# Public Leadership with a Moral Purpose: A Phenomenological View

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## ABSTRACT

Interest in the features of the development of character, specifically one's capacity for moral purpose and moral leadership, have led to an expanding concern within many higher educational institutions. This paper represents a qualitative analysis of a year-long Fellowship's curricular and co-curricular program focused on intentionally developing moral leadership and moral purpose among other outcomes (self-awareness, cross-cultural competence, community, and social responsibility). This exploration of the features of a tailored curriculum focused on the development surrounding morality points to the role of educational institutions as key settings wherein character develops. The selective population within the Fellowship included a diverse cohort of 25 active duty and veteran service members involved in respective graduate programs in business, law, and/or public policy/administration at Harvard University. A major feature of the Fellowship included several reflective writings and presentations on developmental experiences, moral leadership, and moral purpose. The phenomenological approach presented here discovered several themes that are significant to the understanding of public leadership. Also discussed are the findings for the broader context of moral leadership and purpose and relevant limitations.

Studies of character whose major focus is on its links to leadership should investigate understanding who one is in addition to what one does regarding its practical relevance to those leading in professional settings. Based on their studies of engineering, legal, nursing, medical, and theological education, Colby and Sullivan (2008) proposed a framework for thinking about commonalities in professional preparation across different fields. They describe three apprenticeships of professional preparation that must be provided to emerging professionals in any field. The first is intellectual training, which refers to the knowledge and ways of thinking important to the profession. The second involves learning the complex skills of professional practice in the field. Finally, the third involves formation of professionals whose work and professional identities are grounded in the profession's ethical standards, that is, the normative roles, responsibilities, and purposes of the profession. Colby and Sullivan's (2008) framework derives from literature on the formation of ethical professional identity. The military seeks to give each service member a specific type of ethical professional identity.

When trying to study and define one's ethical professional identity, the researcher must understand how moral and ethical behavior is derived from one's character (Cook & Aman, 2020). Vessels and Huitt (2005) define character as "a multi-faceted psychological and behavioral phenomenon that involves the predictable co-occurrence and inter-connectedness of its many psychological and behavioral components," with the level of one's character being "determined by the consistency and strength with which these components co-occur in response to challenging life events" (p. 4). To make this vague definition pertinent to military leadership there needs to be a moral component,

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**Melissa A. Shambach** is a recent graduate from the University of Denver, Josef Korbel School of International Studies, where she studied international security in the Middle East and North Africa. Eager to learn more about the world, she has worked in Jordan, Morocco, and Austria, and traveled to over 25 countries. Melissa has a diverse professional portfolio including working for the public sector, private sector, international NGOs, and higher education. In her current role as an analyst with BMNT, she works to use innovation to solve complex Department of Defense problems. She has worked as a research assistant for two years, and conducted her own independent research in Jordan for her thesis on youth unemployment and entrepreneurship programs. Melissa has a passion for leadership studies and development, spending the last four years in the Pioneer Leadership Program which provides both academic and practical leadership development training.

or in the Aristotelian sense, a morally virtuous component (Aristotle, 1999; Born & Megone, 2019). In other words, character is the habitual manifestation of behavioral and cognitive coaction and the resultant coactions between the morally virtuous self and the normative and non-normative (e.g., unpredictable) facets of the environment. As such, and in agreement with Aristotle, character is a habit developed over the life span in specific environments.

For those who have sought a better understanding about how one discovers, defines, and develops their moral purpose and moral leadership in carefully choreographed environments, this study attempts to provide some insight. It is specifically focused upon one cohort of military individuals and the common factors that inspire them while asking the larger question regarding the applicability of the findings to other dissimilar cohorts. This qualitative research sought to identify the lived experiences and relevant features of the ecology within a Fellowship at the Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Center for Public Leadership (CPL) that promoted the moral development of the participants. As the United States Air Force Academy (2019) defines warrior ethos proficiencies that are based on the intellectual development inherent to the profession of arms, one can see the importance of the promotion of moral development specifically around moral courage and purposeful service to others. As such, the primary aim of the qualitative data collection and analyses will be to ground the theoretical models of the Fellowship's curriculum in insights that can be derived only from close observation of the institution's culture and educational practices. This grounding requires not only careful observation and documentation of key aspects of education for character and leadership but also an analysis of the meaning that the various educational and cultural practices had for the observed.

