

DEVELOPING LEADERS OF CHARACTER
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Character and Ethical Judgement Among Junior Army Officers

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“The military virtues are not in a class apart; ‘they are virtues which are virtues in every walk of life ... none the less virtues for being jewels set in blood and iron.’ They include such qualities as courage, fortitude and loyalty. What is important about such qualities as these ...is that they acquire in the military context, in addition to their moral significance, a functional significance as well.”

(Hackett, 1986, p. 2).

Introduction

The British armed forces, and others like them, are unique from other organizations due to their relationship to the state, incomparable roles, and for balancing institutional and professional practices (Walker, 2018). Institutional practices tend toward hierarchical conformity and environments that are closed off from external influence (e.g., initial military training and operational tours; Goffman, 1968), whereas professional practices are commonly associated with individual autonomy based on shared knowledge and competence (Nuciari, 2006). Taken together, we may understand the military as a precarious professional practice for involving ongoing interplay between both institutional and professional processes, both of which are necessary for ethical military effectiveness. The context of a precarious professional military practice is important for understanding the development of moral character because adherence to traditions, habits and group requirements (institutional) need to coexist with individual capacity for singular ethical judgements and actions (professional). Fortunately, these often do coincide, but any

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effective military force also requires individuals to stand up for an ethical good when a unit or group is functioning in morally poor ways. It seems possible that this precariousness is advantageous for military organizations and achieves the best from both worlds, so to speak. For example, institutional tendencies toward loyalty are crucial for military effectiveness, but in excess can be damaging. The inherent jeopardy of fostering high levels of military loyalty may be balanced by cultivating individual (professional) character able to stand up for an ethical good, even in opposition to local practices. Judging when the time is right for such actions and having the character to carry this out, however, requires wisdom that takes time and practice to develop.

Of course, armed forces have been expecting individuals to stand up for ethical goods for years, but this can be a hazardous career-threatening strategy needing caution if it is in opposition to the majority.

Identifying when an ethical good is at stake in a specific military or military-related situation - either in line with the military community or in opposition to it - is easier than arriving at a full and balanced assessment incorporating both ethical and military imperatives specific to the presenting circumstance and context.

It is not so much that individuals should stand up for an ethical good more often, although that is probably the case, but rather that there may be good reasons why individual agency ought to be suppressed in favor of traditional ways of operating that is not yet understood

by a junior leader still developing their unrefined ethical judgement. Identifying when an ethical good is at stake in a specific military or military-related situation - either in line with the military community or in opposition to it - is easier than arriving at a full and balanced assessment incorporating both ethical and military imperatives specific to the presenting circumstance and context. Only the latter amounts to practical wisdom (cf. Carr, 2018) and reaching this advanced level of professional practical wisdom requires both practiced military knowledge and skill, as well as ethical insight - a combination possibly unavailable to many novice officers. A junior officer may assess a situation naively and make a judgement that with the benefit of military (and ethical) experience they would not make. In the military context therefore, ethical judgement needs to be accompanied by practiced military knowledge and skill, and this professional practical wisdom or phronesis presupposes good character.

Phronesis, or practical wisdom, is an intellectual overarching virtue involving the cultivation of good and appropriate desires, matched by refined reasoning capable of deliberating between conflicting demands or virtues in particular situations (Kristjánsson, 2015). It requires practiced ability to interpret unfolding events and incorporates knowing oneself accurately and unflinchingly (e.g., strengths, weaknesses and tendencies) as necessary knowledge in deciding responses. Building on character, practical wisdom incorporates advanced ethical deliberation and energetic delivery of decisions. A person with phronesis can anticipate the impact of their actions and decisions and be clear about rightful aims. They are also capable of completing actions toward those goals. The incorporation of learning into one's character is a

key feature of phronesis involving ongoing openness to new learning.

