

Leadership Acceptance Through the Lens of Social Identity Theory: A Case Study of Military Leadership in Afghanistan

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Abstract

This study builds on the experiences of a Dutch reconnaissance platoon deployed in Afghanistan in which leadership was not accepted. Setup as a qualitative single case study, this article advances our understanding of how group dynamics and contextual factors might impact the acceptance of leadership. Rather than primarily focusing on the behavior of the leader, this article highlights the perspective of followers in the ranks. The study also offers empirical evidence for the potential of social identity theory as a framework within which to study leadership acceptance. The case shows that leadership acceptance is largely dependent on group processes rather than on the characteristics of leadership. Additionally, it points to the importance of contextual factors. Finally, it suggests that a lack of attention to in-group dynamics, and a lack of active entrepreneurship by the leader, can catalyze “in-group entrepreneurship.”

Keywords

military leadership, Afghanistan, social identity theory, in-group entrepreneurship, qualitative case study

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Considering the vast amount of literature written on the subject of leadership, one can safely assume that being (or becoming) a leader is a difficult journey in which not only acting as a leader but also being accepted as such can present a significant challenge. Even after extensive preparation, when endowed with personal charisma and well-versed in theory, at times, a leader can be rejected. In this article, we describe a qualitative single case study in which military leadership was not accepted. We concentrate on a Dutch reconnaissance platoon, consisting of 19 men, deployed in Afghanistan between 2015 and 2016. During the deployment, the platoon commander's (PC) leadership was no longer accepted by the platoon and, halfway through the mission, he was replaced. The rejection of his leadership functions as the starting point for this study. Building on the direct experiences of the platoon, this article uses social identity theory as a framework within which to analyze leadership acceptance.

By using social identity theory as its framework, this study focuses on interactions within the group (the platoon) rather than the traditional focus on the leadership qualities of the individual. Social identity theory is not commonly used for analyzing leadership acceptance or case study analysis. We did so for reasons both empirical and theoretical. On a theoretical level, this case study afforded us the possibility to investigate the potential of social identity theory itself as an analyzing framework in an actual working context (Cassar, Bezzina, & Buttigieg, 2017; Reicher, Haslam, & Hopkins, 2005). While most studies examining the potential of social identity theory take place in the so-called laboratory settings—that is, with artificial study groups (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Hornsey, 2008)—this was a “real-life” case. As such, this case study can contribute to the ecological validity (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Sayer, 2010, pp. 99–103) of social identity theory as a framework for analysis.

On an empirical level, social identity theory makes an excellent framework for the analysis of military leadership and, in particular, the case at hand. Firstly, the focus of social identity theory on group dynamics is a welcome addition to traditional military studies, as few studies in the military realm acknowledge leadership as a social orientation. The traditional focus in military studies is predominantly on individual leadership qualities (Atwater & Yammarinol, 1993), while in a military team—usually a platoon—group dynamics matter greatly and can, in some circumstances, be the difference between life and death (Arnold, Loughlin, & Walsh, 2016; Grossman, 2009; Vogelaar & Dalenberg, 2012). Secondly, it has been shown that “the military maintains that cohesive groups engender effectiveness in combat situations” (Oliver, Harma, Hoover, Hayes, & Pandhi, 1999, cited in Ahronson & Cameron, 2007, p. 9) and that (widening the remit somewhat) “cohesion has long been considered by industrial-organizational, military, and sports psychologists to be one of the most important small-group properties” (Dion, 2000, cited in Ahronson & Cameron, 2007, p. 9). Finally, social identity has been identified as an important factor in the success of leadership in extreme contexts, such as those facing military organizations (Arnold et al., 2016; Dixon, Weeks, Boland, & Perelli, 2017). Kolditz (2006) has defined *in extremis* leadership as “giving purpose, motivation, and

direction to people when there is eminent physical danger, and where followers believe that leader behaviour will influence their physical well-being or survival” (p. 657). The extreme contexts in which soldiers are supposed to operate, and officers need to give guidance to platoons, are characterized by “uncertainty, time pressure, possible catastrophic consequences such as killing or death” (Arnold et al., 2016, p. 2). Additionally, we believe that insights from *in extremis* leadership are potentially useful outside of the military realm because “crisis management is considered a strategic competency for executives” (Coombs, 2006, cited in Dixon et al., 2017, p. 2). Moreover, “unconventional contexts can sometimes illuminate significant management ideas that may have relevance if context and variables are considered” (Bamberger & Pratt, 2010, p. 665, cited in Dixon et al., 2017, p. 2).