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**Greta Zukauskaite** is a Lithuanian native who calls various cities in the U.S. and abroad home. Her most recent work experience includes working at nonprofit called Crossroads MA which was grounded in youth leadership development. Her responsibilities centered around social justice curriculum creation, implementation and mentorship. She also recently concluded a Community Fellows program with the Institute of Nonprofit Practice. As a Fellow, she learned with and from a group of emerging nonprofit leaders in the Greater Boston area. Greta is currently excited to get back into the social research field and hopes to continue to uncover truths that will provide guidance to her communities during an age of misinformation. She holds a bachelor's degree in Public Communication from American University and a master's degree in Geography from King's College London. Her most recent accomplishment is embarking on a cross-country road trip while documenting her travels and encounters with the people, places, and adventures along the way. Greta hopes to continue combining her passions for research, photography and visual storytelling in authentic and inspiring ways.

**Emily A. Pate** is a former Lieutenant Junior Grade in the U.S. Navy and is currently a graduate student at MIT. She commissioned in 2016 after graduating from Harvard College. Upon completion of Navy Intelligence Officer Basic Course, she was assigned to be the intelligence officer for VAW-117, an E-2C/D Hawkeye squadron, based out of Point Mugu, CA. She deployed aboard the USS John C. Stennis for an "around-the-world" adventure and supported strike group operational planning as a mission planning officer. She was also sent to Qatar as the Navy intelligence liaison officer in support of combined operational efforts between her air wing and the U.S. Air Force. Emily received an A.B. in applied mathematics with a specialty in evolutionary biology. As part of the Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics Research Assistant Program, she assisted Dana Born in research and a publication regarding organizational effectiveness.

Professional preparation is a specific type of educational model that emphasizes the coactions between individual students and their educational environments (Overton, 2015). Present-day models of leader development (e.g., Berkowitz et al., 2017; Callina & Lerner, 2017) underscore that features of positive character develop through mutually influential and, particularly, mutually beneficial, relations between a specific individual and their specific situational and environmental context. The examination of character attributes and their development-in-context therefore highlights the key role of educational institutions—specifically, higher education institutions with a mission to train leaders of character. The CPL is one such institution.

At the beginning of the 2019-2020 school year, the HKS and its CPL along with Harvard Law School (HLS) and Harvard Business School (HBS), began a new Fellowship program for U.S. military veterans and active duty students. This Fellowship sought to prepare these students to be at the forefront of a new generation of public leaders. Managed by CPL, the Fellowship provides vital tuition support, living stipends, and a comprehensive leadership development program to a select group of 20 to 25 active duty military and student veterans drawn from HKS, HBS, and HLS. The program and its curriculum build upon what the selected men and women who have served our country represent. CPL crafted the Fellowship to focus on strengthening core competencies central to public leadership, such as promoting strong moral character and ethical decision making, mastering the art of negotiation, and leading effective teams and organizations, among other areas.

Fellows from HKS, HBS, and HLS participated in a year-long co-curricular program intended to inspire, provide concrete opportunities for leadership skill-building, and connect their previous military service to continued civic mindedness. The Fellowship also created opportunities for Fellows to engage the broader Harvard University and Cambridge, MA communities as well as more closely connect both the civilian and military communities therein through the leadership seminar series and service-learning opportunities. It is custom tailored to leverage and develop each Fellow to bring fresh, responsible, and ethical leadership to the United States and to the world.

**Dana H. Born** is the Faculty Chair, Senior Executive Fellows Program; Faculty Advisor, Black Family Graduate Fellowship; Lecturer in Public Policy at Harvard University; and is a Distinguished Fellow in Moral Leadership with the HOW Institute for Society. A retired Brigadier General, Dana served from 2004-2013 as the 9th Dean of Faculty at the U.S. Air Force Academy. Her military assignments include a variety of duties including the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Royal Australian Air Force, the staff of the Secretary of the Air Force, command, and duty in Afghanistan. She holds degrees from the Air Force Academy, Trinity University, the University of Melbourne, and a Ph.D. from Pennsylvania State University. She received Penn State's Distinguished Alumni Award and an Honorary Doctorate from Simmons College, the Harvard Kennedy School's Innovation in Teaching Award, along with senior military distinctions including the Air Force's Zuckert Award for Outstanding Management Achievement and the Air Force Association's Vandenberg Award. Dr. Born is a past President of both the American Psychological Association (Society for Military Psychology) and the Massachusetts Women's Forum. She serves as an officer, member, or consultant to numerous professional associations and boards including the Air Force Academy Foundation and the Falcon Foundation.