The special circumstances of military (precarious) professional practices, together with unique and often extreme roles, places inimitable demands on the character of serving personnel in ways different from other professions that do not have close ties to the state or that do not require members to operate in isolation from ordinary civilian life for extended periods such as during operational tours. In what follows, I discuss character and ethical judgement among junior British Army officers. This is because moral character is ever more important for military personnel in the context of modern warfare, especially among leaders. The discussion is underpinned by a research study that investigated ethical judgement and character among 242 male and female junior British Army officers from 2015 to 2017. The officers were in three groups based on career stage: officer cadets at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, lieutenants and junior captains with 1-5 years' service (*junior junior officers*) and senior captains and a few junior majors with 6-10 years' service (*senior junior officers*), all attending career relevant courses. The officers belonged to a variety of roles, units, and regiments from across the British Army. Twelve different branches of Army service were represented. The research was part of a wider endeavor focused on investigating virtues in the professions at the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, University of Birmingham, United Kingdom (UK). The aim of the current article is to draw out and expand on key findings from this original research in ways accessible to military practitioners.¹

1 For those interested in the detail and methods of the original research, they are available in a report and a forthcoming peer reviewed article in the *Journal of Military Ethics* (Arthur, Walker, & Thoma, 2018; Walker, Thoma, & Arthur, 2020 forthcoming).

As relatively youthful organizations, the armed forces need regularly to train and develop new leaders. Officer entrants, who come from a rapidly changing society, are joining military forces that themselves have undergone multiple changes in recent times involving in the UK context, changing roles, downsizing, a revolution in military affairs (Shaw, 2005), as well as increased occurrences of asymmetric warfare and terrorism. Military officers are key upholders of ethical and professional standards, and the underpinning research for this article focuses on a generation of leaders who at the time of the research were junior Army officers, some of whom may eventually become senior Army leaders. Officers in these ranks represent approximately 50% of the total British Army officer population. (Ministry of Defence UK, 2014).

Character and Ethical Judgement

In Aristotelian virtue ethics philosophy, character is fundamental for proper moral functioning. It involves more than performing one's job. Moral character encompasses the evaluable, reason-responsive and educable sub-set of human personality, and the virtues are considered integral to that. This involves stable states of character concerned with morally admirable agency (Kristjánsson, 2013). All aspects of the person are attended such as perception, sensitivity, reasoning, and action; and so good moral character also involves acting for the right reasons. This conception of moral character aligns desired military character which though focused on values (e.g., British Army Values (Army, 2020)) is really cultivating in military personnel, character capable of excellence from dispositional states for right reasons and allied with virtue, whether that is integrity, courage, or both and more. Virtue ethical treatment of character matches aspirational moral approaches expecting individuals

to seek character excellence beyond military roles. Focusing on character for military roles alone would involve taking a functional perspective where ethical standards are valued only to the extent they align military purposes (cf. French, 2005). This is not a view progressed in this article. It is also likely that young people are selected for service as Army officers in the first place because they have good general character, which is then further cultivated for military roles, but are not reduced to those roles either in kind or scope.

Ethical judgement is a component of aspirational Army character and leadership. Moral psychologist, Lawrence Kohlberg classically afforded dominance to moral judgement and reasoning for moral agency, and neo-Kohlbergian's have since broadened this emphasis to include three more components (e.g., sensitivity, motivation and action) in the four component model (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999; Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, & Bebeau, 2000). This model has proved popular for researchers of the professions. In the research study underpinning the current article, an unlikely theoretical alliance was formed between neo-Kohlbergian expertise including ethical judgement assessment, and virtue ethics conceptions of character. This involved prioritizing virtue, or intermediate concepts in neo-Kohlbergian language, as essential to moral character of which judgement is an integral component. After extensive measure development, a moral dilemma survey was adjusted for the UK context called the Army Intermediate Concept Measure (AICM)². Using AICM, participating officers read four military dilemmas and were asked to select from a list of options what the protagonist in each dilemma should do (action) and why (reason). AICM compares participant responses to judgements made by an expert military panel. As such, AICM is an

objective assessment of the application of virtue to realistic military scenarios. However, the measure is not designed to expect a single correct response to each dilemma because the expert panel deemed multiple option choices as either acceptable, unacceptable, or neutral. This means that, for example, two participants can score equally well by making quite different choices if those choices are labelled as acceptable in the AICM key. Dilemma 1 involves an injured local Somalian and requires a decision about responding to the injured man who is surrounded by a volatile crowd. Dilemma 2 targets torture/aggressive methods and requires a decision about how to respond to the capture of two soldiers. Dilemma 3 involves a curfew and a river in Iraq. It concerns soldiers' use of non-authorized tactics and requires a response to inquiries from the Army chain of command about this. Dilemma 4 involves fraternization and requires a response to a fellow male officer and friend who is fraternizing with a female soldier contrary to Army rules. Forty of the officers were also interviewed about character and British Army values.

