Owning Professional Practise Through Character

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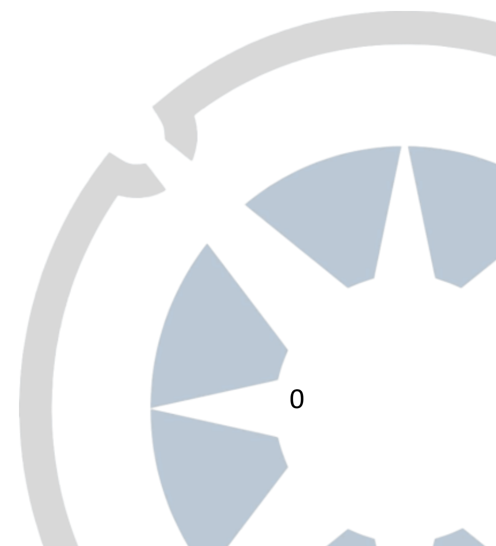

Owning professional practice through character

Abstract

For philosopher David Carr, a professional practice emphasizes how practitioners develop a 'feel for the game' or comfort zone to perceive, feel and act in accordance with the practice. Perhaps this is most directly obvious in military practices where communal belonging must be balanced with individual character for the benefit of society. In this paper, interdisciplinary research with the British Army is used to illustrate how the development of character in the early years, though messy and protracted, may lead to ownership of professional practice capable of guarding it against ethical violations and advancing rather than reproducing the practice.

Introduction

Though focused on the British Army, I hope that this paper will act, at least partially, as a means for generating ideas for exploration and relevance beyond the military. Sometimes I have found the extreme nature of the military community useful for identifying processes relevant beyond the military context.

In this paper, I adopt the concept of professional practice - a term emphasizing a need for practitioners to develop a 'feel for the game' or comfort zone to perceive, feel and act in accordance with the practice. I do this from a theoretical framework combining Pierre Bourdieu's habitus and neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, and to some extent moral psychology, especially neo-Kohlbergian perspectives. I also refer to interdisciplinary research with the British Army, completed at the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, some of which was only recently analyzed. This paper draws on five key pieces of published work (Arthur et al., 2018; Walker, 2018; Walker, 2020a; Walker et al., 2021, Walker 2022).

My focus in this paper is on the development of character in the early years of professional practice for junior British Army officers - a period of adjustment that is especially messy and protracted. In the paper I suggest that a necessary outcome for moral development in the early years ought to lead to ownership of professional practice through character, capable of guarding the practice against ethical violations and advancing it rather than merely reproducing the practice.

Regarding areas of paid work in general, it has been common to set some occupations apart as professions according to traditional criteria such as for law and medicine for example. Sometimes however these professions do not meet the standards of a traditional profession, particularly in the area of having genuine autonomy for applying expert knowledge. There are examples of this such as in the military where processes of institutionalism can override professional judgement (Walker, 2018). Such problems of occupational definition motivate my recourse to the alternative concept of 'professional practice' as envisaged by David Carr (1999, 2018) for being a more inclusive term with less emphasis on ethical codes and rules. A professional practice, like a profession, involves activities supportive of a social need as the source of professional status.

In a recent book chapter, I argued that the British Army is a precarious professional practice where both institutional and professional dynamics exist, requiring individuals to find balance between them (Walker, 2018). This is a useful dynamic since it is hard to imagine military service without some form of instutionalization but there needs to be checks and balances. For example, there is a requirement to ensure institutional processes, such as loyalty and conformity, are not allowed to dominate.

The need in professional practice to develop an applied wisdom or feel for the game (Bourdieu, 1998) from the experiences and contexts of the work fits well with a virtue ethics focus on character and Pierre Bourdieu's sociological concept of habitus. Bourdieu talks of an acquired 'specialized' habitus in professional practice, and similarly sociologist Elias describes this as a 'second nature' or 'comfort zone' (Elias, 2007), to 'think, act and feel like other members of that profession' (Jansen et. al., 2019 p. 340). The habitus is:

> a largely unconscious, internalized, even bodily sense of the social world acquired through upbringing. It delimits tastes, bodily gestures, ways of eating, sitting and talking; in short, everything we think and do, including our normative ideas (Bourdieu, 1984, 1995).