CPL crafted a tailor-made Fellowship to focus on strengthening core competencies central to public leadership, such as promoting strong moral character and ethical decision making, mastering the art of negotiation, and leading effective teams and organizations, among other areas. Fellows studying in the HKS, HBS, and HLS participate in a year-long co-curricular program intended to inspire, provide concrete opportunities for leadership skill-building, and connect their previous military service to continued civic mindedness.

The purpose of this qualitative study is two-fold. First, it is to further understand the processes by which an organization can foster development of Fellows through intentional curricular processes. Second, it is to gain a deeper understanding of the Fellows' experience of their own development. Qualitative research allows the researcher the ability to read, hear, visualize, and potentially even experience phenomena from the perspective of the people or population studied. We will potentially be able to decipher their verbiage, their specific lexicology, and their associative stories/experiences regarding how they express the manifestations of these themes across the areas of moral leadership and purpose. Some specific lines of inquiry for this project were:

1) What are the dynamics of peer relations within the Fellows?
2) How do Fellows navigate within civilian-military relations?
3) What can we learn about their reflections on the definition and development of moral leadership and moral purpose?

Given an extra-curricular program focused intentionally on specific learning outcomes focused community, self-awareness, social responsibility, and cross-cultural competence as well as moral leadership and moral purpose, our primary research question became "What is the learning experience of a first-year graduate Fellow focused on these intentional learning outcomes?" An additional question was "What meaning did the cohort of Fellows ascribe to their yearlong experience that may be relevant for other audiences?"

## Method

In line with the views of Thomas and Magilvy (2011), we became more and more interested in a holistic, close-up view of the many variables of the dynamic phenomena of moral leadership and moral purpose. Of note, the purpose of qualitative research is "not to generalize to other subjects or settings, but to explore deeply a specific phenomenon or experience on which to build further knowledge" (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p. 152). To address these ideas and the research aims, we conducted a phenomenological analysis of qualitative data collected as a part of a developmental Fellowship program at the HKS.

## Designing the Present Study

The qualitative research technique used in this work was a phenomenological approach. This methodology deals with the manifestation of phenomena themselves, potential hidden meanings, as well as how, why, and where they arise to describe the essence of our lived experiences. Therefore, we will generate hypotheses and theoretical constructs by establishing different concepts from collected data within the social world (Jakobsson et. al., 2005).

## Data Collection

The data used for this inquiry consisted of three sets of reflective papers written by members of the Fellowship. The prompts were *"Defining Moral Purpose & Leadership"* in October 2019, *"Your Transformative Experience"* in November 2019, and

*"Aftermath: Reflective Understanding"* was written between December 2019 and March 2020. These papers encapsulate opinions and experiences of the Fellows, providing us with a window into learning, growth, and development that transpired. To understand and characterize the culture of Fellowship as a developmental process, the aim of the qualitative investigation was to enhance and supplement other similar institutions by providing an ethnographic snapshot of the ways in which the CPL purposefully carries out its developmental programs.

## Participants

There were 25 total Fellows. These Fellows were competitively selected in two steps: first by their professional school for the program and second by an independent panel for the specific Fellowship. By school the participants are HBS (3); HLS (4); HKS (13); Dual degree (5 total, HKS/HBS – 3, HBS/HLS – 2). Demographics of the Fellows matched the demographics of the institution, in that the racial/ethnic composition of the sample was 80% male and 20% female and, in turn, 72% White; 12% Latinx; 4% Black; 8% Asian; and 4% Other. Across the military spectrum 64% Veterans, 20% were Reservists, 12% were Active Duty, and 4% were National Guard members. Additionally, the armed service components were represented as 40% Army, 24% Navy, 24% Marine, and 12% Air Force.

## Procedures

Data were collected through reflective papers at three time points from summer 2019 to spring 2020. No one received compensation for their research participation. The consent process took place at the end of the Fellowship as papers, reflections, surveys, and other data were collected. The participants were given a detailed email with information of what they could expect, and it was reiterated that they had free choice to participate in this study as part of the course or "opt out" with no penalty. The act of the participant reading the information and then continuing to undertake the survey was viewed as willingness to participate under free choice and with knowledge of what it was they were participating in. Participants could decline to take part in the process without any consequences at that point or any time therein. It was explained how the confidentiality of the data would be managed and how the data would be stored and protected from that point forward. In summary, at the end of the year, all 25 members of the Fellowship offered consent for their papers from over the year to be analyzed for this study.

