Introducing Character Strengthening and Practical Wisdom Through Project Development in Medical School

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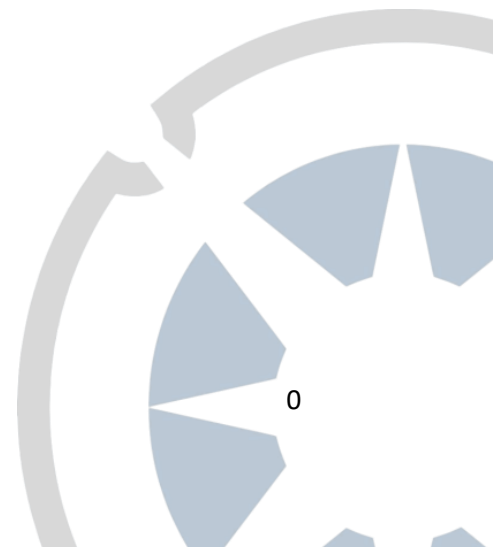
Introduction

As we witness a growing collective of data, fueled by a new wave of the information revolution, the pace of decisions occurs at an ever-rapid rate. Specifically military leaders are being asked to operate in ambiguous environments, often with limited direct communication with superiors and inadequate immediate feedback. The imperative to arrive at rational, precise, and transparent battlefield decisions is in clearer contrast that at any time in history.

Broadly, organizations are wrestling with an ethical decline (Kaptein, 2010). With a multitude of scandals and front-page reports of leaders demonstrating malfeasance while leading their organizations, public trust in leaders is on a decline. Given this dynamic, there is a demonstrable need for improved moral strength across the military's officer corps (Schiller, 2016). Despite high marks from the American public regarding confidence in its military leaders to make the right decisions, according to multiyear confidence index published by Harvard's Center for Public Leadership (Rosenthal, 2012), confidence is fragile. In more recent history, The Ronald Regan Foundation (2021) found that for the first time in their survey's history only a minority of Americans retain a "great deal of trust in the military." It is this obligation of trust that fuels the imperative to make not only the right decision, but more importantly, the moral decision.

Cadets at the United States Military Academy (USMA) are instructed that their values feed the moral decisions that they make. The USMA Superintendent's Capstone course titled *Officership* emphasizes moral leadership and challenges cadets to become commissioned leaders of character who demonstrate virtue, honor, and a life committed to fulfilling their professional obligations. The course reinforces that there is no grace period for moral leadership and that the future demands of Officership require budding officers to be the moral compass of their small unit on the first day.

Cadets discover that moral leadership involves strengthening themselves as well as their subordinates to be able to face the future ethical challenges of a profession dedicated to managing violence. Midway through the course cadets review two theoretical frameworks to aid in their application of strengthening their moral decision-making. The first presents developmental psychologist James Rest's (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999) four-stage moral reasoning process. The second reviews the components of the moral self (Sweeney, Imboden, & Hannah, 2007), which introduces cadets to the theory governing the "having" and "doing sides" of the human capacities that regulate their moral behaviors.
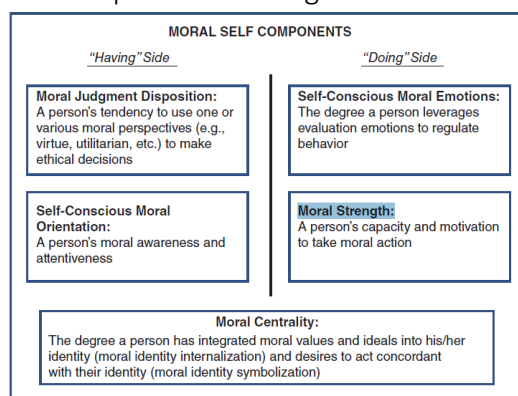
Source: Adapted from "The Moral Self: A Review and Integration of the Literature," by P. L. Jennings, M.S. Mitchell, & S.T. Hannah, 2014, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Copyright by Wiley & Sons.

Figure 1: Moral Self Components

Embedded in one of the "doing" side components of the moral self is the concept of moral strength, which is an individual's motivation to take moral action.