This perspective - combining habitus with virtue ethics philosophy - addresses both personal moral agency and a socialized second nature which can be at least somewhat reductionist in the sense of social relations cultivating agency. It is also important to remember that hexis and habitus emerged from the same beginnings (Walker, 2020b).

I believe, however, that Bourdieu's habitus is more than a mere socialized rubbing off of professional practice on workers. It can also be connected to character development whereby an agent in professional practice learns to respond to complex situations, sometimes uniquely, but within common patterns of behavior in the professional practice. In the extreme work of the British Army there is an ongoing need to effect change for junior officers – to influence their expertise in perceiving and acting for the good of the practice linked to and legitimated by wider society.

It will be obvious by now that I am taking an interdisciplinary perspective as I did for other work completed in collaboration with James Arthur, Kristjan Kristjansson and Stephen Thoma. The focus of my talk today - junior Army officers - are upholders of ethical and professional standards. In general, the British Army, takes an aspirational approach to character, meaning it is insufficient to be a good person only as this relates to professional necessity or role. Instead, military individuals need to strive for excellent general characters as well as for character relating to military roles. In an ideal process, adjusting to professional practice involves cultivating special socialized expertise as well as individual ethical responsibility, legitimized by societies' support (cf. Wolfendale, 2009). While this is an easy enough statement to make, inevitably in reality this is much more haphazard and problematic in a precarious professional practice.

As I will elaborate later, analysis of interviews with 39 junior Army officers underpins my suggestion that at least two general processes need to occur as regarding habitus and character in the early years of professional practice: finding oneself in professional practice and learning to own professional practice.

Finding oneself in professional practice

Despite being knowable ahead of time, the new Army entrants were shocked by entry into the Army and its demands. Experiencing their new roles underpins their need to adjust pre-entry expectations about being an Army officer (Caforio, 2006) as part of a process of *finding themselves in professional practice.* This relates to character development and the need for unique learning within forms of similarity. Finding oneself in Army practice involves navigating challenges at Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, appraising one's early career standing and competence, improving one's character, and being positively influenced by the field. As a form of moral education, Army officers need to develop

characters that will respond to demands of practice and provide leadership. Even so, and in addition to this partially reductionist possibility, developing ethical agency is also needed as a process toward 'owning' the professional practice.

Learning to own professional practice

While of course, embracing military norms is a required professional foundation in order to *own* professional practice, there is also a need to add a capacity for questioning and resisting local practices if they contradict an ethical good. Owning practice involves combining socialized learning with one's own voice. Recent research on character and ethical judgment suggests moral development in the early years of practice may involve a non-linear process (Arthur et al., 2019, 2014). We found this too in the British Army (Arthur et al., 2018) and based on interview data I will describe soon, ownership of practice for junior British Army officers involves grasping a shared wisdom of military operations, its ethical dimensions, whilst also learning critically to apply this for oneself. If this can be achieved, then the practice may be advanced through character. This suggests that the practice is not merely reproduced. In this way, practitioners through character, are important sources of practical and ethical agency.

Research on junior Army officer's moral judgement

Research on moral judgement - a key aspect of character - suggests there is a messy period of moral learning in the early years for junior Army officers (Walker et al., 2021). This research used moral dilemmas based on neo-Kohlbergian theory, especially employing intermediate concepts as similar to the cognitive component of virtue. The research investigated how far junior officers' ethical reasoning aligned with Army values and we tested the application of virtue to professional moral dilemmas.

Methods

This wider project of research as mentioned above took place at the Jubilee Center for

Character and Virtues and involved three levels of junior Army officer: officer cadets at Royal Military Academy Sandhurst (RMAS), early lieutenants and captains (1–5 years' service), experienced captains, and a few junior majors (6–10 years' experience). Data were collected at three courses (RMAS, Junior Officer Tactical Awareness and Captain's Warfare Course). A final sample of 242 officers was achieved. Although full details of this research are available (cf. Walker et al., 2021), a brief summary of the procedures and dilemmas is provided below.