Studying the relevance of social identity theory in extreme contexts can be fruitful because, in these settings, social dynamics play out in a “pressure cooker” environment, meaning that the mechanisms existing between leaders and their teams come to the fore more swiftly and more pronounced than they would in a nonmilitary setting. Social identity theory has the potential to reveal in-group dynamics that traditional perspectives leave unnoticed, and therefore, we argue that an analysis based on social identity theory can fill a gap in understanding the dynamics of the case at hand.

In the sections below, first, an elaboration on social identity theory and, in particular, its use as an analytical framework for leadership is presented. Subsequently, the methodology, design, background, and process of data collection are explained in the third section. In the fourth section, empirical findings—such as excerpts from interviews and field notes—are analyzed from the perspective of social identity theory. In the fifth section, these findings are complemented with additional theories and information on various contextual factors. Finally, reflecting on the limitations of this study, we end with suggestions for further research, focusing on the implications for the military, as well as on the suitability of social identity theory as a framework for analyzing leadership.

Social Identity Theory as a Framework for Analyzing Military Leadership

Social Identity Theory and Leadership

Traditionally, leadership theories focus on individual leader characteristics as a key explanatory mechanism for leadership effectiveness (Reicher et al., 2005; Yukl, 2006). Accordingly, leadership is often understood as “individual cognitive processes that categorize individuals as leaders” (Hogg, 2001b, p. 199). As a result, leadership studies focus predominantly on one particular component or attribute of leadership (Reicher et al., 2005)—the individual leader and his or her personality.

As a reaction to this “individualistic metatheory” (Haslam & Reicher, 2016, p. 24), in the early 2000s, *followership* emerged as a new topic within leadership studies (Malakyan, 2014, p. 6). Studies on followership acknowledge that leaders cannot exist without followers (Riggio, Chaleff, & Lipman-Blumen, 2008) and that followers are powerful actors in organizational and social transformation (Malakyan, 2014, p. 7). However, both perspectives fail to consider the dynamics that exist between those who follow and those who lead (Hogg, 2016; Malakyan, 2014; Rosenbach, Taylor & Youndt, 2012). In a further option, Hogg (2001a) suggests that leadership is “a social orientation between individuals” (p. 185) and is, to a large extent, dependent on interactions within a given group. Contained within this wealth of approaches, there are, for example, studies that concentrate on leader-member exchanges (Hafidz Bin Maksom & Winter, 2009) or on leadership as a relational dynamic within a group (Hogg, 2001a; Hogg, van Knippenberg, & Rast, 2012). Within this final perspective, social identity theory has been identified as a particularly promising framework for analyzing the interaction between a leader and his or her followers (Cassar et al., 2017; Ellemers, de Gilder, & Haslam, 2004; van Dick & Schuh, 2010).

Based in social psychology, yet extending into other areas of social science, social identity theory is considered “one of the most influential theories of group processes and intergroup relations” (Hornsey, 2008, p. 205). Lying at the heart of social identity theory is Tajfel’s (1972) concept of social identity, based on “the individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership” (p. 292). As such, social identity is different from personal identity, as it is derived from belonging to a particular group. The identification is “we,” instead of “I” (Griffith, 2009, p. 41). Gumusluoglu, Karakitapoğlu-Aygün, and Scandura (2017) explain that “a person who identifies with a group perceives himself or herself as psychologically intertwined with the fate of that entity” (p. 484). As a result, the collective outcome, or the results of the group, become of great importance. Social identity theory predicts that, if this is indeed the case, group members are likely to show more extreme behavior in order to protect their social identity. When people identify more strongly with a certain group, they tend to align their beliefs and behaviors more with the so-called group prototype (Hogg & Terry, 2000).

According to social identity theory, people feel a need to protect their social identity through (favorable) group comparisons in order to protect their self-esteem. Contextual triggers, such as a high-risk environment or other uncertainties, can activate self-categorization (Hornsey, 2008). “Self-categorization theory,” explain Hogg and Reid (2006), “focuses on the basic social cognitive processes, primarily social categorization, that cause people to identify with groups, construe themselves and others in group terms, and manifest group behaviours” (p. 9). Consequently, people “stick together” and group members accentuate what they believe to be the prototypical behavior of their group.

Social identity theory attempts to explain how group membership not only shapes the beliefs people have about in-group and out-group members but also steers intra- and intergroup interactions. In-group members show prototypical behavior and—dependent on the context—identify against out-group members. Therefore, we can see how identification with a specific group motivates behavior that is perceived as consistent with that group's identity (Ellemers et al., 2004).

