give us their informed consent. The e-mail was followed up and a meeting was arranged. All dealings with study informants were conducted according to the ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council.

Data collection

Data were collected by qualitative semi-structured interviews following an interview guide. Following two opening questions on the informant's professional background and actual experience of interacting with Swedish officers, the interviews covered a number of themes and consisted of open-ended questions and individually adapted follow-up questions. The themes were derived from the developmental leadership model (Larsson *et al.*, 2003). The informants were assumed to have interacted with Swedish military officers in a broad variety of environments. Following from this, it was decided to limit the data collection to their experiences of Swedish officers as persons (basic prerequisites and desirable competences) and as leaders. This means that the model domain contextual characteristics were not focused in the interviews. Table I presents the used concepts from the model and the interview themes designed to cover them.

The informants were interviewed individually at their places of work or at the premises of the Swedish Defence University, Stockholm, (a few interviews were conducted via telephone/skype) during the period of March 2014 to June 2014. The interviews lasted about 30 to 60 min and were all recorded. All interviews were conducted and analysed by the authors.

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and initially analysed within each theme according to the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The first step is known as "open coding", which means that data are examined line-by-line to identify the participants' descriptions of through patterns, emotions and actions related to the themes mentioned in the interviews. After that, categories are formulated in words resembling those used by the participants. To illustrate, using an interview excerpt where Swedish officers were described: "I have been working with Swedish officers in international staff as well as earlier at the Royal Norwegian Naval Academy and they

Table I.
Used concepts from the developmental leadership model and interview themes designed to cover them

Developmental leadership concepts	Interview themes – "What is your experience of Swedish officers . . ."
Basic prerequisites	
Physical	Physical fitness
Psychological	Personality, mood, energy
Desirable competencies	
Task-related	Language skills, negotiation skills, combat skills
Management-related	Structuring and management skills
Social	Social skills
Capacity to cope with stress	Stress resilience
Leadership behaviours	
Exemplary model	Physical appearance, clear communication, decision making, loyalty, discipline, integrity, responsibility, courage
Individualised consideration	Listening, willingness to confront interpersonal problems
Inspiration and motivation	Inspiring motivation, creation of a positive atmosphere, promotion of delegation and participation

have all been very dutiful". This excerpt was coded as *responsibility*. In the analytical step that followed, the categories were related to the developmental leadership model factors. To illustrate, the category "responsibility" was sorted into the model factor exemplary model. This concluding step was based on our interpretation of the goodness-of-fit between the categories and the model.

Results

The results presentation is structured in accordance with the developmental leadership model (Table I). Dominating responses related to each model concept are shown. At the end of the section, an attempt is made to combine the separate aspects to a summary pattern. Numerous illustrative interview excerpts will be given. However, when an example is taken from an informant who is the only participant from his/her country, nothing is mentioned about the nationality to guard against the risk of identifying the person in question.

Basic prerequisites

Physical. This theme was briefly covered in the interviews and the dominating response pattern was that Swedish officers are physically fit and have good exercise habits.

Psychological. Questions related to personality, mood and energy yielded the longest and most detailed responses. In the analysis process, these were sorted into more favourable and less favourable aspects, according to how they were presented by the informants.

Favourable aspects. Beginning with *temperament*, Swedish officers were generally described as being calmer and less aggressive than most other officers. Regarding *motivation and will power* the dominating picture was that Swedish officers were described as committed, willing to work hard and often doing even more than is required.

Personality qualities were also mentioned. Swedish officers were mostly described as prompt and accurate, which was interpreted as indicating conscientiousness. It was also frequently mentioned that they are open, flexible and adaptive. Several comments dealt with various aspects of agreeableness. Thus, Swedish officers were described as friendly, kind, humble, helpful and generally well socially oriented.

We labelled a final favourable aspect *functional independence*. It is underpinned by statements such as: "They are pragmatic and ask if they don't understand" or in the words of a Czech informant: "They just use common sense. Not like the Americans – if they don't have a manual, they don't know what to do".