An Army Intermediate Concept Measure (AICM), first developed in the US, was adjusted to the UK context involving a panel of senior experts in ethical judgment in US military contexts and then 2 UK expert panels to reduce the dilemmas in number from 7 to 4. This measure comprises dilemmas that are realistic for the practice and works to compare results to expert panel judgements about options that are acceptable or unacceptable. Similar to real life, there is not a single 'right' answer. Dilemma 1 (Metcalf) involves an injured local Somalian and requires a decision about responding to this injured man who is surrounded by a volatile crowd. Dilemma 2 (Smith) targets torture / aggressive methods and requires a decision about how to respond to the capture of two soldiers. Dilemma 3 (Milgram) 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. And finally, dilemma 4 (Jacobs) involves fraternization and requires a response to a fellow male officer and friend who is fraternizing with a female soldier contrary to Army rules.

The participants completed AICM under supervision, rated action choices and reasons on a scale from 1 to 5 and then ranked best/most important and worst/least important options for actions and reasons. Scoring involved assessing participants' responses against a key developed by the expert panel process. The key allows for multiple ways for participants to score well and poorly and produces scores for best/worst action/ reason as well as a total ICM score. All of these are percentage scores representing how far participants' responses matched the expert panel.

Basic findings – reproduced and summarized. Overall, the officers scored well, matching the expert panel key 65% of the time. Highest results were for identifying poor actions. Female officers moderately outperformed males for action choices whereas gender differences were smaller than is generally the case for moral dilemmas of this kind. Minor differences suggest female officers were slightly more willing to protect their soldiers against investigation (Milgram) and male officers were more prone to distraction from loyalty to a friend over doing right thing (Jacobs). Overall, officers most successfully rejected inappropriate aggressive methods under pressure and chose to uphold truth to the detriment of their soldiers but were less successful diverting from a mission to make a rescue (Metcalf) or upholding the Army's fraternization policy (Jacobs). Poor responses to the Metcalf dilemma signal a trend toward prioritizing mission and avoiding risk, and poor responses to the Jacobs dilemma suggest overemphasis on loyalty to friends, especially for infantry/artillery officers.

But for the purposes of this paper, I want to pick up on a pattern in the results for moral judgement, namely that officer cadets and senior captains and majors scored higher than lieutenants and junior captains, once branch of service was included in the analysis. Although AICM is a uniquely military measure, the application of virtue has global as well as role-related expression such that non-military people (the new cadets are close to this) can see the virtue at stake too. Verweij, et al (2007) had a similar finding. It seems that with accumulated experience, the senior captains / majors (6 to 10 years' experience) were perhaps more likely to respond to the dilemmas as fully rounded professionals, combining military experience and skill with Army values at an advanced level. For the new entrants (cadets), however, theory dominates, while for junior officers with 5 years' service or less, practice seems to dominate causing lower scores on the measure if they are distracted by the enormity of learning the technical aspects of the practice.

Moral Development in the early years – junior officers' perspectives

Results from this AICM research suggests that developing character and ethical judgment in the early years for Army officers is a difficult protracted process of learning, incorporating periods of imbalance, such as a potential for overemphasis on the mission (practice dominated) for very junior officers. This is what I wanted to investigate in my recent analysis of the interviews with 39 of the same officers in order to investigate this early career period of moral development.

Inevitably, officers have much to learn in early careers and there are many factors potentially threatening their ethical judgment (e.g., some institutional practices). As mentioned earlier, there is a need for members to have capacity to stand up for ethical goods as part of owning the practice. There is also an associated need for balancing and navigating institutional and professional imperatives. However, the officers described standing up for what is right against the group as potentially career-threatening strategies, needing caution. This is partly to do with their junior status and inexperience. My point is that junior officers should stand up for ethical goods when needed, but also in the opposite direction should recognize there may be good reasons in military practice why individual agency is at times suppressed in favor of traditional ways of operating, not yet

understood by a junior officer still developing. This dynamic is at the heart of learning to own professional practice, since relatively new officers inevitably cannot know what they don't know and may be disadvantaged (and protected) by perceptions of their naivety by others. It follows therefore that identifying when an ethical good is in jeopardy in military situations in line with the community or against it is one thing but making a comprehensive ethical and military assessment relevant to a specific military context is another. For example, an inexperienced junior officer may assess a situation naively, make a judgement that with the benefit of military (and ethical) experience they would not make since ethical judgment needs to be accompanied by practiced military knowledge and skill. Turning now to the semi-structured interviews. What did the officers tell us about character in the early years? Before describing how themes of finding oneself in and owning the practice are supported by data, it is necessary to provide a brief summary of the methods and results recently reported in the Journal for Moral Education (Walker, 2021).