Through deliberate reflection, cadets have the chance to engage their self-conscious evaluation during and after military training, character education events, and leadership positions. Deliberate reflection on moral lapses, aids in strengthening their moral muscles and becoming more sophisticated in their moral reasoning. One study found that almost two thirds of cadets had transitioned upward one full stage in moral development by the time of their senior year (Sweeney & Hannah, 2007).

Literature Review

The concept of moral strength, or conation, serves as an illustrative framework to understand how individuals derive the capacity and motivation to take moral action. Moral action is a fundamental requirement of leaders of character who are called upon to make ethical decisions, specifically military officers who make the moral decisions to manage violence in support of their political leaders' objectives. As such, USMA's capstone course in Officership relies on an examination of the components of moral strength as part of curriculum that discusses moral development models. USMA cadets use this model in a major writing assignment where they reflectively evaluate a moral failure in their past.

Moral strength, as it is presented to USMA cadets combines the triad of moral ownership, moral efficacy, and moral courage—termed moral potency (Hannah & Avolio, 2010)—with a fourth factor of duty orientation (Sweeney et al., 2015).
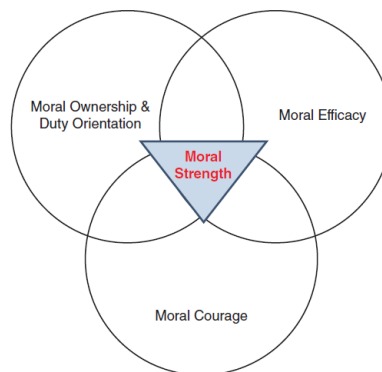
Source: Adapted from "Moral Potency: Building the Capacity for Character-Based Leadership," by S.T. Hannah, & B.J. Avolio, 2010, *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 62(4). Copyright American Psychological Association.

Figure 2: Moral Strength Components

This framework derives from research evaluating the moral potency of individuals, specifically potency as a critical factor in developing leaders who have the conation to act on their moral judgments and behave as leaders of character.

Hannah and Avolio (2010) developed their model through the blended application of moral development and developmental psychology literature. Later, this review will examine each of the four components of moral strength independently, yet broadly moral strength derives from the work of individuals such as Jean Piaget (1932/1965), Lawrence Kohlberg (Kohlberg, 1981; Kohlberg & Candee, 1984), and James Rest's (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999) four-component model of moral decision-making. These developmental psychologists lead to an understanding that individuals develop through stages and expand their ability to conduct moral reasoning as stages advance. Hannah et. al (2011) adopt their

theories from the "gold standard" of moral development models. The theory of moral strength stems from a fundamental acknowledgement that moral reasoning development occurs in stages (Kohlberg, 1981; 1984). Kohlberg's development model suggested an individual matures through a six-stage process that unfolds over a lifespan, where individuals progressively graduate to the next, more complex stage through "mental operations."

Similar in sequence, moral decisions are said to stem from a four-component model of moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral action (Rest, et al., 1999). Rest's work aimed to expand on the Kohlbergian approach by suggesting that there were more than simply judgements that resulted in individual moral actions and subsequent moral development. Rest attempted to fill in what is typically called the "judgment-action gap" and theorized that a process existed where resultant intentions, combined with judgments, were required to carry out moral action. In response, Hannah (2011) desired to identify and account for the capacities that individuals use to "process, formulate judgements about, and respond to moral challenges." Blending the theories of Kohlberg and Rest, resulted in a framework to "guide future research and practice concerning the moral capacities needed to process a moral challenge from recognition to action" (Hannah, 2011).

Measuring one's ability to make moral decisions has been difficult in practice. James Rest developed the Defining Issues Test (DIT) in 1974 in an effort to activate moral schemas and rank them in terms of their importance. The DIT has been studied ever since as a way to determine individual and collective moral reasoning development. Yet, the research suggests that Rest's DIT typically explains less than 20% of the actual variance in ethical choices or behaviors. In parallel, 80% of the variance of behaviors cannot be explained by reasoning alone. Hannah's most significant critique of the "gold standard" theorists is that little has been done to explain the motivations that drive an individual to engage in a moral activity.