Unfavourable aspects. Two aspects frequently recurred in the interviews. One theme was that Swedish officers tend to be *restrained*. They are also more formal and show less emotions than others. They were also described as more taciturn and shy than most, and, following from this, it takes longer time to get to know them. Some informants mentioned that they open up after they have been drinking and that they like to drink when abroad because it is so expensive in Sweden. However, it was pointed out that they never drank when on duty.

A second frequently mentioned aspect was that Swedish officers were perceived as a bit *overly humble*. In the words of a British informant: "Confirmation. I don't know where it comes from. It's some kind of need, bad self-confidence". Another quote, this time from

an American informant who had experience with Swedish military higher staff students:

> The students, I'm surprised at how almost insecure they are about their own capabilities. They downplay what they are capable of doing. And I think that many times I find myself telling them 'You're much better than you think you are'.

And this informant went on: "In our forces, if it's not prohibited, we will do it. And the Swedish officers – if it's not allowed then we can't do it".

Two other less favourable aspects were mentioned but almost only by informants from the major countries (Great Britain and the USA). One aspect could be called *overly focused on own rights*. A couple of interview excerpts:

> The independence of the Swedish culture, and you see it quite a bit in the officers when you think of it. […] The The one thing that surprises me is the students' willingness to challenge either the curriculum or the teaching, and that's, maybe again, I'm not used to it. […] There might be valid points but if you do it too many times it's whining.

A final example: "They [Swedish officers, our remark] are so bloody focused on their rights, contracts and all that kind of stuff. All that is foreign to me".

The last unfavourable psychological aspects could be labelled *self-righteous*. This included two kinds of perceived naivety. The first concerned an overestimation of the importance of the Swedish contribution in international missions. An excerpt:

> Now you are, kind of, you are in a Battle Group from September to January. OK fine, but you don't do anything. You don't change anything. […] Complete waste of time.

A US informant filled in: "We don't have an opinion of Swedish military officers before we interact with them. […] A third of our country doesn't know where Sweden is". The second kind of naivety was related to a Swedish self-image described by a US informant as "We're Sweden, we're the good guys. Therefore, nothing bad will happen".

Another aspect that contributed to the category self-righteous was a tendency for some Swedish officers to look down on officers from some other countries, particularly officers from the former eastern European forces. In the words of one of the US informants: "There may be a subtle Scandinavian looking down on the Baltics, the classic 'little brother' comments". A Czech informant also remarked that he had noticed that Swedish officers could find it difficult to lead officers from the developing countries.

Desirable competencies

The developmental leadership model includes four kinds of desirable competencies and the response categories identified within each of these are shown in the following.

Task-related competence. Beginning with skills in the *English language*, all informants but one emphasised the high quality of Swedish officers. The exception was a British officer who felt that the young ones – and the officers from the major cities – are good, but some of the older and those from the countryside "are lousy".

Continuing with *negotiations skills*, the dominating picture was once again positive. A British informant: "Good, good! Because they are listeners and try to understand the other person's perspectives". Comments like these were common and a Finish informant added that "[…] you have such a topic in the curriculum and practice and reflect upon it". However, there were also critical comments. A Norwegian officer pointed to the fact that higher level officers in Norway interact more with politicians and civilian than their

Swedish counterparts because of different ways of organising the military headquarters. As a result of this, he felt that Norwegian officers were somewhat better negotiators than Swedish officers. The exception to the overall positive picture on negotiation skills was an informant who simply claimed that: "Let's say that they could have been better".

Turning to *combat-related skills*, only a few informants had personal experience of seeing Swedish officers in such situations, but those who had gave favourable comments. Swedish officers were generally seen as good at handling their weapons. Common responses were that they are well trained and good in combat situations. One of the British informants provided a mixed picture. On the one hand he said, "They are afraid of losses. […] I don't think that Sweden has ever been given a kill or capture task, they are only patrolling". On the other hand, he was convinced that: "There is nothing they couldn't manage. Actually. Maybe lacking a little experience sometimes but that's really not their fault". One of the American officers added: "But my gut feeling is, again, that they are better than they think they are". A Latvian informant agreed and added that "Swedish officers always follow safety regulations without stress, this is important". To conclude, a Czech officer felt there are bigger differences between officers with combat experience and those "just playing with papers", than there are differences between officers from different nations.