Earlier work on leadership and social identity theory has shown how the dynamics that exist between leaders and followers can explain the acceptance of leadership in different circumstances. Social identity is instrumental to the way in which individuals relate to their social context and deal with uncertainty and insecurity alike. When this sense of social identity is put under pressure, individuals are more likely to protect their social identity and more likely to scrutinize leadership (de Cremer & Tyler, 2005; Hogg, 2001b; van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, de Cremer, & Hogg, 2005). This shift in perspective—from the individual to the social context of leadership—makes an analysis based on social identity theory more suitable for uncovering in-group mechanisms rather than individual behavior.

Although social identity theory is not commonly used for analyzing leadership, Reicher, Haslam, Platow, and Steffens (2016) have developed a new framework for analyzing leadership from a social identity theory perspective, identifying four dimensions of leadership: Firstly, the leader has to “act as one of us.” However, this does not imply that the leader is a typical member; rather, the leader should be prototypical—that is, be an extraordinary member (based on Steffens, Haslam, Ryan, & Kessler, 2013). Secondly, he or she needs to “act for us” (Reicher, Haslam, Platow, & Steffens, 2016). This means not acting out of self-interest, power seeking, or acting on behalf of an out-group (Platow, Hoar, Reid, Harley, & Morrison, 1997). Thirdly, a “successful leader needs to deliver for the in-group,” to which Reicher et al. (2016) refer as “collective self-realisation” (p. 74). This realization means both “building norms and values into the group itself,” and taking actions to “transform the practices of the wider society” (Reicher et al., 2016, pp. 74–75). Finally, a leader must define a group and its values, not only to the outside world but also in terms of mobilizing the group itself; leaders have to be “entrepreneurs of identity” (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). This suggests that leadership is also about how the leader shapes the performance of the team or group as a whole—the leader has to give content to its social identity in order to make the group's identity real. It is argued that this fourth dimension encompasses the effects of the other three (Reicher et al., 2016).

Military Leadership

While in contemporary leadership literature the examination of leadership as a social orientation is not a complete novelty, few studies into military leadership deviate from the traditional individualistic approach. Hence, studies of leadership in the military context tend to focus mainly on these individual leadership qualities (Atwater & Yammarino, 1993). This is particularly remarkable if one understands

the importance of comradeship and the team in any military structure. It has been confirmed that “in the extreme military context, it has been found that soldiers value their professional identity above other social identities” (Griffith, 2009, cited in Arnold et al., 2016, p. 7). Furthermore, Grossman (2009) argues that men engaged in combat are usually not motivated to fight by ideology, hate or fear, but “by group pressures and processes involving (1) regard for their comrades, (2) respect for their leaders, (3) concern for their own reputation with both, and (4) an urge to contribute to the success of the group”(chapter 7; see also Janowitz, 1961; MacCoun, 2006; McPherson, 1997; Wong, 2003). Although military hierarchy formally arranges the relationship between leaders and followers, informally, platoon members are able to reject their leaders. This dismissal can create friction and counterproductive behavior within military teams (Pierro, Cicero, Bonaiuto, van Knippenberg, & Kruglanski, 2005). Finally, in the military, the dynamic between commander and platoon might be considered even more important than in civilian organizations (Arnold et al., 2016), not least as it could become a matter of life and death.

Method

Single Case Study

In this article, we describe a qualitative single case study (Edwards, O’Mahoney, & Vincent, 2014; Yin, 2009) in which military leadership was not accepted. A commonly noted pitfall of single case studies is their lack of abstraction; the qualitative analysis of one case is not able to sufficiently provide evidence for scientific generalizations (Sayer, 2010; Yin, 2009). Nonetheless, Yin (2009, pp. 47–50) argues that single case studies are an appropriate approach under four circumstances, namely “when it represents a *critical case* in testing a well-formulated theory . . . ; an *extreme case* or a *unique case* . . . ; a *representative* or *typical case* . . . ; or a *revealing case*” (pp. 47–48, italics in original). Two of these circumstances are relevant for this particular case study and will be discussed below in greater detail.

In this article, a single case study is used for two reasons: the *unique* character of the case concerned; and because it can be considered a *revealing case*, as few investigators have access to military contexts. Regarding the case study’s unique character, it is important to realize that in the Dutch context, military leaders are seldomly replaced during a mission. This is confirmed by military operational analysts working at the Defence Leadership Centre of Expertise; a department within the Dutch military (names are omitted for reasons of anonymity). “There is one similar example that has been extensively discussed in the media, but there is hardly any literature or data on it” (commander ECLD, personal communication, June 18, 2018). While a military operational analyst suggested: “This is highly unusual. In case of internal problems, more often someone lower in rank will be repatriated in order to save the career of the military leader in question” (operational analyst, personal communication, June 19, 2018). In the Netherlands, because of its

sensitivity, aggregate data on this topic are either nonexistent or not accessible. Such a lack of information makes this specific case “so rare that any single case is worth documenting and analysing” (Yin, 2009, p. 47).