Methods

Habitus can be easily obscured from individual notice (Archer, 2003) and indeed this is part of its nature (Walker, 2020b). Similarly, character may be subject to desirability bias and / or overconfidence when discussing it. In the interviews specific examples are repeatedly requested to illustrate participant's discussions. This was intended to 'ethnographize' (Ortner, 2003) the interview and improve access to habitus and character. Interviews were focused on participants' narrated experiences, investigated for moral character development and education. The focus of interviews was to investigate how junior officers describe their characters and what key challenges they faced as part of early socialization and learning. There was a subsample of 39 officers who were interviewed, taken from a broader sample of 242 officers (Arthur et al, 2018). Participants came from a wide range of military roles and positions across the British Army. Twelve were female, 19 held the rank of captain, 11 were in the rank of lieutenant and the remainder were cadets. Participants were asked about: Army values; relationships; moral exemplars, soldiers, superiors, the ideal officer, moral difficulties, and challenges. Finally, the interview was structured to ask about other officers and soldiers before finally asking about the participants themselves.

Analysis. Thematic analysis (familiarize, generate initial codes, search for themes, review themes, define and name themes and writing) was used to analyze these data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This involved the creation of initial codes for moral agency in general; gleaning relevant categories or themes; reviewing early codes and themes with moral content, making connections, writing memos, and organizing these into overarching themes to support the process of writing.

Institutional features of Army careers

A dominant theme generated from these data related to institutional features of the career. Falling under this broad heading were themes of early socialization, Army life, and operations as uniquely institutional aspects of the career involving adjustment to core imperatives, mostly relating to the need to achieve operational effectiveness. Early socialization experiences involve learning to accept these basic requirements, sometimes in deliberately forceful ways.

However, even at Sandhurst there was evidence that cadets were discovering ways to balance some of the harsh institutional necessities. For example, some cadets said that complete honesty at Sandhurst was not needed or wise even though it was often demanded, since pleasing the person above you (an institutional habit) was problematic. Similarly, some cadets claimed that the Army value of selfless commitment did have certain limits despite its allencompassing appeal.

Finding one's place in the practice

A key theme in the overarching theme of finding one's place in the practice is 'challenges of practice'. Most discussions of personal growth centered around such challenges. According to the officers, general challenges include:

-'Army life' (24[1]);

-'sheer workload and the need to develop competence' (61)

-being away from home -'first 6 months I spent 3 weekends at home' (10),

-being the support person on exercise - '35 days or so of people whinging at me' (10),

-managing 'reporting and career profiles' (53), and

-coping with 'disciplinary situations' (10),

-gender issues -'not seeing fellow females' (76).

'Life-changing challenges' were also discussed, including as follows:

> 'three-week-old lieutenant, and I've got a nine line (combat injury) coming down. I've got troops in contact—was probably the worst morning of my life' (10);

> 'the biggest challenge was calming the guys down in Afghan after our sergeant major got killed. I didn't have time to grieve properly 'cause I was dealing with the blokes' (85).

Another officer describes disappointment at his own physical courage after witnessing an Afghan officer with a heavy-duty item threatening a prisoner:

> 'the first thing I did was run for the interpreter and I feel like I should've jumped in—I was just physically intimidated' (94).

According to the officers, professional challenges provided learning and self-knowledge, as did themes of 'deliberation and 'taking an ethical stand'. Most of the officers described difficulties acting in line with their ethical beliefs in the face of various challenges. The officer's accounts describe processes of moral learning through experience often involving a balancing of professional and institutional undercurrents. They discussed their deliberations in depth for making an ethical stand which may or may not align with practice norms. Working out when and how to stand up was a much-discussed issue by the officers and involves at least the following factors: deciding if there really is an issue in the first place; deciding if the officers lack of experience is a factor; evaluating if and when to make a stand and how that might happen. Relatedly, a few of the officers described being removed from briefing rooms for apparently trying to make an ethical stand.

All of this implies complexity for knowing when to take a risk to 'stand up' and how to develop in one's character the courage to execute this skillfully. The following direct quotations illustrate various ways this is viewed by the junior officers:

[1] Each participant has been allocated a number.