## Data Analysis

### Conducting a Phenomenology

As qualitative research uses an open and flexible design, doing so may seem to stand at odds with the notion of rigor to quantitative/positivist perspectives (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Coming to a single, universal truth is not possible, as each person has their "own personal perspective as seen through the lens of cultural, experiential, environmental, and other contextual influences" (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p. 152). Therefore, paying particular attention to the qualitative rigor and model of trustworthiness (e.g., credibility, applicability, consistency, and confirmability) from the moment of study conceptualization is critical (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Interpretation is a very complex process, and while all research is a balance of art and science, qualitative analyses involve making interpretations only after careful consideration (Blumer, 1969). Qualitative analysis, evaluation, and interpretation are "neither terminal nor mechanical" and are always "ongoing, emergent, and unfinished" if one is seeking the rigor required for proper representation of the data but

also for proper interpretation by the outsider (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 276). This process starts with selecting a methodology regarding which qualitative approach one will take. Indeed, when selecting said approach a qualitative researcher knows that regardless of the approach taken, "meaning, interpretation, and representation are deeply intertwined with each other" (Denzin, 1998, p. 322).

A phenomenological approach was used to find the reasons behind the context, process, and outcomes regarding moral purpose and moral leadership. As described by Creswell and Poth (2018), the purpose of a phenomenological study is to describe the common meaning for several individuals regarding a certain concept. It is a study of the lived experiences of persons, from which one draws descriptions of the essence of the experiences rather than solely explaining why they happen (Moustakas, 1994). In other words, a phenomenology does not seek to find causation, correlation, or strict post-phenomena linkages. Rather than finding a homogenous, theory-based sample for variation of or correlation between the experience, through this approach we sought out the shared experience of multiple individuals. This separates a phenomenology from ethnographic, narrative, case study, and grounded theory approaches (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

We used the NVivo and Dedoose programs to look through all the paper transcripts, initiating the process of data reduction, memo writing, and an initial thematic of textual and structural descriptions. The data were deidentified prior to analysis and comprise a representative sample of the Fellows. It is undoubtedly difficult to transcend one's own interpretations but taking a fresh perspective toward the examination of the Fellows' experiences was of the utmost importance

to this study (see *Phenomenological Reflection*). The corresponding sections detail the means taken to specify and organize our findings.

## Analytic Steps

We drew from the perspectives of Giorgi (2009) and Moustakas (1994) in crafting our analytical approach. As external research assistants for the Fellowship, we each engaged in each step independently, then compared their findings for internal consistency. First, we sought to gain an intuitive, holistic understanding of the data by reading through the raw data multiple times. Second, we identified themes and re-read the papers, coding for notable themes and sub-themes. Third, we came together as a team to compare results and refine the themes and sub themes. Fourth, we analyzed data within each theme and subtheme to identify significant trends in the experiences and attitudes of the Fellows. Fifth, we synthesized the analysis of trends and themes within the data into a cohesive narrative for the purposes of this report.

From these steps we sought patterns that undergirded moral purpose and moral leadership in relation to our three lines of inquiry: *the importance of peer dynamics and peer relations, the need to navigate civilian and military relations*, and *the importance of learning about and reflecting on one's moral purpose and capacity for moral leadership*. Data were collected into different themes and headings, which were confirmed and modified throughout the analyses. We then integrated our analyses, sifting out linkages that exposed explicit patterns.

Dedoose and NVivo were used to revisit the data set to expand upon the initial patterns and charts made to verify these findings. Additionally, we searched for any other relevant references or thoughts shared

by the Fellows that may augment the preliminary findings. This level of verification is crucial to a qualitative approach to ensure that findings presented here make sense, are relevant, and accurately depict what is happening. We also took additional steps to verify and validate our ideas, such as crosstalk in regular research meetings and referring back to preliminary analyses and previously completed reports on the Fellowship. Our analytic process allowed us to continually aggregate information about each category and the potential relationships between categories. The research team met weekly to share independent findings, collectively map out the analysis, and focus the scope of the research.

### Phenomenological Reflection

As pointed out by Corbin and Strauss (2015), a qualitative researcher "is as much a part of the research process as the participants and the data they provide" (p. 4). Whereas a few of the authors' own experiences as research assistants and instructors alongside the Fellows may have biased some views, acknowledging it helped tailor this interpretation. As established by McGill (1966), it is common practice when doing qualitative research to make continual, deliberate efforts avoid observational biases. To wit, observational biases must be overcome in every psychological research method. Speaking to these various influences on our methodological style help "bracket" and "set aside" our personal experiences in order to focus on the experiences of the participants (Giorgi, 2009; van Manen, 2014).