However, there is more at stake. Koivu and Hinze (2017) argue that, besides methodological concerns, the “human element of research” is of particular importance in case selection (p. 1025). To discuss this, human element would support “the recent push for transparency” in research and help “build methodological sophistication” (Koivu & Hinze, 2017, p. 1026). Therefore, and especially because entering the military community is considered rather difficult for civilian researchers (Dalenberg, 2017; Fosher, 2013), the position of the researcher and the case selection process cannot remain undiscussed. As the first author of this article, I am a civilian and a member of the research staff of the military academy in the Netherlands. My position at the Netherlands Defence Academy made it possible “to study at *first hand* what people do and say” (Hammersley, 2006, p. 4, emphasis in original) in the particular context of Dutch military. After exhausting my existing network within the military organization, I was allowed to join the platoon depicted in this case study to Afghanistan for a short period. Additionally, I could visit them twice during their predeployment preparations. The initial objective was to get a general idea of the practice of military leadership. However, once in Afghanistan, I learned about the unrest present in the platoon. Several platoon members expressed serious doubt concerning the leadership capabilities of the PC and his successor. These doubts were not only shared with me on a personal level but were also officially reported. Once back in the Netherlands, I stayed in touch with the platoon via social media. Within a week, I received the news that the PC was replaced and that one of the soldiers had been repatriated. These developments placed my data in a new perspective, as these data were no longer able to give an adequate representation of operational military leadership, as was my initial intention. However, the problem was not the data itself; rather, the difficulty was to find an adequate framework to understanding what happened. The decision to analyze the case from a social identity perspective enabled me to gain insights into the conditions for accepting military leadership. The rationale behind this choice is the immanent importance (within the military organization) of the dynamics between followers and their leader. Furthermore, this framework could shed light on the importance of contextual factors in military operations. Hence, this case study portrays a reconnaissance platoon deployed in Afghanistan who no longer accepted their commander. Half way through the mission, he was replaced. The rejection of his leadership functions as the starting point for this study, employing social identity theory as a framework for analyzing leadership acceptance.

Background to the Case

For this case study, we concentrated on a reconnaissance platoon deployed in Afghanistan in the winter of 2015–2016. Their specific assignment was to safely

transport North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) military advisors to and from their appointments with local service men, government officials, and other security professionals. During this mission, the PC—a first lieutenant—was responsible for the planning and coordination of the overall assignment. The platoon sergeant is his advisor and acts as the first point of contact for the rest of the platoon, consisting of 4 sergeants and 13 soldiers and corporals. They fulfill three different roles: drivers, door gunners, and guardian angels. Drivers prepare the vehicles and stay behind the wheel, while waiting for the NATO advisors. Door gunners maintain manually directed weapons aboard the vehicles and should—together with the drivers—make sure the patrol is not interrupted while driving. Guardian angels walk the advisors to and from the vehicles to their appointments and secure the area. Each vehicle has a commander, and aside from the platoon and the political advisors, a medical vehicle accompanies the patrol every time they leave the camp. Outside of the base, all of the above fall under the PC's leadership, while inside the camp gates, only the platoon itself is his responsibility.

Most of the platoon members had worked together for about 2 years in the Netherlands as a reconnaissance platoon; however, due to a variety of reasons, the composition of the platoon changed shortly before departure—two sergeants and several less experienced privates were added specifically for the mission. The young lieutenant was introduced to me by his commander as a rising star in the military; however, once in Afghanistan, things transpired rather differently. Before the end of the mission, he was replaced and one of his soldiers was repatriated to the Netherlands. It was these events that prompted this study to focus on why his leadership was not accepted.

Data Collection and Analysis

Although an independent research project, this project was embedded in a regular research program of the Dutch Ministry of Defence. A military organizational research unit was tasked to visit every mission halfway through their deployment and to perform a quantitative study regarding the morale of the soldiers concerned. For logistical reasons, the study presented in this article was embedded with this research unit. As the first author, I was invited as a researcher to Afghanistan to join the research unit for 2 weeks. Additionally, I met with the PC, encountered the platoon during the predeployment phase, and upon their return. The narratives of these platoon members offered a unique understanding of the daily challenges of operational military leadership. The activities of this platoon, as observed during field research in Mazar-e-Sharif (Afghanistan), and the platoon members' experiences and vision on leadership, conveyed through semistructured interview sessions, form the input of this case study.