Hannah et. al (2011) sought to develop a comprehensive and testable theoretical framework to guide research and practice as it related to the motivations and capacities needed to process a moral challenge from recognition to action. The model operates in two major domains: moral maturation—critical in driving the cognition process—and moral conation—our motivation process to take moral action. Motivation is the critical factor at odds with previous developmental psychologists and it is this motivation that may account for a portion of the missing 80% of variance apart from reasoning.

As promised earlier in this literature review, the four major components of moral conation will be examined as a framework to illustrate the importance of moral strength in developing military leaders. The first component of ownership demonstrates a psychological responsibility to maintain behaviors consistent with the ethics of those around them, their organization, or another collective. For medical professionals the hypocritic oath provides energy and motivation to practice medicine consistent with the community of practitioners in the profession. For members of the U.S. Army the Army Ethic establishes the professional baseline for behaviors consistent with the ethics of the surrounding collective. Bandura's (1991) findings demonstrate that there is variance in the desired extent in which individuals feel a sense of group responsibility to act.

Closely related to ownership is the concept of duty orientation (Sweeney, Imboden, & Hannah, 2015) which demonstrates a volitional attitude of service and duty to support other members of the group. Rather than self-regulation for the sake of individualism, those with a

morally oriented duty-orientation aim to serve for the sake of the other. The Army demonstrates this attribute through its aim to value Selfless Service in members of the organization.

The third component of moral efficacy relates to an individual's belief in their own internal energy to mobilize the motivation, cognition to attain moral action despite the challenges of moral adversity. Efficacy is made up of the resources an individual finds inside of oneself to usher in moral action, known as self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), while the second part—means efficacy (Eden, 2001)—relates to the contextual factors resident in the environment that inspire moral action. Lethal moral efficacy combines elevated levels of both self and means efficacy. Not only will moral decision makers find the means within themselves, the resident environment will positively reinforce the energy required to motivate moral action.

The final component is moral courage. Moral efficacy and ownership are "necessary but not sufficient" to act, leading many to argue that without courage to face risk and overcome perils created by the moral situation, leaders will fail in their moral strength requirements. Sekerka, Bagozzi, and Charnigo (2009) analyzed moral strength in the context of ethical workplace environments and characterized courage as "self-directed effort…toward the good…or at what is morally right." Numerous barriers may stand in the way of military leaders making the best moral decisions—enemy disposition, social pressures, fear of resentment—and it is imperative that environmental factors do not restrict the moral compass of small units from succumbing to the risks of moral action.

A budding body of research literature has developed around the framework of the components of moral strength. The growth of research has occurred in both military (Hannah and Avolio, 2010; Schaubroeck et. al, 2012; Schiller, 2016) and non-military environments (Ganu, 2018). Hannah and Avolio (2010) examined two samples of U.S. Army soldiers (*N=309; N=2,572*) and concluded that the "components of moral potency [are] necessary but not sufficient—leaders require adequate levels of all three to promote consistent ethical action." Furthermore, as the literature has suggested that all components of moral conation are required, one may wonder if a single component is more important than the others. Conversely while they all may be important the natural question arises as to the inadequacy of a single component effecting the whole lot. Ganu (2018) examined a small sample (*N=150*) of graduate students from a faith-based university in Kenya and found moral courage to be the weakest developed component of moral strength. The researcher concluded there is a "discrepancy between who we think we are and what we actually do when confronted with ethical challenges. Sometimes we know the right course to take; yet when faced with a specific situation, there is a strong temptation to do what is wrong or engage in inaction."

Research Methodology
Respondents and Procedure

The sample (*N=228*) consisted of a representative population of seniors at the United States Military Academy in their second-to-last semester of a 47-month experience of military, academic, and physical training designed to certify them as commissioned leaders of character in the United States Army. The study was conducted at a military installation in an academic environment. Participants were responding to a two-part test question that

required mastery of course concepts with a reflective application of their experience and judgement.

Study Design

This study seeks to evaluate the self-professed weaknesses of future military officers to serve as a collective indicator of the challenges present in the current generation of trainees. Hence the study adopted a mixed-method review of examination responses relating to the weakest component of their moral strength.