Summary and Discussion of Key Findings

Overall, participants responded well to the dilemmas, matching the expert panel 65% of the time. They tended to discern what should be done (actions) slightly better than why (justifications). As part of moral development, deciding how to act in situations is less advanced than reasoning why. This makes sense because through socialization we might learn how and what to do by following norms, and by absorbing anticipated negative and positive responses from important others; whereas the capacity to explain and justify why certain actions are needed is a higher-level capacity. In fact, Howard Curzer (2012) suggests that knowing "why" may be the defining feature of practical wisdom (phronesis). According to this view,

² This was based on a version created by Turner (2008) for the USA context – United States Military Academy at West Point in particular.

practical wisdom builds on states of character that were cultivated in a more rudimentary or habituated form. Practical wisdom, as an overarching intellectual virtue, involves advanced levels of discernment, capable of objectively attending multiple features of an ethical and military situation.

Of course, even junior Army officers probably have relatively advanced ethical agency. After all, such officers have: (a) been successful in a rigorous entry selection process, (b) undergone rigorous training and development, including ethics, and (c) occupy challenging leadership positions in a profession that emphasizes character. That the officers had close matching scores for reasoning and action may be taken as a sign of well-developed moral agency.

Unlike other professions, gender had minimal influence on the officers' ethical judgements. Female officers performed only slightly better with some minor gender differences for the kinds of choices made. For example, female officers were more likely to protect their soldiers when this was not a good choice, and male officers were more prone to distraction from doing the right thing by loyalty to a friend. However, on average and regardless of gender, officers did well to avoid unsuitable aggressive methods and uphold truth under pressure, but were more likely to struggle negotiating diversion from a non-urgent mission for a humanitarian rescue or maintaining the Army fraternization policy.

Although some poor choices were found across the sample, a few individuals performed badly across the entire measure. Poor selections signalled areas for improvement for both action and justification

choices. For action choices, this included problems of indecision, taking too much risk, emphasizing the mission too much, using excessive force, insufficient regard for the truth, and failing to act. For justification choices, poor responses involved allowing rules and authority to dominate, undervaluing life, avoiding risk, prioritising utility, dehumanizing the enemy, emphasizing loyalty to soldiers, prioritising one's own career, self-preservation, following others, and concealing or de-valuing the truth.

An important result for understanding rounded military character is that officer cadets and senior junior officers scored more highly on the measure than junior junior officers. I speculated earlier that since they passed Army selection, officer entrants probably possessed relatively good moral agency and potential.

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Moreover, the officers had passed their most influential years (childhood) for character development. Taken together, this non-military character development might partly explain why high scoring cadets could recognize the virtues at stake in the dilemmas, often selecting responses aligning with them. Another advantage for this inexperienced group was their presence at the military academy at Sandhurst at the time of taking the survey - a learning environment covering ethical learning. We know too, thanks to

Verweij, Hofhuis and Soeters (2007) that military and civilian differences may be less clear than often thought. After all, as was cited at the start of this article, the virtues are universal (Hackett, 1986), although their application can vary across cultures (Thoma et al., 2019). Similar patterns of response to ethical dilemmas, where most junior and more senior personnel achieve best results, has also been found in other professions (cf. Arthur, Kristjánsson, Cooke, & Brown, 2015).

Senior junior officers differed from the cadets for their substantial Army experience allowing for a combination of Army experience and deep knowledge of Army values (virtues). Unlike cadets, senior junior officers perhaps assessed the dilemmas based on realistic military experience which, counter-intuitively, could make the dilemmas more difficult to negotiate. The dilemmas are written so that participants fill in informational gaps from experience. However, the intermediate group - junior junior officers - appeared to be distracted by military factors. For example, they were often overly mission focused, especially if they belonged to infantry or artillery career fields. Paradoxically, therefore, military knowledge for this junior junior group seems a liability. One interpretation for these results is that senior junior officers showed military phronesis having integrated through experience, theory and practice. By contrast, at entry levels, cadets allowed theory to dominate, whereas junior junior officers often appeared dazed by military practice at the expense of ethical considerations. Perhaps, becoming a commissioned military practitioner in these early years was all-consuming for junior junior officers, especially those in the infantry and artillery.