### Results

From 64 total reflective papers, over 150 significant statements were extracted. 32 of the most significant statements are presented verbatim here, with a number of references and linkages to other thoughts captured

by the Fellows in their papers. The analysis of the papers and statements was conducted alongside two surveys administered by Fellowship instructors. Data from these sources was synthesized into three categories, herein referenced as themes:

1) The importance of peer relations within the Fellowship cohort.
2) The challenges of navigating a new civil-military environment.
3) The growth in understanding of moral leadership and moral purpose.

A deeper explanation of each of these themes is outlined over the following sections.

### Peer Dynamics and Peer Relations

Fellows consistently highlighted the importance of the camaraderie they discovered within the Fellowship. It has been noted that peer relationships continue to have "a strong effect on self-concept, social skills (e.g., conflict resolution, making and maintaining friendships), moral reasoning development, involvement in risk, [etc.]" that will inevitably play out within academic institutions (Berkowitz, 2002, p. 54). These relationships help shape not only intellectual development, but also affective and psychosocial dimensions of development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Davis and Murrell (1993) proposed that optimum growth occurs when classroom studies relate to other aspects of the student's daily lives outside the classroom, and peers help shape that development.

The primary benefit of the Fellowship to most members was a space that eased them through a jarring transition - a "bright spot" in their semesters. Some went from the throes of active duty combat service to sitting in a graduate business class surrounded by bankers and hedge fund investors. All Fellows described a contrast

in the two environments and making the conscious effort required to readjust to civilian life.

The Fellowship provided a *touch point*, *anchor*, and *family* to the students throughout the semester. In an academic world that is jarringly different from the militaristic one from which most of the Fellows very recently came, the Fellowship provided a retreat into a more familiar area for many members. As one member succinctly put it:

> "While disaggregating moral purpose and leadership from the identity of the military officer has been difficult, the Fellowship, and its group of exceptional peers has made it much more manageable. We've learned from each other's experiences, shared stories of triumph, grief, and joy, and become friends. Together, I like to think that we've been a source of comfort in a time of transition."

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Fellows also described a disorientation as they sought to "internalize their transition in ways that maintain their identity as a servant leader, but in a new direction." The Fellowship provided a community of Fellow veterans to help in that transition. Fellows expressed gratitude to be able to connect via shared experiences and a deep passion for service while learning from each other both in a peer and mentor/mentee capacity. Some described learning to be vulnerable with the other Fellows helped them in other programs outside of the Fellowship as well. By providing a secure place for the Fellows to reflect and strengthen their emotional intelligence through reflective retreats, exercises, small group discussions, and written reflections such as the three papers used in this study, Fellows could leverage a reflective time in their lives to help them connect with peers outside of the Fellowship.

The Fellowship helped orient a group of individuals struggling to establish their identities outside of the military context into a team that together gained an understanding of how to leverage their experiences in their quests to explore a purpose of service "beyond the uniform." In other words, the development of a leader's character matters beyond just the leader themselves. This aligns with multiple studies that have shown that

> the processes involved in cooperative groups enhances students' skills in civic engagement and character development, the expansion of which are increasingly seen as an essential mission of higher education and beyond (Colby & Sullivan, 2008; Cook & Aman, 2020; Lerner & Callina, 2014).

### Navigating Civil-Military Relations

The Fellowship seeks to bridge the military-civilian divide and enable graduate students to learn from each other's unique experiences and perspectives. Developing leaders of character within the Fellowship is not solely a concern of Harvard alone, as the Fellowship trains leaders who arguably are continuing their service to the nation. Navigating a diverse civil-military environment in the various Harvard-based graduate programs gave Fellows

a unique opportunity to reflect on their own identities as members of the military and engage with the new perspectives of their colleagues.

Several of the Fellows described how the "military-civilian divide became a very real notion [upon transitioning]." These difficulties not only arose in day to day classroom interactions, but within the Fellows' own self conceptions. Those who spend extended time in the military often craft their identities around their service, and are used to an environment of reinforced purpose, values, and mission. For example, one Fellow reflected that "West Point and the Army did such a good job at inculcating me with Army values - that my morality, ethics, and beliefs were generally in line with that of the military as an institution." Fellows frequently described their initial time in the civilian academic world as uncomfortable, uncertain, disorienting, and unconfident. Many wrote about longing for the familiarity and clarity they had had while serving, speaking of wanting to return to service, and experiencing jealousy for those who were still active duty. These sentiments were especially strong when Fellows discussed their concepts of leadership, morality, and purpose. Their previous conceptions of moral leadership and moral purpose that had been clear, familiar, and continually reinforced in their military service, were difficult to grapple with in their new civilian context.