Demographics

In order to assess the amount of variance accounted for by instructor on cadet performance, I invited two members of West Point's Character Integration Advisory Group (CIAG) to participate in the theming of data alongside myself. This provided a mix of military and civilian background and instructional orientations. One civilian member participated from the Department of Mathematical Sciences, one retired military member participated from the Department of English and Philosophy, and the primary researcher is active-duty military from the Simon Center for the Professional Military Ethic.

Research Methods

During the final test of the core-course titled MX400: Officership, students were asked to respond to the following question, assessing their understanding of course concepts, while reflectively applying the concepts to their time at the academy:

What is moral strength? Identify its sub-components. Based on your observations from the 47-month experience, in which component are cadets generally the weakest and why? Use your 47-month experience to make a recommendation to address this weakness.

Responses were de-identified to mask the score associated with the completeness of their responses. The researcher collected and combined a total of 228 responses into an overall dataset that further de-identified the responses from the instructor.

Some data was not useful as it pertained to the research question as 43 respondents misapplied the theoretical concept of moral strength in answering the question and their results were excluded from the dataset. The research team applied a simple language processing approach to the data, searching for the keywords of the components of the moral strength. The data was categorized quantitatively to examine the number of respondents out of 185 which chose each element of moral strength, providing a representative ranking of components. From the four indexes of moral strength (moral ownership, moral efficacy, moral courage, and duty orientation) the researcher applied a random selection to develop a subset of the data with 10 responses in each index. This completed the quantitative portion of the mixed-method study.

To evaluate the qualitative portion of the study the four indexed subsets were evaluated by the principal researcher and two additional researchers through inductive coding of the data sample to identify commonalities and themes. The specific research

method applied was thematic data analysis to use phrases to describe or capture the meaning of each aspect of moral strength. The three subset coding results were combined to determine overall commonalities representative of the dataset, which contained emergent recommendations to collectively increase strengthening efforts at the institutional level.

Findings

Quantitative Findings

The findings suggest that responses to the weakest component of moral strength derived from two different methods of analysis (quantitative analysis of the most frequently cited component and quantitative framing analysis of a random sample subset) and performed by three different researchers validated the weakest component of moral strength is *moral courage*. The results of the quantitative analysis is presented in Table 1 below.

Component	Cited as Weakest (%)
Moral Ownership	14
Duty Orientation	9
Moral Efficacy	13
Moral Courage	54
Incorrect Application	19
Note: Some responses cited that there was not one single component of moral strength that was the weakest, including multiple components in their response. 18 responses cited multiple components and of those 15 combined the elements of moral ownership and duty orientation, which is consistent with their close association in the literature (Hannah & Avolio, 2010).	

Table 1: Weakest Component Results

The moral courage component of moral strength can typically arise in numerous conversations with cadets at USMA as cadets often feel comfortable with the rules and their own attribution to act based on their efficacy, yet the perseverance to act in the face of resistance is seen as a barrier to action. The self-attribution of the current dataset analyzed is consistent with both anecdotal evidence and the existing research literature available at this time (Ganu, 2018). Ganu's results were based on a Likert scale survey data and not a binary ranking of the weakest element, yet despite the variance in research method the findings based purely on the ranking of the weakest variable add to the current literature that there is an overwhelming majority of individuals that struggle with marshalling the courage to act in the face of adversity when it comes to a moral issue.

Qualitative Findings

Following purely quantitative results of the dataset, the researcher conducted a random identification of a total of 40 responses (10 responses from each index) through the RANDBETWEEN() function of Microsoft Excel. With this randomly selected subset, the principal investigator assigned all 40 responses to two additional researchers. Each

researcher conducted inductive analysis and found emergent phrases and themes represented by the difficulty with each identified component of moral strength.

The findings of each component of moral strength will be presented below with a brief summary of the findings of each characteristic.