Management-related competence. The general picture was that Swedish officers were perceived as professional regarding management-related skills. They are good at structuring tasks, have their information very well organised and control and follow-up issues adequately. One of the American informants described it as "exceptionally and incredibly professional", whereas another study participant felt it was too much by stating that the Swedish officer he had interacted with was: "[…] structured to the bones".

Social competence. The dominating response pattern regarding the social competence of Swedish officers could be summarised as "no problems". They were generally perceived as clear communicators and good listeners. A few deviant opinions, or rather limitations of the social competence, were also expressed, as shown in the following excerpt from the interview with one of the Czech officers:

> When it's about job issues it's no problems […] but it was a little bit different in the spare time. If you didn't have a closer relationship or friendship, it became very brief talks. You only say what needs to be said and then you leave.

Capacity to cope with stress. One of the interview themes was about stress resilience. The dominating response could be summarised in the word "professional". One of the US informants described Swedish officers as "[…] cool professionals that know what they're doing". One of the Czech officers reflected as follows on his experience of Swedish officers' stress resilience: "They're like professionals. They knew what to do. They acted". One of the other US officers stated it like this: "To be honest, I've never seen a Swede really lose his temper or seen them react negatively to stress". Finally, another informant was a bit less enthusiastic and simply said: "I would say, average and normal".

Qualitatively generated categories fitting the model concepts desirable competencies and leadership behaviours

In reality, the phenomena attempted to be covered by model concepts such as desirable competences and leadership behaviours, respectively, are interrelated. This was clearly

illustrated in the present case where comments on communication style and decision-making on the one hand could be related to the desirable competencies, social competence and management-related competence. On the other hand, the same comments were also interpreted as having a clear reference to leadership. Therefore, we decided to present these findings under a separate heading.

Communication style and decision-making. Some comments on this theme were positive and some were critical. We will begin with the favourable opinions. One of the US informants said he was "[…] very impressed with their decision making abilities". Swedish officers were generally regarded as solution-focused and citing a British officer: "[…] before the decision is made, there'll be a forth right discussion". The Swedish communication style could be perceived as unusual, at least initially. An excerpt from an interview with a US officer:

> Here sometimes, if you're not aware of the [Swedish, our remark] culture, there seems almost a level of familiarity or equality and that doesn't seem to make sense in a profession that requires structure and command. If you are here long enough, you realize there is still definitely a structure and command, but you have to see that because it is not unusual for a navy lieutenant to either call or refer to a senior officer by their first name. And for a USA guy that's very confusing.

According to one of the informants from Finland, Swedish officers discussed a lot before decisions, but in emergency situations they could adapt and make decisions quickly.

As mentioned above, there were also a number of critical comments on Swedish officers' communication style and decision-making. Three related subthemes emerged in the analysis. One could be labelled *too careful*. A Norwegian informant: "They are a bit careful. They want to make sure they have everything in their hands before they jump". A US informant went along the same line:

> And sometimes what I have seen is the Swedish officer is […] 'don't believe that I can do that'. They don't believe they have the authority because of rules and regulations.

He went on: "I used to say 'when in command, command!' In other words, if you're given the opportunity to make decisions, make decisions!"

A second subtheme was *over talking*. Swedish officers were perceived as having too much talks and discussions before they came to a decision. "They have meetings about everything". A related subtheme was labelled *too democratic*. A Finish officer expressed that: "You have a super-democratic discussion culture in Sweden". He went on:

> I'm not saying that this is a problem, on the contrary, it can be a strength, but it can become a problem if you do not understand and practice to make decisions by yourself and without support, and also make decisions the group does not agree with.

Another Finish informant said: "It seems that Swedish officers want to be friends with their units. Of course that's a good thing but sometimes you can't be close friends with everyone". A British officer filled in:

> You shall kind of have a democracy and everybody shall be part of the decision making. But that's not how it works in the rest of the word. Then there are different degrees of stiffness maybe, you know, you can respect each other but you should not be buddies.