'On 90% of occasions you have to hold your physical capital—I've been told on numerous occasions—who are you to have that opinion, you are only a lieutenant' (25).

One experienced officer notes: 'there may be a time when I unfortunately have to stand up and do the right thing and it will cost me my career without a shadow of a doubt' (40).

'It's simpler to just bite the bullet and have it on your conscience when you go home— (if) you have tacit agreement from the chain of command that they're aware of it, then it's almost not a moral dilemma, it's their responsibility if that goes up' (53).

Moral development for the junior officers also appears to involve humility since this was emphasized a lot alongside approachability of more senior officers. Descriptions of humility often show a clear desire to improve. For example, one officer said, 'actually I could have done that better. If you're the person who wants to develop, you're going to be inconsistent next time but for the better' (32). Analysis of this theme led to a realization that most of the officers displayed a moral growth mindset (Han et al., 2018). And for some, moral growth appeared to involve dramatic shifts in moral compass:

Aware now, that my moral ground isn't necessarily better but is different to a lot of other officers. I probably came away from Sandhurst thinking that we all sang off the same song sheet but it's clearly not the case - my boundaries and red lines are very different to other people's (84);

I think my moral compass is out of kilter now. Before it was, this is black and this is white and now it's different (94).

The officers also discussed professional growth as requiring reflection on their own weaknesses and a lesser prior self, sometimes with horror when they recall mistakes and necessary learning that took place in their not-too-distant past.

The theme of 'relating up and down' refers to developing relationships up and down the chain of command. This is probably a feature of moral development in the hierarchical Army and potentially for other hierarchical occupations too. This also connects to appeals for officer's senior to the sample to be approachable - something participants valued in order to learn from experience:

'A very honest discussion with someone that's got more experience, wanting to develop you as a junior officer rather than getting sucked into their computer screen' (25);

'Listen to you regardless of your rank, he was very relaxed, but firm and I think that's such a hard thing to do' (10);

Problems relating upwards do however exist:

'They're no longer approachable' (16); 'don't have the empathy to understand how their mindset can be different from someone else's' (86);

'Solely motivated by what they've seen to be career interest' (10);

'Don't make it feel like I'm only there to enable your next report' (88) and 'he would have sacrificed his own kids to get promoted' (85).

Relating downward to soldiers mattered for moral growth too with soldiers often viewed with admiration:

'As much a moral role model to a junior officer as a more senior officer is' (69);

'You know, big jobs on, and yet he still finds time to do something he thinks is important (volunteering) and I like people like that because they can be at any rank' (88).

Allowing oneself to benefit from moral exemplarity in a lower rank requires:

'a combination of intellectual drive and humility to take advice from much more experienced (soldiers)' (40).

And, within hierarchical relationships, soldierly influence could be quite significant:

'I'm going to be honest with you here (to a soldier), "what do you think?" And he would never give you bad advice' (44).

Toward owning the practice

'Right priorities', 'balance' and 'bigger picture' are key themes pertinent for owning the professional practice. A key feature of military moral education involves developing concern with right priorities. This is needed to align officers' ethical primacies to those of the precarious practice in a balanced way. Right priorities is a term used to code text expressing a steady ethical value in the practice. For example, a heartfelt priority for soldiers whereby activities and sentiments counter to this (e.g., careerism, self-interest or failing to spend time with soldiers) are criticized in oneself and others. Right priorities signals identification with practice requiring ongoing refinement through experience. For example, another code, seeing the wider picture shows how though prioritizing soldiers is worthy and admirable, it can also be ill-advised (e.g., an officer helping a soldier, learns the soldier has been repeatedly lying). Themes of right priorities, wider picture and balance, depict officers learning to own the practice and involve glimpses of phronesis.

Officers displaying these themes are balancing competing institutional and professional demands to generate individualized ethical responses requiring deep understanding of why aspects of practice matter since understanding why may be a defining feature of phronesis (Curzer, 2012). The officers' grip of right priorities varies by experience in the context of the professional practice. Most participants agreed they were 'interested in the blokes genuinely'

(26) and saw leading soldiers as fundamental, causing upset when 'people forget that everything we do has got a bloke with a bayonet at the end of it' (58). In these ways, interacting with soldiers and finding time for them were mostly right priorities:

'I didn't get time to sort myself out at the time. But morally, looking after the guys was the right thing to do' (85);

'It's so easy to get bogged down in emails, whereas actually real important stuff is if the guys see that you're showing that example' (93);

Finding time could mean working late in the evenings, doing what 'I could have been doing during the day, but I was busy spending time with the guys making sure everyone's okay' (10).