Moral Ownership	
n	Themes
1	Overlooking others actions as not effecting them
2	No obligation to enforce rules Holding Environment rules do not Match Future Rules
3	Afraid of ramifications of tolerating immoral behavior, violations Fear of being outcast
4	Schedule overload inhibits moral awareness
5	Overlooking others actions as not effecting them
6	Self-interest; self-focus
7	Overlooking others actions as not effecting them
8	Self-interest; self-focus Lack of self-reflection
9	Loss of social capital Fear of being outcast
10	Following rules rather than internalizing them Individualized value on what is important rather than obligation to a rule

Table 2: Moral Ownership Themes

In analyzing moral ownership, the response data indicates a self-interested motivation of individual cadets in navigating their four-year program. The demands of USMA often fall on the individual as their resultant, post-graduation experience is determined by their performance during their time at USMA. Specifically, their Army assigned jobs and locations are based on an order of merit list which is established by their individual performance in the academic, military, and physical pillars of their cumulative cadet grade average. In the context of this environment a cadet is often pitted against their own performance and aspirations and espousing the virtues of teamwork, duty, and collaboration with their teams and subgroups.

One other overarching theme that emerges from the data is the notion that the actions of others are excusable as long as they do not directly affect the observer. Meanwhile cadets may justify inaction in their moral ownership when they view the violation as "dumb" or acting may come at a reputational costs, which is more consistent with the findings of the moral courage component. Excusing the actions of others when they do not affect the individual is also largely an individually focused outlook on life and suggests the importance of the warnings of the bystander effect on organizations.

Closely related to moral ownership is the component of duty orientation. Consistent with the overall dataset where 8% (15 of 185) closely related the two components, the subset of the data included 5% (2 of 40) responses that associated the components of moral ownership with duty orientation.

Duty Orientation	
n	Themes
1	Uneven Ascribe Institutional Values "Them" problem, not "Us" problem
2	Lack of Ownership Misaligned personal and professional values
3	Do not hold others accountable Do not fully understand regulations
4	No obligation to enforce rules Holding Environment rules do not Match Future Rules
5	Fear of confrontation
6	Self-interest; self-focus Rules considered unimportant
7	Self-interest; self-focus Misaligned personal and professional values
8	Misplaced loyalty
9	Lack of stewardship
10	Following rules rather than internalizing them Individualized value on what is important rather than obligation to a rule

Table 3: Duty Orientation Results

The review of the data associated with duty orientation results in a combination of themes that lack uniform results. Several themes, however, suggest consistency of the struggle between individualism and institutionalism. Specifically, there is a thread of loyalty to individually aligned ingroups, where difficult conversations about keeping one another accountable are avoided. This in turn represents a greater desire to support ingroup members and avoid stewarding the institutional values of the organization. As the data suggests duty orientation examines the idea of a volitional orientation toward moral action for the good for the sake of others in a larger group.

Moral efficacy includes components of self-efficacy and means-efficacy. As the results indicate below, there is a strong indicator that responsibility for weaker moral efficacy can be closely related to one of the two sub-components of efficacy.

Moral Efficacy	
n	Themes
1	Perceived lack of agency
2	Separate Rules for First-Year Cadets Too many to enforce
3	Perceived lack of means-efficacy Cynicism
4	Misplaced loyalty
5	Fear of confrontation Misplaced loyalty Difficulty with peer leadership
6	Lack of self-efficacy

	Difficulty with peer leadership
7	Lack of self-efficacy
	Fear of being outcast
8	Perceived lack of means-efficacy
	Fear of being outcast
9	Following rules rather than internalizing them
	short term vs long term
10	Lack of self-efficacy
	Push off corrections on another

Table 4: Moral Efficacy Results

Regarding self-efficacy, individual motivation and energy along with the demands of peer leadership contribute to many summarizing that their individual efforts have little perceived contribution to their ability to make the moral choice. Another often cited challenge is the structure of peer leadership which contributes to the individual suggesting that they are unable to act in a moral situation because of a perceived lack of influence over their peers. The environment and the means resident at USMA also indicate the challenges of contributing to one's moral strength. Specifically, the myriad rules to follow, include the structure of a fourth-class system where the newest members of the academy must follow another set of rules, creates an overlapping set of compliance factors which often results in cadets viewing these regulations as pitting their sub-group loyalties with that of the institution.

The final category of moral strength, which is also statistically the weakest component as the evidence indicates, is the personal resolve and desire to act in the face of adversity.