Leadership behaviours

The presentation of results on the remaining parts of leadership behaviours will be more strictly organised according to the developmental leadership model.

Exemplary model. The coding process resulted in four categories which were regarded as indicators of the developmental leadership model factor exemplary model. The four categories were: overt exemplary behaviour, loyalty, responsibility and integrity/respect/courage. Beginning with the *overt exemplary behaviour*, it was emphasised that Swedish officers always have clean uniforms and behave politely. However, one of the informants added that:

> […] if you go too soft, too politically correct, many other people, especially from different cultures and backgrounds, will not understand what you are talking about. […] Sometimes you need to be straight forward or a little bit harsh, it works better, especially if I talk about crisis situations.

A British informant criticised some Swedish officers for having tattoos and using bad language. He felt that officers should set a standard: "As officer you should be better than those you lead".

Regarding *loyalty* two different themes were noted. The dominating was that Swedish officers are loyal and trustworthy. One of the British informants agreed to this but also came up with a critical comment. He had experienced that Swedish officers frequently talked behind the back of their higher management. An excerpt: "The test of loyalty, well, it's easy to be loyal to those you like. The test is to be loyal towards those whom you don't like".

The theme *responsibility* frequently occurred in connection with discussions on exemplary behaviour and loyalty. The dominating opinion was that Swedish military officers show a high degree of responsibility. In the words of one of the US informant:

> Guys [Swedish officers, our remark] would cut their lunch early, or skip it altogether, have someone bring it to them or, you know, work the extra hour or go the extra mile.

A fourth and final category was a mixture of *integrity, respect and courage*. The positive picture dominated also on these issues. A Czech informant claimed that: "Sweden, it's one of the least corrupt countries in the world". A British informant said that Swedish officers have exhibited moral courage. He went on:

> It can be quite frustrating working with certain nations, particularly from Eastern Europe. Particularly if you've got someone that is just one rank below you. They will, they agree with almost anything you say, if you're the senior person. Where is, my experience of working with the Swedish officers, if they are not sure, if they don't understand it they will say so.

The dominating responses to questions about courage were "very good" and "no problems". Some informants also pointed out that Swedish officers generally treated other people with respect and that this was much appreciated.

Individualised consideration. In the development leadership model, this factor consists of two facets: caring and confronting (the latter with a warm heart). The first of these facets was clearly observed in the interview responses and the dominating picture was favourable. One of the US informants had experienced that: "Everybody [Swedish officers, our remark] was going to listen". Another US informant felt that: "[…] they do put importance on, you know, such things". Common responses were that if you get to know Swedish officers, they can offer really good emotional support.

The second model facet, confrontation, was not covered as much in the conversations. A general comment was that the willingness to confront problematic behaviour depends on the individual. However, one of the Finish informants was quite critical here:

> It's a little bit hard for the Swedish officer to get negative feedback. It is because in your culture you are not using such a rough or straight negative feedback giving as we are in Finland.

He went on: "In my opinion it seems that Swedish officers are not good to say in their own unit or to their colleague that 'you are not so good'".

Inspiration and motivation. Two categories emerged in the coding process which we feel fit into the model factor inspiration and motivation. The first could be summarised as *positive energy*. A Latvian officer said that:

> It [Sweden, our remark] is a smiling nation. The smiling is so natural so where they are speaking to people they're smiling and that already created some kind of positive atmosphere.

A US informant expressed his experience of Swedish navy officers as follows:

> I have seen positive energy and motivation, even if the officer embodied […] was not respected as a leader in a certain position, he still maintains that positive sense of, you know, 'moving forward', the task he's going to accomplish and try to motivate the team. […] Their energy and their contribution to their ship has only been positive from what I've seen.

The second category was labelled *delegation* and mainly consisted of favourable comments on Swedish officers' ability to exercise mission command. One of the informants expressed it like this:

> I'm impressed. I'm impressed by the way he led our group and, you see he showed that he is in charge but he also allowed us to express our own opinion. […] I would say they are familiar with what mission command means.