In many ways, Army values (e.g., selfless commitment) and right priorities connect to a wider context and along with other values need to be intuitively revered and chosen. In order to own the practice, the junior officers need to develop as authentic agents of practice, pursuing right priorities in their own way:

'There's enough room in the Army, just be yourself' (76);

> ‘Sandhurst (didn’t) really fit my style of leadership. (At my unit), I liked being able to just develop myself my way a little bit more and actually go and do the job’ (33);
>
> ‘Keeping track of who you are as a person outside of the Army by not working to excess’ (76);
>
> ‘Aiming to invest yourself without allowing the role to consume you’ (15).

It is clear from this that owning the practice should not involve getting lost in the practice and the officers were willing to explore their own way and learn from their mistakes in this regard. Too much personal adherence to institutional imperatives over professional ones could involve losing oneself and prove problematic for individual and practice alike since the precariousness of the practice ought to be a strength if managed well (Walker, 2020a).

Improving trustworthy judgements seem more likely when a (moral) growth mindset is present which can also involve practical wisdom or phronesis, developed through experience and improved self-knowledge:

> It’s not a decision that’s easy to understand, you tend to self-search. Is it the right one actually? It stands out because you know, it’s the first time I had to make a proper moral call at the expense of professional output in the short term in order to guard it in the long term (86).

In another example, a popular soldier was killed and the officer, new to the Unit, is tasked with organizing a funeral:

> Was quite a hard challenge to feel compassion, remain composed and still, lead and motivate people.
>
> Some of the guys were absolutely devastated - he was a big character, a lot of them had followed him through a lot of tough stuff and, I wouldn’t say they weren’t willing to soldier, but they needed time to mourn, but they also needed to do their job, so it was quite a fine balance.
>
> I tried to maintain a relatively normal routine but at a gentler pace, so we’d still do a parade in the morning or do fizz and go for a run but it would be hard - people would chat and decompress and we had quiet time in the afternoon - just to go away and think about stuff or send them places where we knew they’d group work - they’d probably be having a chat and not do much work.
>
> I saw a full spectrum of emotion, I saw people get really, really angry about it, I saw some people kind of laugh it off, I saw some people showed no emotion and then at the funeral they absolutely fell to bits.
>
> So, I think it just widened my understanding - it helps that you don’t make a too forceful decision where some people would react (88).

Conclusion

In the paper, I suggest officers new to Army professional practice, as for other professional practices, need to develop a ‘second nature’ or ‘comfort zone’ (Elias, 2007), to ‘think, act and feel like other members of that profession’ (Jansen et. al., 2019 p. 340), but not be reduced to this. Research has

suggested this is a messy and protracted process for junior Army officers and other professional practices. Army officers, have to learn their complex craft and this can involve loosening their grip on ethical dimensions of the work to some extent as experience is being amassed (Walker et al., 2021). New entrants have a difficult task understanding what character development means and what they should aim for.

Overall, real experience over time reflected upon for moral learning was very valuable to these officers who were mostly working to develop themselves in the practice. A feature of development involved learning how to make ethical stands. Most of the officers were quite blunt putting this into action, whereas more contemplation about how to tackle their ethical concerns in this hierarchical occupation seemed to require higher levels of moral character and professional practical wisdom if they were to work out how best to effect change; many of the officers displayed little knowledge of different ways to do this. A moral growth mindset was evident among most of the officers, who were finding their 'own way' within patterns of familiarity. The need to find one's own way reflects obvious problems viewing an officer only through their military role. Overall, analysis of the interviews emphasized experiences for moral learning and development, pointing to key themes of humility and approachability of more senior leaders - officers appreciated and wanted mentoring from officer's senior to them. Humility was a dominant theme perhaps owing to the scale of learning officers felt they faced in becoming Army officers with moral character's aligning the imperatives of practice, but without being reduced to them.

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