In the classroom Fellows had varied experiences interacting with their civilian classmates, speakers, and professors. While they were able to find like-minded military peers in the Fellowship program, they were often ideologically isolated in their public policy and law classes. Some engaged with those who held different views directly, seeking to understand where they were coming from. These Fellows experienced transformation and learning through this cross-cultural environment, for both themselves and the colleagues with whom they engaged. One student got coffee with a colleague whom he had vehemently disagreed with in class. After an hour and a half discussion, they found that they differed over whether change best occurred within or from outside an organization, and "how there were tactics from both sides that could be valuable to put into our leadership tool kits for future moral leadership challenges." Others noted taking on the role of educating peers about the military. Many Fellows recognized how the mix of perspectives and experiences contributed to collective growth in their communities. The Fellowship surely provided the environment and opportunity for the overarching breadth of these interactions, regardless of whether the Fellows would have taken these actions anyway.

Clearly, the discomfort that Fellows faced in navigating their new civilian environment provided crucial opportunities for self-reflection, value examination, and dialogue with those of different backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. Part of the reason for assigning the papers that the Fellows completed was to facilitate these very activities. Rest (1986) noted that changes in one's beliefs come from "experiences that do not fit one's earlier conceptions. Cognitive disequilibrium is the condition for development" (p. 32). Moreover, this opportunity for dissonance laid the groundwork for a transformational setting. A transformational setting is the most ideal for the development of one's morality (Cook & Aman, 2020).

### Reflections on Moral Leadership and Moral Purpose

As previously mentioned, the features of a leader's character have garnered a great degree of research attention. Within this literature there is wide-reaching agreement that character has a moral component that is related to but also distinct from values and personality

attributes (see Berkowitz, 2012 and Nucci, 2017 for similar ideas), and that character is a developmental phenomenon (e.g., Hannah & Avolio, 2011; Lerner & Callina, 2014; Wright & Quick, 2011). Most Fellows defined moral leadership (ML) in universal terms. These included definitions like the *golden rule, doing the right thing despite personal cost, and adhering to a strong moral and ethical compass*. This type of leadership was described as most effective when it is constant and consistent. A majority of Fellows also conflated servant leadership or leading by serving with their definition of ML. Most definitions of servant leadership were paired with reference to military rhetoric or influence, like mentioning the values of "Honor, Courage, and Commitment." Some Fellows defined ML as personal and named values that were informed by individual lived experience. Some of these values included but are not limited to empathy, compassion, and selflessness.

Many Fellows described moral purpose (MP) as the "why" behind the choices people make in their lives generally and in leadership roles. It was often framed as the values that are the driving force behind peoples' decisions. One Fellow stated that "moral purpose is a foundational element of moral leadership." A few Fellows shared their personal MPs, one of which was to "defend liberty, protect the innocent, and inspire greatness" which they achieved "through the pillars of courage, excellence, truth, and integrity." Some Fellows included religious and spiritual tenets from Hinduism and Christianity informing their notions of MP, although one Fellow made clear that "regardless of religion or upbringing, a large number of core values are almost universal among leaders."

It is important to note that many Fellows included a mixture of different definitions of ML and MP while some only included one or some. Fellows were also asked to reflect on how their definitions evolved during the year-long Fellowship. The third reflection essays demonstrated less than half of the Fellows' understanding of ML and MP evolved while others remained comfortable and confident with their starting definitions. One Fellow expressed that contrary to what they thought initially, "morals are not universal and I have realized my black and white approach cannot accurately capture the realities of the challenges we face." They also stated that "becoming a moral leader to me now means investigating and preparing to give weight to values, which requires deep self-awareness and commitment to defend them." Others claimed that their reflections resulted in a completely renewed understanding of moral leadership which "at the heart… is an unwavering commitment to serving others" and "in the context of moral purpose, [they've] gained clarity in what this means for [their] career aspirations and the kind of leader [they] want to be."