This aspect was summarised by one of the US officers:

> The mission command and mission-based style that they had – and the multinational guys were working together to achieve camp purpose. So good leadership, good guidance, good initiative-based procedures.

Summary pattern

The results section up till now has consisted of an aspect-by-aspect presentation of findings. In this concluding part, we combine them to a summary pattern shown in Table II.

Table II summarises positive and negative views, respectively, of Swedish officers. Two things should be kept in mind when reading the Table. First, the lists are not complete and further aspects can be found in the preceding results presentation. Second, the fairly similar proportions of positive and negative aspects in the Table do not reflect the overall interview material, where the positive side by far outweighed the negative.

Discussion

The aim was to gain a deeper understanding of how military from other nations perceive Swedish military officers and their leadership qualities. The majority of comments were favourable on all developmental leadership model factors, whether they dealt with basic prerequisites such a personality, desirable competencies or leadership behaviours. This

Developmental leadership model component	Positive views of Swedish officers	Negative views of Swedish officers
Basic prerequisites	Physically fit, good exercise habits Calm temperament Committed, willing to work hard Conscientious, agreeable, flexible Functional independence	Formal and restrained Overly humble, bad self-confidence Overly focused on own rights–too much focus on own rights, too much criticism which turns into whining Self-righteous naivety: overestimate own importance; and uncritically see themselves as the good guys
Desirable competencies	Good at the English language Good negotiators Good combat-related skills Well organised High social competence Good capacity to cope with stress	Not so good negotiators because of limited experience of working with civilians and politicians Fear of losses–will never get kill or capture tasks Social competence–too task-oriented, difficult to connect emotionally
Desirable competencies and leadership behaviours	Solution-focused, good decision-makers	Too careful when making decisions, afraid of breaking rules and making mistakes Over talking when making decisions Too democratic when making decisions Want to be friends with everybody when making decisions, which does not work
Leadership behaviours	Good overt exemplary behaviours (clean uniforms, politically correct behaviour, etc.) Good loyalty High responsibility Good integrity, respect and courage Good individualised consideration Good at creating a positive atmosphere Good at exercising mission command	Too soft and politically correct Poor role models by showing tattoos and using bad language Poor loyalty–negative public talk about superiors Poor at giving necessary negative feedback

Table II.
Summary of positive and negative views of Swedish military officers

should be positively acknowledged by the individual officers, the Swedish Armed Forces and the Swedish Defence University where the officers are educated.

Turning to the criticised aspects of Swedish officers, and leaving individual differences in personality, experience and competences aside, we believe that much of the obtained results can be understood in the light of three antecedent and interacting conditions which all could be assumed to affect stereotype preconceptions. One of these

conditions can be found in the Swedish culture at large. Having grown up in the post-Second World War era, many Swedes have been socialised into a self-image that Sweden is one of the richest and the most social and gender egalitarian countries in the world. It is also the country with the longest unbroken period of peace (since 1814) on earth, etc. Having fought for and gained a number of rights on the labour market and in society a large, it may lie behind the tendency for Swedish officers to exhibit the behaviours we labelled "ego-oriented independence" behaviours that were perceived as incompatible with a military culture by officers from other nations. This suggestion is in line with the aforementioned results presented by Bolin (2008). In a related vein, the somewhat narcissistic self-image, "Sweden is the best country in the world", may contribute to the two kinds of observed naivety (overestimating the own importance and uncritically believing that "we are good guys"). In terms of the developmental leadership model, this mainly relates to the component basic prerequisites.

The second potential antecedent condition is the general tendency of Nordic people to be emotionally restrained. There have been speculations that this is because of the cold and dark climate (Andersen, 1985; Pennebaker *et al.*, 1996). The present study showed that it took longer to get to know Swedish officers than most other officers and that there was little emotional bonding in the spare time. Classical social psychological studies (Bales, 1950) have shown that a mixture of instrumental and emotionally expressive communication is favourable for most tasks. By having an organisational culture with restricting feeling rules (Mesquita and Frijda, 1992), and by being too task-oriented, Swedish officers may lose effectiveness. Using the developmental leadership framework, this indicates a weakness in desirable competences. The phenomena of emotional contagion (Kemper, 2011) was also clearly demonstrated on the responses to leadership behaviour questions about inspiration and motivation. Summing up, keeping cool is positive, particularly in crisis situations, but being emotionally restrained according to the stereotype-congruent conceptions of others may limit building positive collaborative relationships, therefore suppressing effectiveness. The fragmented opportunities for more enduring social interaction between participants from different nations in modern multinational missions, as mentioned by Tallberg (2007), could be assumed to contribute to this.