Moral Courage	
n	Themes
1	Fear of being outcast
2	Fear of being outcast Fear of confrontation
3	Fear of confrontation
4	Loss of social capital
5	Fear of being outcast
6	Loss of social capital
7	Fear of being outcast
8	Difficulty with peer leadership Misplaced loyalty
9	Difficulty with peer leadership Misplaced loyalty Fear of confrontation
10	Fear of being outcast

Table 5: Moral Courage Results

Fear of others—both in the act of confronting someone and the perceived future negative consequences—and loss of social capital are the most inhibiting barriers to act. Aristotle recounted that the one "who faces and fears the right things for the right motive and in the right way at the right time, and whose confidence is similarly right, is courage[ous]." According to the Aristotelian notion of courage, fear, motives, ways, and confidence stand in the way of doing the courageous act. Similarly, cadets indicate that the fear of others' perception of them when confronted and the loss of social capital that is exchanged when taking a moral action contribute most to the barriers toward moral action. By far this is the most uniform list of themes that emerge from the data across all four of the vertices of moral strength.

Discussion

Institutional Implications

Based on the findings uncovered, much of the results follow from anecdotal evidence and previous research findings on the subject. While the immediate reaction to such findings may be to energize the development of a program of analysis and program of development associated with strengthening the collective moral courage of the organization, the researcher offers a gentle reminder. First, a strengthening program must consider some of the key points of the body of research on character. One of the main findings of The Jubilee Center for Character and Virtue's *Character Education in Universities Framework for Flourishing* (2020) is that students should be free to critically decide how they pursue their character development. Institutionally, character—specifically moral strength—development occurs in many forms and is not a one-size-fits-all approach. The research suggests that we develop our own character through our own experiences, including our own sought opportunities to strengthen. Yet, in the same framework there is an implication that the

university has a responsibility and makes it their purpose to educate and prepare students for their professional lives. In the context of USMA, there is a responsibility and purpose to fulfill the mission of the academy, to educate, train, and inspire the next generation of commissioned leaders of character. This framework imbues an institutional demand that strengthening is a two-way street. Similar to physical growth, the institution provides a number of things, including a culture of holistic health and fitness, required coursework, resources for improvement, testing, and negative reinforcement for failure. For a strengthening program in moral strength, specifically moral courage to have benefit, it will need to consider the desires and interests of the population on their terms.

Second, a program of development of moral strength must refer to the caution of the literature in marking one component as more important than the others. The researcher must remind the reader of Hannah and Avolio's (2010) conclusion that the "components of moral potency [are] necessary but not sufficient—leaders require *adequate levels of all three to promote consistent ethical action*" (emphasis added). A strengthening in one component should contribute to strengthening of all. The themes that emerged across all of the components are complimentary (difficulty with peer leadership, fear of being outcast, self-interest and self-focus) and suggest that programs that strengthen along multiple fronts will strengthen the whole cadet. More than a barometer of lacking moral strength, the current addition to the body of research on moral strength components adds to where the contemporary body of future leaders resides in their own understanding of their specific ratios of moral strength.

Pedagogical Implications

The results of this research indicate a few implications for those responsible for teaching the cohort of seniors at USMA. Specifically, an obvious reflection of the data illustrates that there were more incorrect responses than any of the four components except one. This may be attributed to the method of data collection in the current study, which was collected during a final exam. Although the exam allowed the student to use a notebook from their in- and out-of class notes, a final exam is a highly stressful environment which included several other questions that the student was asked to answer in contribution to their final grade. One may interpret that instructors ought to take the ownness to further teach and reinforce these terms throughout the course and leading up to the examination. Some pedagogical research suggests that testing retrieval throughout the class will not only have an effect on their ability to retrieve for tests, but will contribute to imprinting of the theories in their practical wisdom and **continue to shape cadets' lives for the better.**

Recommendations for Further Research

It is the desire of the author that the momentum to continue to develop the moral compass of future officers never declines. As such, researching the requirements, shortcomings, and desired strengthening efforts should hold paramount prominence in our higher education institutions, explicitly at USMA. The capstone course, MX400 may continue to ask this question on future term end examinations to grow the data sample to approximately 800 per academic year. The findings of such an *n* may bring the current findings closer toward a statistically significant sample.

(Word Count: 4,526)   12

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