As mentioned, infantry and artillery officers responded differently to the measure compared to

others. Among infantry and artillery officers, the cadets scored highly, junior junior groups performed poorly, and senior junior officers performed better than junior junior officers. Overall, infantry and artillery officers depressed scores for the entire sample. The nature of infantry and artillery experiences following attendance at Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst may be implicated here.³

Relating Character to Moral Judgement

A broader understanding of character for these junior officers as related to AICM scores is possible by turning to the semi-structured interviews. Themes covered in the interviews included: (a) the officers' belief in Army values, (b) their professional and personal lives, (c) personal qualities and character strengths for an ideal officer, (d) professional challenges, (e) an outstanding challenge that they had faced, (f) pressures or barriers for doing the right moral thing, and (g) their own personal qualities/strengths. The officers were also asked about self-discipline and endless commitment as Army values that were not assessed using moral dilemmas; the other four Army values of courage, integrity, loyalty and respect for others, are incorporated into the dilemmas. By looking at these topic areas among top and bottom AICM scoring groups it was possible to make comparisons. Ten interviews from each group were included.

Portrayals of good character during the interviews stood out for the high scoring group. They responded to questions in aspirational and motivational ways. For

³ I would like to express much gratitude to Professor James Arthur, Director of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham, UK for valuable contributions to the original research on which this article draws. I would also like to thank Dr. Stephen Thoma, Professor Emeritus at the University of Alabama for his appreciated expertise and major contributions to the original research, including the development of the Army Intermediate Concept Measure.

example, these officers mentioned character and values as reasons for joining the Army, whereas low scorers were more likely to provide mundane responses such as failing to find another job or financial gain, even expressing intention to leave the Army. In discussing “ideal” officers”, high scorers described clusters of personal qualities rather than single ones as for the low group. The aspired “ideal” officer was therefore rounded and balanced. Descriptions of Army challenges for low scorers involved personal annoyances with Army life, compared to high scorers who emphasized barriers for reaching their aims. The high group also fused moral challenges into their interview responses, together with descriptions of lessons learned. Unlike low scorers, high scorers described multiple qualities they were cultivating in themselves and others, including Army values. Crucially, the high group also discussed needing continuously to work on Army values. Although both groups agreed relevance for Army values to all aspects of their lives, high scorers provided details about how this differed by context.

Overall, a strong relationship between good ethical reasoning (high AICM scores) and expanded aspirational character was clear. Specific admirable qualities for this high scoring group are summarized below:

- Responded to questions in aspirational and motivational ways
- Mentioned morality and character when not asked about it
- Described clusters of personal qualities, rather than single ones
- Portrayed an ideal officer as rounded or balanced (low scoring officers often fixated on a specific quality)
- Framed Army challenges as barriers for reaching their work-required aims and also included

moral challenges

- Included detailed descriptions about the lessons they learned from various challenges and experiences

Responses for high scorers seem to suggest intellectual humility, involving much openness to improvement and to new knowledge. If AICM can identify good ethical judgement – and evidence so far suggests it can – then the high scoring sub-group that were interviewed stand out in multiple ways, including the expression of a forceful determination to put their ethically oriented decisions into action. Moreover, when the entirety of each interview for high scoring officers were analyzed, ten very different officers emerged, each indicating novel ways for striving in accord with Army values and moral excellence. Indeed, many of these officers said they had learned to avoid direct emulation of other officers. Instead, they described needing to develop an authentic character and style of leadership of their own. Often, this involved finding workarounds based on their own personal characteristics. For example, a small female officer who was leading physically larger male soldiers who were intolerant of the corporeal difference, described how she learned to exert her influence in novel ways. Another officer with a quiet demeanor explained how he learned not to emulate a charismatic leader, instead finding a style of his own. Evidenced in these narratives, and others like them, are accurate self-understandings coupled with ongoing efforts to learn and develop, even if this is difficult. This matches Aristotelian conceptions of good character acknowledging a true and objective appreciation of one’s own unique personality and character. In these ways, Army character for this top scoring group involved expression of the officer’s unique qualities as subject to ongoing refinement by experience. This seems inseparable from a developing phronesis.