A third potential antecedent condition, mainly related to leadership style, is that the organisational culture in most other countries has been found to be more authoritarian and command-oriented than it is in Sweden (Tixier, 1994). This means that perception of Swedish officers as being too democratic, over talking, being too careful, wanting to be friends with everybody and having problems giving negative feedback all represent possible military cultural differences in an international arena. Possibly this can be explained by the strong civilian impact on the military in Sweden, including ideal images of leadership (Bolin, 2008). On the other hand, favourable observed aspects, such as functional independence and being proficient with mission-based leadership, could be interpreted as favourable outcomes of the less authoritarian organisational culture.

One additional aspect of the stereotype concept was found in the present study. Informants from neighbouring countries being close in terms of culture (Finland and Norway) and language (Norway) tended to emphasise individual differences more than the other informants. This is in line with findings reported by Boster and Maltseva (2006). Turning to the second theoretical concept summarised in the Introduction section – identity based on group membership – the empirical data was limited in this

study. However, one example was found where the professional identity as military officer (*esprit de corps*, Manning, 1991) outweighed an identity based on national origin. We are referring to the informant who claimed that there are more similarities between officers from different countries who have combat experience, than there are similarities between those with combat experience and "the paper pushers" from the same country. Thus, limited support was found for the concept identity based on group membership. Drawing on the writings of Bolin (2008) once more, this may be understood as a reflecting of a gradually weakened military profession identity.

Looking at the results from a historical and military contextual perspective, interesting observations can be made. With regard to the positive views of Swedish officers, it should not surprise anyone that the Swedish Armed Forces – like most military organisations – have tried to recruit among individuals that are physically fit, committed, well organised, can cope with stress, are good decision makers who show integrity and courage and who are good at creating a good atmosphere, etc. General conscription was practiced in Sweden until 2010, why the Swedish military until quite recently every year came into contact with a large number of (male) youths who met these high standards. Conscription, although problematic from the perspective of military efficiency for other reasons, has no doubt greatly contributed to the quality of officer-recruitment in Sweden.

The negative views that informants express of their Swedish colleagues are also interesting. Some, like the view that they are emotionally restrained, too consensus-oriented, overly democratic and afraid of making decisions or handling conflicts, adhere to common cultural stereotypes of Swedes as has been pointed out above. But, there are also traces of a cultural heritage from the late-Cold War Swedish Armed Forces, which were expected to operate with a large contingent of conscript and reserve officers. In all likelihood, this has forced the Swedish military to use leadership models that are more in tune with those prevalent in society at large than would have been the case in countries with a long tradition of an all-professional army, such as Britain, Canada or the USA. Moreover, a long tradition of military unions in Sweden (an institution which in Anglo-Saxon countries does not even exist) and a strong identity as government employees parallel to the professional identity, could contribute to the impression of Swedish officers as being overly focused on their own rights, with a tendency towards whining. Finally, broad social recruitment to the officer-corps during the twentieth century, with a unified career system for NCOs and regular officers for many decades, may well explain why some Swedish officers attract attention among their colleagues through tattoos and bad language.

Summing up, although all authors of the study are Swedish civilians, we have lengthy experience of conducting research on and teaching Swedish military officers. Intuitively, we feel that the obtained positive and negative views are accurate – "that's the way Swedish officers are". In other words, we argue that the outcome of the analysis yields a good Gestalt, which is commonly regarded as an important validity or trustworthiness criteria in qualitative research.