Following a communal breakfast in the international camp canteen, every day began with a field briefing, after which vehicles and weapons were prepared. Most days the platoon would leave the confines of the camp, however, for safety reasons, I

could only join the platoon on a single field mission. The other days were spent inside the gates, either with members of the platoon who had some time off or with the platoon's superiors. Evenings were mostly spent together in the Dutch bar, talking, playing table tennis or cards, or watching a movie. As the Dutch base was relatively small, I had the opportunity to spend a lot of time with the platoon—in terms of official interviews, as well as in spare time, and for the sharing of meals.

Every member of the platoon was interviewed in the Dutch compound of the military base in Afghanistan. The PC and his successor were interviewed individually twice, each lasting approximately 1 hr—once upon arrival and once before departure. Sergeants, corporals, and soldiers were interviewed individually once and also in focus groups, two groups of soldiers, one group of corporals and one group of sergeants. The group interviews lasted between 60 and 90 min and 10 interviews in total were held. All interviews were recorded (audio only). The semistructured interviews all followed the same format: a description of the daily activities of the respondents, zooming in on daily problems and challenges, and relating daily activities to leadership as experienced by the respondents.

Upon returning to the Netherlands, the audio files were transcribed and coded (names are omitted for reasons of anonymity). To ensure anonymity, all respondents were given identification numbers—such as 3.15 or 6.18—in which the first number refers to the chronological order of when the interview was held, and the second to the respondent. Only where informative, ranks are mentioned. The interview data were complemented with personal observations and additional conversations—both with members of the platoon and other Dutch military personnel present at the compound. Furthermore, field notes and internal documents were used for background information.

The transcribed interviews were coded with the help of ATLAS.ti 8. For analysis, we used techniques of selective and open coding. Open coding means that the data were analyzed without the use of preidentified theoretical concepts (Friese, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This is an iterative process, which led to the identification of a wide diversity of codes, (sub)categories, notes on the use of language, possible underlying mechanisms, and mapping between codes. Early in the process, we worked with 56 individual codes, including codes on the preparatory phase, self-reflection of the interviewees, external threats, and cooperation with other nations. Later in the process, patterns emerged, mainly with regard to more internally oriented social processes, such as team composition, preparation time, and task orientation. The overarching question behind the selective codification of the interviews with the platoon members was: Can social identity theory explain the undesirable dynamics between the PC and his platoon? For selective coding, we mainly relied on the four dimensions of leadership in terms of social identity theory, as identified by Reicher et al. (2016). These four dimensions provided the framework within which we sought to understand why, in this case, leadership was not accepted. As such, this case study offers a unique understanding of the daily—sometimes banal and mundane—challenges of operational military leadership. In presenting

the data, we first focus on the results of selective coding (the fourth section). Subsequently, in the analysis (the fifth section), we use the results of open codification to give greater depth to the discussion.

Unaccepted Leadership: The Platoon's Perspective

Regarding the first dimension of the framework developed by Reicher et al. (2016)—that is, act as one of us—the interview data revealed a strong tendency for placing the PC in the out-group rather than as part of their in-group. “I feel that the PC and platoon sergeant are participating, but not for real. That’s my feeling” (respondent 6.15). Also on a personal level, platoon members reported a certain distance: “Our PC doesn’t do social talk with us. Since we arrived here he has not asked once how I’m doing” (respondent 7.20). Respondent 3.4 elaborates on the feeling of distance: “We are soldiers, he is a ‘jeans-officer.’” “Jeans-officer” is a term used among privates and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) to frame young officers as inexperienced “elite-boys” from the military academy. Respondent 3.4: “If you pretend, with only six years of service, that you know it all, then you’re a big cheat, seriously. It is a life-threatening mistake.” Furthermore, the platoon judged him as being too stressed: “Our leader always shows his stress, this is not good” (respondent 6.17). When asked for further clarification, it was explained that a reconnaissance soldier should not exhibit stress, especially if he is the leader of the group. Another private said: “We know what we have to do, each one of us is just doing his work. As long as things go well, he has nothing to do” (respondent 7.18). These quotes indicate that, while the PC is tolerated, he is not considered an essential element in the performance of the platoon.

Following the four dimensions outlined by Reicher et al. (2016), secondly, a leader needs to “act for us.” The platoon, and in particular the NCOs, believed that the PC was mainly pursuing his own career. “He uses the platoon to show off towards his own superiors. . . . I feel that his only vision is about making a good impression in order to pursue his own career” (respondent 3.4). It was claimed that the PC took on extra assignments, such as making pictures for the intelligence department and giving tours to high-ranking visitors, without taking the safety of his own men into consideration:

If you use the platoon as an extension of yourself by ordering them to take pictures of a whole complex. . . . He uses the platoon as a means, instead of having the goal of making the platoon function perfectly. (Respondent 3.4)

Platoon members suggested that on different occasions, the PC was not concerned enough about their safety. He neglected basic drills: “Basic military agreements are ignored. . . . [C]onsequently, he creates unsafe situations” (respondent 3.3).