Practical Application

According to AICM scores and interviews, participants mostly aligned with Army Values in terms of ethical judgement and character. However, as discussed, this general pattern of excellence overlays differences. These differences represent areas for development and may also be useful for other military contexts if the identified issues also correspond to local experiences and beliefs. It may not be possible to generalise to the entire junior officer population - even less so across different countries - but findings may well resonate

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with local commanders and as such provide topics for consideration and investigation for further training. It is important to note that AICM and measures like it are not intended for individual assessment. They are designed to assess groups as compared to an expert panel with credibility in the chosen profession. AICM results identify themes and patterns for groups and subgroups. Several specific suggestions for practical applications based on research results are provided below.

Transitioning From Training to Profession

Transitioning from training to profession is challenging for all military officers owing to unique roles and cultures. Additionally, reconciling ethical judgement with the rush to develop practical military skill in the early years as commissioned officers

seems an unavoidably uneven process as they work to integrate all features of their role. Arguably, infantry and artillery officers included in the study were involved in most fundamental Army activities. These officers probably had quite different experiences following Sandhurst than the officers from other career fields. Results suggest more support, especially for junior officers in the infantry and artillery, might be beneficial as they transition from training to profession. Of course, specific military establishments will need to decide if such a need exists and if so, how might this be addressed. Interviewed officers described transitioning from Sandhurst to the “real” Army as a “professional shock”, and so a qualifying period following initial officer training, in this case Sandhurst, where new officers might be formally mentored is a possible way forward. A period of mentoring would facilitate the development of the intellectual virtue of phronesis as relevant for military contexts. This would involve a process of guided reflection about the officers’

military experiences designed to bring together ethical and military considerations. This process could be incorporated into military education courses early in an officers’ career, although this would be more amenable to small group work rather than one-to-one mentoring.

Developing Ethical Justification Reasoning

Although AICM results were mostly good across justification and action choices in response to dilemmas, justification reasoning did lag slightly. Ethical functioning involves consolidating knowing what to do and why; and knowing why or having capacity to articulate reasons for acting is a feature of moral character and developing wisdom. Improving ethical reasoning is therefore worthy of attention for developing junior military officers if they are to reach

highest possible standards of ethical and military excellence. Achieving this may simply involve taking more time in military cultures to explicate reasons for action where possible. In this way, interactions present opportunities for developing ethical reasoning, but obviously not if this is at the expense of brevity and decisiveness at crucial times. Additionally, a tried and tested method for developing ethical reasoning involves using ethical dilemmas for training purposes rather than for research. For example, dilemmas can be used during military education courses as the basis of small group discussions. The process of discussing various options and experiencing disagreements among the group exposes participating officers to different kinds of reasoning. With skilled facilitation, this method can enhance ethical reasoning skills, as a key feature of phronesis.

Balancing Compassion and Mission, and Negotiating Personal Relationships

Lower scores were found for dilemmas requiring participants to balance compassion and mission and to balance personal relationships with military expectations, in this case involving perils of fraternization. These are areas for potential attention and development. Given the complexity involved, this might be incorporated with the earlier suggestion for improving levels of ethical reasoning. Encouraging processes of reasoning among officers by discussing various military dilemmas could improve capacities for thinking through situations requiring ethical balance (compassion and mission for example), but recognising that there are no easy or off-the-shelf solutions. Other possibilities, for developing capacity in these areas during military education courses could involve the use of simulation (e.g. role play, war gaming etc.) whereby officers are required to make judgements under conditions that are as realistic as possible. It would

also be a good idea to explore the officers' own views in these areas, rather than only their knowledge and ability to apply military policy. This is because there were signs during interviews, of isolated disagreements with Army policy in these areas, especially for the fraternization policy.

Conclusion

In the context of a precarious professional practice, aspirational moral character has been highlighted as an aim for developing junior military officers, involving ever more advanced levels of ethical judgement as a key feature of practical wisdom. Results suggest experiential variance for surveyed officers such that some may be too ethically focused (cadets) while others seem too militarily focused (junior junior officers). Recognising these possible patterns will be important for cultivating character and ethical judgement. In response, this article has suggested practical possibilities for developing character and ethical judgement among junior military officers, as relating to processes of transition from training to profession (especially for infantry and artillery officers); enhanced development of ethical reasoning; improved balancing of compassion and mission and better negotiating personal relationships.

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