## Discussion

In essence, the year-long Fellowship experience and curriculum was planned to intentionally meet the Fellows where they were and to provide training, coaching, and mentoring to further develop these effective, public leaders with moral purpose. All programming addressed four intentional curricular and co-curricular themes sessions to: (1) build self-awareness, (2) cross-cultural competence, (3) community, and (4) social responsibility. For this specific veteran's Fellowship experience, we added a fifth additional focus (5) on public leadership with a moral purpose. The extra focus was an acknowledgement these particular active duty and veteran Fellows have vast leadership education, training, and development experience that the CPL could learn from them, adding an important learning outcome target for the year. Indeed, the work presented here assists in future efforts to benefit many.

One quote that resonates with the purpose of this effort is, "if you don't know where you are going, you will end up somewhere else." In this Fellowship there was a serious effort to be intentional and disciplined to foster development in the five previously mentioned areas ranging from self-awareness to moral leadership with moral purpose. The intentionality and curricular and co-curricular planning were aligned to hit these targets and ultimately the reflective essays and surveys provided a bevy of material for this phenomenological assessment to be discussed further at this juncture.

First, safe, and perhaps even brave spaces, with community members who have shared similar experiences are essential for self-reflection and vulnerability which can aid during times of transition. It is easy to jump to the assumption that self-awareness is a solo endeavor mainly based upon reflection. Slowing down and taking time to reflect, through both structured and unstructured reflection, must occur for learners to best derive lessons learned (Day et al., 2004). Deep reflection stimulates connections with other experiences and revisiting learning moments inspires this type of stimulation (Cook & Aman, 2020). This is certainly important; however, it is insufficient. It is important to do self-reflective work for self-understanding, yet it is also an important social endeavor. For example, the answer to the following two questions might be very helpful in growing self-awareness: (1) How do you experience me?, and (2) How do you experience yourself because of me? Whereas these may be helpful, there is also a danger that this sharing does not define the individual. Each person's character and values might be key to a steadying effect that needs to occur as they grow to be more self-aware.

Second, there was a wealth of evidence supporting the importance of discomfort for growth. This is in alignment with Piaget's (1970) ideas involving the creation of developmental disequilibrium through deliberate and realistic growth activities. "Comfort is the enemy of growth and continued effectiveness," therefore hardship and challenge are requirements to develop well-rounded leaders (Moxley & Pulley, 2004; Van Velsor & McCauley, 2004, p. 7). Transitions create new opportunities to learn and grow and reflect – or they can be paralyzing for some people. The key is that this is variable for each individual Fellow. Aligning the general framework and focus for the program along with focusing on an individualized

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approach to the Fellows development proved helpful. As such, there is an important balancing act between maximizing challenge and support for our growth that is quite distinctive for each person. Constructing developmental experiences for those who will endure ambiguity and/or settings that will challenge their moral leadership requires a skillful understanding of individual, leader, group, and organizational development (Cook et al., 2020). If we experience too much challenge with too little support this tilt might lead us to paralysis, sometimes accompanied with fear and/or doubt, that might result in an inability to learn and grow. However, too little challenge partnered with grand support we often enjoy often leads us to the false sense of security of performance excellence without the

necessary push for us to grow (commonly referred to as "everybody gets a trophy"). The discomfort referred to by some as the growth zone and tough love is needed although this challenge needs to be accompanied by high support for it to be our "sweet spot" for the growth zone and tough love. Once a strong sense of self has been established through a safe, brave, comforting community, leaders can then understand how they operate in multiple contexts outside of their comfort zones. From there, they begin to understand how they want to shape their environments and lead.

Third, the Fellows reflected that it did not matter whether they were in or out of uniform, be it temporarily or permanently, they were very much the same upstanding, accomplished, experienced, and respected leader – just in a new context. Fresh perspectives and new environments, such as the Fellowship, inevitably build a dynamic, relational developmental system that helps with everything from moral development (Leming, 2001) and prosocial behaviors (Cheung & Lee, 2010), to problem-solving skills (Taylor et al., 2002), and emotional competence (Greenberg et al., 1995). "Wherever I go – I am there" – a person's values, motivation, and character go where they go, but become more nuanced in new contexts. These sentiments were very much in line with Simon Sinek's (2011) *Start with Why?* and Dov Siedman's (2012) *How: Why HOW We Do Anything Means Everything*. It became increasingly evident among the Fellows in this study that having a clear understanding of moral purpose (one's *why*) transfers to strong moral leadership (one's *how*). In other words, moral leadership (e.g., their how) without moral purpose (e.g. their why) is hollow and can possibly be harmful. The discussions that oriented unity centered on civilian–military relations and what many called the "divide." Yet some of the richest understanding that emerged was the importance of reframing the "either/or" part of the discussion to a

"both/and" outlook. Several of the transition stories proffered in the Fellows' essays focused on the choices of how to (re)negotiate one's identity. This came up in many discussions revolving around the question of who am I ... now?