The third dimension was coined by Reicher et al. (2016) as “collective self-realization.” Within this dimension, the most serious grievance was that the PC did not make enough use of the knowledge and experience within the platoon, nor of a previous deployment. He was said to have refused support from the previous deployment and wanted to do it all by himself: “He was busy buying a house and therefore missed the opportunity to visit Afghanistan in advance” (respondent 3.4). Additionally, some members conveyed they felt he was unable “to take them along in the story, and the assignment” (respondent 4.8). The same respondent also suggested that the PC decided on things, and gave orders, instead of sharing the “why behind a certain order” (respondent 4.8).

Finally, comprising the other three dimensions, the fourth dimension outlined by Reicher et al. (2016) is “entrepreneurship of identity.” Their theory prescribes that leaders must define a group and its values—not only to the outside world but also in terms of mobilizing the group itself (Reicher et al., 2016). The platoon judged the PC to have neither of these qualities and, although some men showed understanding for the PC’s position in the organization—“he is being addressed and criticized every time we do something against the rules, even when he can’t help it” (respondent 5.13)—the final judgment of the platoon was negative. On several aspects, the PC was considered to be out-group rather than in-group. He was trained at the elite military academy and thus considered to be part of the officer body rather than a “real” reconnaissance soldier. Additionally, he had hired “newbie” rather than experienced soldiers. He was suspected of acting out of self-interest, rather than for the platoon, and did not listen sufficiently to the existing experience within the platoon. In other words, the PC was unable to fulfill the platoon members’ needs to shape and strengthen their group identity. The platoon attributed these shortcomings in terms of leadership to their PC on a personal level. It was collectively established that he was not prototypical and thus did not manage to be an in-group leader, let alone an “entrepreneur of identity.” This negative judgment only increases as he fails to show in-group favoritism.

Thus, based on the four dimensions outlined by Reicher et al. (2016), the findings seem to show that the lack of leadership acceptance should be attributed to a failing leader. However, being replaced while on a mission is quite unusual (Vogelaar & Dalenberg, 2012). Hence, simply framing the PC as an inadequate leader is not sufficient to understand the social dynamics within the group that led to his replacement. Through open codification, we identified additional factors expressed by the respondents that were experienced as a threat to the social identity of the platoon and that could explain the spiraling negativity of in-group dynamics. These factors appeared to be contextual rather than personal (meaning they can be attributed neither personally to the PC nor to the platoon), but nevertheless they seemed to have a decisive impact on the course of events. In the following, we discuss the three factors that came out strongest in open codification: *team composition*, *preparation time*, and *task uncertainty*.

Contextual Factors and the Black Sheep Effect

Firstly, regarding *team composition*, sergeants, corporals, and privates alike expressed that they felt a lack of unity, ascribing this mostly to how the platoon was assembled, at least in part, on an ad hoc base. One corporal commented: “The team is different than usual. We have to work with all new and unexperienced soldiers, while we normally only work with experienced guys, and [name old sergeant] is missing” (respondent 4.7). Respondents 6.15, 6.16, and 6.17 also felt that the situation was not normal. Private 1: “It is rather weird. There is one sergeant who leaves. And then, three others leave as well.” Private 2: “Actually, there is only one sergeant staying.” Private 3: “It’s all a bit make-do and mend.” Private 2 added: “They are all temps, and together we try to make the best of it.” Based on these comments, and the fact that the platoon was assembled, at least partially, in an ad hoc manner, it seems reasonable to assume that the team’s composition was an undermining factor in this mission.

Secondly, collective *preparation time* was experienced as limited. A private explained:

After the summer we all went to individual training institutes. Drivers went to Germany, gunners went to Germany, guardian angels to Hilversum [a town in the Netherlands]. We only had from August till November. From those months you had to spend one and a half maybe two months on individual training. And in the remaining time the gunners were somewhere else for quite a while. So effectively we had less than two months to prepare together. (Respondent 7.19)

This assessment was confirmed by other platoon members. Getting the appropriate driving licenses and updating technical knowledge were considered more important than investing time in team cohesion. These technical trainings are usually job-specific and, as such, an individual enterprise, rather than representing a training opportunity for the whole platoon.

Thirdly, platoon members felt that the type of assignment was not in line with their reconnaissance identity.¹ The assignment for this mission was considered simple and labeled as a low-threat assignment. We coded this as *task uncertainty* because the platoon felt that they could not do the type of work they were trained for. One respondent illustrated this clearly: “We are actually a recon [i.e., reconnaissance] platoon, but do simple force protection work” (respondent 3.4). Others agreed: “I’ve had exercises with reconnaissance elements that were more exciting” (respondent 5.13); and “We are soldiers, but stay in when there is a threat, while we are trained for combat” (respondent 4.8).