Our interpretation of the qualitative data can be theoretically summarised as follows. The stereotype concept proved to be fruitful when attempting to understand the results. However, this was only the case when it was related to the broader military historic contextual framework, including the rapidly changing character of military operations and the military profession. Thus, we cannot claim any contribution to the stereotype

concept *per se* but point to its value when contextualised as above. Turning to the second theoretical concept used, professional group-based identity, we found this to be of limited use. We suggest that this can be explained by the gradual weakening of the modern military profession identity observed in previous research (Bolin, 2008) and discussed above.

We regard the methodological sequence consisting of an initial qualitative coding and categorisation process as advantageous in this case. This procedure generated categories close to the actual data, rather than broad concepts such as "leadership style". The following process of relating the categories to descriptions of the factors in the development leadership model means that a limited amount of data could be interpreted within the framework of an established model.

The more general purpose of the study was to illuminate perceptions of the military officer profession using the special case of Swedish officers as empirical illustration. By relating the empirical data to a model drawing on the dominating leadership model over the past decades – transformational leadership – and to the concepts of stereotypes and group-based identity, an attempt was made to provide a broader understanding of the results. By placing the Swedish case in a military historic framework this ambition was accentuated. In particular, the transformational leadership model has been a source of inspiration in a number of military organisations, especially in the NATO community (Bass, 1998). Thus, we suggest that the presented leadership theory-related analysis is of theoretical and practical value for military officers from other nations, and possibly other professions, as well. However, from the standpoint of profession perception, it would obviously also be desirable to obtain data from informants with other professional backgrounds.

This study has several limitations. We do not claim to have captured all the different aspects of how Swedish officers are perceived by military officers from other countries in our present study. In constructing our analysis, we were limited to data obtained from selected groups of informants. Although individually adapted follow-up questions were used, it cannot be ruled out that the use of an interview guide based on the developmental leadership model prevented us from discovering other themes. It could also be argued that the informants could be reluctant to explicitly criticise the officers from another country and, therefore, provided a more positive and politically correct picture. This cannot be ruled out of course, but, with two exceptions, we feel that the informants spoke freely from their hearts, particularly after the first few minutes.

Another limitation is that we have no data on the development of the stereotypes, that is how they are shaped and then changed when one gets to know the subject of stereotyping. This was outside the scope of this cross-sectional study and should ideally be explored using a longitudinal design.

The presented analysis could be regarded as context-specific by being limited to Swedish military officers and as context-free in terms of hierarchical level, work environment and type of mission and the other aspects belonging to the domain contextual characteristics in the developmental leadership model. Because of the limited number of informants, comparisons between different kinds of subgroups such as nationality of the participants, field or staff experience of working with Swedish officers, etc. were not regarded as meaningful.

A final study weakness we want to highlight is the lack of representativeness, which is inherent to the chosen qualitative method. However, we argue that the obtained

results can be valuable also in civilian contexts. The argument is that the extreme military context with its life and death threats could be assumed to evoke stereotype preconceptions and make them more manifest, whereas they also exist on a more latent level in ordinary civilian work environments.

Given the abovementioned study limitations, we will conclude the paper by presenting some suggestions of practical implications for Swedish officer education. First, the Swedish culture at large and its deviance from most of the global military community are more or less "fixed parameters" that need to be accepted. What can be done is to provide Swedish officer students with an increased awareness of these differences and a mental preparation of how they are perceived by others.

A second suggested implication is to put more emphasis on practicing decision-making without group support and giving negative feedback in a constructive straight forward, but still considerate, way. A third and final suggestion is to pay more attention to the role of emotions. Teaching and text books on military command and control tend to be almost clinically free from emotions. Emotions have been regarded as irrational phenomena that may limit organisational effectiveness and predictability. But, as one of the Norwegian informants concluded: "That's not the way the world is". The process of emotional contagion (Kemper, 2011) has already been mentioned in this study. Emotions have also repeatedly been found to be important when it comes to building trust (Fors Brandebo and Larsson, 2013, for an overview). Other theoretical concepts that may be fruitful are emotion-focused coping (Lazarus, 1991), emotional labour (Hochschield, 1983) and soft and smart power (Nye, 2008). Thus, there are several theoretical sources that can be drawn upon when developing emotional management for leaders.

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