Without the uniform, the rank, and adjusting to an entirely new structure and culture, there became a pull to fit in alongside a coinciding push to "influence and inform." The challenge each shared was how to respond to someone who has never met a military member. A few refrains within the cohort began to appear. *Do I have to speak for all military? You can take the person out of the military yet can you take the military out of the person? How can I best transition to "both/and?" I have military experience and I am learning and growing in a civilian environment... but what does it all mean?* There certainly is tremendous pressure to make the transition to be more civilian. This transition is a grown zone and an opportunity for a *growth* zone. The community and support of other veterans helped many of the Fellows avoid paralysis or a false sense of security and pushed them towards a sweet spot of growth. Moreover, there was yet another wonderful opportunity for each civilian the Fellows met who had never encountered a member of the military to also enter a shared opportunity for learning. This was a truly dynamic bridge for understanding military-civilian relationships through learning about one another.

## Limitation and Future Directions

Whereas the themes and learnings above provide valuable lessons to be learned, they are clearly not generalizable to other populations. This was a very selective cohort of veterans and active duty military attending the same university and experiencing the same Fellowship. Having said that, it is not much different than the limitations of a class of cadets or midshipman at a service academy or a select set of

executives completing a similar executive education, training and/or development program.

A logical next step would be to conduct further analysis and include other qualitative and quantitative measures that were not included in this analysis. Future mixed-methods approaches (potentially through a mix of regression, factor analysis, grounded theory, and/or ethnographic analyses) could delve further into other aspects of demographics (i.e., race, religion, socio-economic background, admissions data, academic major, etc.). It would be intriguing to see how these demographic variables align with other representative samples. Observers must also consider the portion of the survey data that ultimately was self-reported, as self-reported measures are subject to potential bias (e.g., social desirability bias, response bias, response-shift bias, and exaggeration of answers) (Northrup, 1996; Rosenman et al., 2011).

Future research should also consider parsing out additional performance measures to also see if there are any potential predicting, moderating and mediating effects to test the validity of more nuanced quantitative constructs. Research has indicated that the use of mixed-methods (e.g., both qualitative and quantitative) data most likely will lead to increased validity in findings and a deeper, broader understanding of the studied phenomena (Hurmerinta-Peltomaki & Nummela, 2006).

Although this study had a well-defined focus and cohort, there are many potential future directions for this work for other researchers in similar contexts. The findings may prove beneficial while serving as a starting point into taking a deeper look at the human capacity (leader) and social capacity (leadership) relationship to help determine how one defines and measures moral leadership and moral purpose (Day, 2000). Leader

development focuses on individual knowledge, skills, abilities, and other competencies, whereas leadership development focuses on collective social capacities, roles, and processes (Day, 2000). Leader and leadership development are both misunderstood as processes even at the highest levels of the military, as each includes more than just training and operational experiences (LeBouf, 2002). Another potential direction would be to create a parallel study of moral leadership and moral purpose that involves a quasi-experimental design. There were several other Fellowships where moral leadership and moral purpose was not an intentionally focused outcome. A design of this type could answer if there would be any differences between the different cohorts of Fellows.

## Conclusion

The scientific understanding of character development has greatly expanded in recent years, whereas the understanding of character measurement is still in its early stages. Given the continued interest in developmental science of the theoretical conceptions of the process of character development (Lerner, 2018), the past two decades have seen an innumerable study of attributes of character development (Murray et al., 2019). Further research into attributes and subcomponents, such as curiosity, creativity, fairness, forgiveness, honesty, and others found by Peterson and Seligman (2004) could help further define measures that would help objectively qualify what being a moral leader with moral purpose ultimately may be.

Going forward, there will continue to be an emphasis on the importance of institutional contexts for promoting this development of the morality of leaders (e.g., Callina et al., 2017, 2018). The qualitative exploration presented here is just one of many that can further illuminate the features of a curricular approach dedicated to character development that points to

the continued role of educational institutions as key settings wherein moral leadership and moral purpose can be optimally developed (Berkowitz, et al., 2017). It is unknown what the rest of the century has in store for America, but it will surely at times be uneasy. America's future leaders must continually develop the professionalism to stand their ground morally and ethically. In doing so, their leadership will buttress our society writ large in the existential effort to "surprise the critics, both domestic and foreign, who predict our decline" (Peters, 1997, p. 4).

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