We consider these three contextual factors as presenting structural risks to the acceptance of (military) leadership. These contextual factors suggest that this reconnaissance platoon felt they had been placed in a position in which, because of their mandate, they could not live up to what they considered to be prototypical of their

group. They had to execute (for them) relatively unfamiliar tasks, with a rather new team, under different circumstances than they were trained for, and they experienced a lack of preparation time. Glennon (2015) confirms the importance of contextual factors and connects the institutional practices to underlying frustrations (pp. 19–28).

Moreover, these contextual factors suggest there was a mismatch between training and work. Not only was the PC himself unable to live up to the image of the military leader, that he and his seniors had developed of him during and after military education. Also the soldiers and NCO could not reassure their own image of being a reconnaissance soldier. Neither the task nor the team was considered prototypical of their identity as a reconnaissance platoon. This posed a threat to the team members' social identity.

In addition, these in-group dynamics were not moderated by active entrepreneurship of social identity on the part of the PC. Stets and Burke (2000) explain that through self-categorization, individuals accentuate perceived similarities between themselves and other in-group members, while accentuating differences between themselves and out-group members. In this case, we see that the PC was increasingly seen as an out-group member. This situation eventually caused the social dynamics of the group to turn against him.

This situation might be explained using an additional theoretical framework, namely the "black sheep effect" as described by Pinto, Marques, Levine, and Abrams (2010). The black sheep effect explains how the responses of in-group members to the deviant behavior of an in-group member are more severe than that of an out-group member who shows similar behavior. According to this theory, the deviance of an in-group member will trigger a "prescriptive focus" that drives group members to evaluate the deviant member in terms of his or her contribution to the superior identity of the in-group members (Pinto, Marques, Levine, & Abrams, 2010, p. 107). This effect is more prevalent when the social identity of the group needs validation (due to threats to this identity; Pinto et al., 2010, p. 108). The deviance of in-group members undermines the distinctiveness of the group and, therefore, poses a direct threat to in-group identity. In addition, research has shown that group members tend to judge deviant group members more strongly when they feel other members hold them accountable for their judgment as group members (Marques, Abrams, Paez, & Martinez-Taboada, 1998). These mechanisms are clearly recognizable in this case study.

In this case, the combined influence of threats to the reconnaissance platoon's identity and distinctiveness (e.g., new members that were not considered prototypical, and a task that was not in line with their reconnaissance identity) and the behavior of the lieutenant as deviant from group norms (e.g., "not acting as one of us," no small talk, ignoring protocol, showing his stress) may have resulted in increased scrutiny of the PC's behavior. This scrutiny was, among others, characterized by the paying of a disproportion amount of attention to the PC's behavior,

which was deemed to be undermining the reconnaissance identity of the group (e.g., not using the experience within the group and accepting just any task).

In the end, this scrutiny led to more unfavorable judgment by the NCOs compared to the privates. While the privates were unhappy about the situation, they reacted with more equanimity. However, the NCOs focused all their negative attributions on the PC's behavior and his person rather than on contextual factors or the defense organization, which could be considered equally (or perhaps even more) responsible. This might be explained by their roles in the unit. The NCOs were seen—and saw themselves—as keepers of the group's identity and protectors of group norms: “[I]t is us, the sergeants, who keep things going and keep the platoon together, to come across as a unity for outsiders” (respondent 3.4). The lack of entrepreneurship of the social identity by the PC was compensated for by the NCOs. First of all, the NCOs are considered responsible for the socialization of new group members, as they are generally the most experienced (and therefore most prototypical) group members. Moreover, the NCOs are supposed to support and protect the PC's leadership by adhering and explaining his decisions to the group. However, as the PC in their view was acting against the group's interest, they could only dismiss his leadership to protect their own prototypicality. This responsibility may have enhanced their perceived accountability toward the group and therefore led to an even stronger prescriptive focus or, in other words, a tendency to judge the PC's behavior only in terms of deviance toward the group's identity.

Conclusion

Building on the experiences of a Dutch reconnaissance platoon in Afghanistan, this article aimed to understand military leadership acceptance by focusing on social dynamics in relation to leadership acceptance. Secondly, it studied the potential of social identity theory as a framework within which to analyze leadership. Regarding military leadership, it can be concluded that simply dismissing individual leadership qualities can take us toward an explanation but does not do justice to the complexity of the case study. The analysis of interview data from a social identity theory perspective gave a more precise explanation of why the privates and NCOs judged their leader to be inadequate.

The findings provide some preliminary evidence to show that paying insufficient attention to in-group dynamics and entrepreneurship might undermine leadership acceptance—both in the context of military platoons, and quite possibly, other team situations. The effect of this lack of attention is intensified when contextual threats to social identity are present, and others in the team feel responsible for acting in an entrepreneurial way regarding the team's social identity. As such, the combination of (lacking) leadership behavior, contextual circumstances, and the characteristics of his followers led to the dismissal of this military leader. The analysis, focusing on group dynamics, in fact showed that individual behavior is just one of many factors. These insights could be of importance in predeployment training for military

leaders. It might suggest that the current focus on the development of individual leadership qualities, and ignorance of the importance of context and in-group dynamics, fails to adequately prepare military leaders for their work as team leaders.

Although this is a single-case study, we would not want to generalize beyond the case this study's findings relate positively to established literature and, as such, can provide preliminary evidence that social identity theory can be a useful instrument for analyzing in-group dynamics with regard to leadership. In line with Van Knippenberg et al. (2005) and Hogg (2016), we suggest that social identity theory can fill a gap in current research on leadership and can be used to explain the acceptance (or not) of leaders in groups. The contribution of this study to existing literature on social identity theory is that it illustrates how entrepreneurship of identity emerges in the in-group. It demonstrates how a lack of attention to group dynamics may damage the reputation of the leader and create the need for "in-group entrepreneurship," which places an extra burden on official leadership. The results of the case study might suggest that elements of social identity theory can, apart from analyzing leadership patterns, also be an instrument for analyzing in-group dynamics with regard to leadership. Based on the principles of social identity theory, this study suggests that a combination of the context and the type of leadership might create a dynamic that can lead to "leader-undermining entrepreneurship"—that is, team members who are more prototypical than the leader may undermine official leadership.

In conclusion, in this case, social identity theory proved to be a useful framework for analyzing the acceptance of leadership, as it moves beyond the individual characteristics of the leader, addresses contextual influences, and considers leadership acceptance as a dynamic process. As such, social identity theory explained how dynamics between leaders and followers influenced the acceptance of leadership in this particular situation. Possibly, social identity theory can be a suitable approach for analyzing the acceptance of military leaders in other situations as well. Furthermore, this case study demonstrates how a lack of attention to group processes can damage a carefully prepared operation. Finally, the use of social identity theory as an explanatory framework highlights the perspective of the followers rather than the behavior of the individual leader. As few studies in the military realm acknowledge leadership as a social orientation, this is a refreshing approach.

However, the framework of social identity theory failed to give a satisfactory explanation for why followers—in this case, particular NCOs—turned against their leader. In a secondary analysis, we therefore focused on in-group dynamics and, in particular, the behavior of these NCOs. The open coding provided additional information on contextual factors and sketched a different picture. A PC was sent on a mission with a platoon that had been assembled ad hoc, and without sufficient time to prepare, to complete an assignment that was outside of their core expertise. These findings suggest the insufficiency of focusing on leadership behavior alone, as contextual factors also drive in-group dynamics, spiraling into a situation in which leadership acceptance is no longer a given. Therefore, in a secondary analysis, we

connected these findings with literature on the so-called black sheep effect (Pinto et al., 2010). The NCOs in this case practiced their own entrepreneurship and, as such, dismissed the leadership of the PC. Thus, whereas Reicher, Haslam, and Hopkins (2005) describe the importance of being an entrepreneur for the group's social identity, the black sheep effect reveals how an inability to do so can create a negative environment for leadership acceptance.

Research Limitations and Future Research

While offering several interesting insights regarding leadership acceptance and the use of social identity theory within a military context, there are several limitations to this study. Following Yin (2009), we used the single case study approach, as it can provide valuable insights into the mechanisms of leadership acceptance in an actual work context. However, case studies in general, and single case studies in particular, can suffer from a lack of generalizability. Therefore, conclusions should be drawn with caution. Future investigations, either through the use of additional case studies or a more quantitative approach, can be employed to corroborate these findings.

In addition, the current study focused on leadership dynamics in small units. It remains to be seen whether these findings also apply to larger units and upper echelon leadership. However, we do believe that it is useful to examine the leadership dynamics of a small unit such as a platoon because small unit leadership is becoming ever more important as fewer soldiers are tasked with (and can do) much more with the contemporary technologies now at their disposal. Concluding, we underline that more research into leadership-follower dynamics in small groups, both qualitatively and quantitatively, would be pivotal for military practice in future operations.

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Note

1. Reconnaissance soldiers are usually more experienced than regular infantry soldiers. They operate under more complex circumstances and, in smaller teams, trained to operate in life-threatening circumstances.

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