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Abstract

The U.S. Army has a longstanding tradition of nominating exemplars during and across domains to highlight specific positive and negative characteristics. Using a similar method we propose a novel approach, focused on cadets at the United States Military Academy (USMA) who are nominated by their peers as exemplars to predict moral leadership. Drawing on literature about moral exemplars, who tend to embody socially desirable attributes that promote emulation, inspiration, and embodiment by the admirer (e.g., Zagzebski, 2017), we aimed to develop a theoretical model that outlines what those attributes might be.

At USMA, we administer many rater-reports that indicate individuals of high and low peer-perceived character, on domains such as trust and leader competencies. Among these assessments, we administer a character survey which asks for a peer nomination of fellow cadets that either possess exceptional moral character or which peers perceive to be of poor moral character. Combined with other data collected across a variety of settings, this study investigated the traits that best predicted exemplarity.

In this exploratory study we found exemplarity was significantly and positively associated with informant reports of character-relevant attributes from high school faculty, admissions physical fitness testing, academic aptitude, self-reported cadet gratitude, and correlated with expected behavioral indicators, such as self-reported goal-setting and meditation behavior. We believe our results may lend insight into what traits contribute to being an effective leader.

Keywords: peer-nominations, moral leadership, trait prediction, exemplar, anti-exemplar

Trait Characteristics of Exemplary Military Leaders

In an era marked by unprecedented technological advancements and evolving societal values, the criteria for selecting individuals to serve as military officers are undergoing a profound transformation. Historically, military leaders' advancement revolved around a time-based promotion system, highlighting time in grade above other factors. However, the shifting landscape of warfare, coupled with initiatives like the Army People Strategy and the Air Force's refinements to promotion boards, has resulted in personnel management forces pushing for deep expertise in technological fields to keep pace with our strategic competitors. At the same time, there is a growing recognition of the importance of character, which demands a reevaluation of the traits that define exemplary military officers. Moreover, as we move forward into an age where algorithms are increasingly relied upon to assess and predict an individual's suitability for military leadership, it becomes crucial to understand the nuanced interplay between character traits and the traditional metrics of military aptitude.

This research paper aims to delve into the intricacies of trait characteristics exhibited by exemplary military officers, opening up the aperture of their significance not only in the context of military service but also in the broader realm of admissions for officer commissioning sources. As we peer into the future, a reality emerges wherein algorithms may play an instrumental role in shaping the composition of the next generation of Army officers (Vincent, 2023). Thus, our investigation assumes a three-fold significance: to inform the military leadership selection process, to contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding character evaluation in educational admissions, and to further the basic question of what traits moral leaders exhibit.

Our inquiry begins by recognizing the enduring importance of traditional military qualities, such as leadership, discipline, and competence, while also emphasizing the increasingly critical role of character development to produce judgment. We aim to provide

empirical evidence and insights that facilitate a more holistic understanding of the traits that foster exemplary military officers. Moreover, we seek to explore how these traits can be assessed, measured, and integrated into the admissions files (Hoover, 2023) of aspiring Army officers.

Peer Evaluations as Predictors: The Military Context

The U.S. military utilizes peer evaluation systems across several different contexts and in training situations to evaluate the behavior and performance of trainees. Often these peer evaluations result in a formative tool, which can be used by individuals in their own development plans to improve across a number of measures. Alternatively, peer evaluations, in some specific cases, may be used as a discriminator and in some cases exclude the trainee from continuing in a program. The U.S. Army has a historical tradition of nominating exemplars for both formative and discriminatory purposes. The most popular and well-regarded formative tools include the Multi-Source Assessment and Feedback (MSAF), a 360-degree assessment tool, which was once a requirement to be started prior to any annual performance evaluation report. Other forms of peer feedback occur at the Officer Candidate School (OCS), where members seeking to move from the enlisted rank to become commissioned officers undergo a 12-week course. The peer evaluations a metric to provide formative feedback, as well as summative feedback as Candi-dates must receive a rating of at least "satisfactory" on 50% of their peer evaluations to graduate (Allen, 2014). OCS revised their peer evaluation system to include questions such as: "Would you go to war with this person" (Toumbeva et al., 2021). Additionally, the revised peer evaluation system now includes a question on peer trust. The revised peer assessment contributed to a summative evaluation of the officer candidates, which was factored into their graduate rankings.

More recently, summative peer assessments have been formalized as part of a process that evaluates the senior officers under consideration to command battalions and brigades

(Vincent, 2023). While not the only form of analysis, peer assessments are meant to fill in gaps and provide the day-to-day analysis free of demand characteristics, which typically cannot be assessed by superiors (Norton, 1992). There is a growing list of research conducted on peer assessments in the military context, which has come to demonstrate that peer assessment is a predictor of leadership performance during the training environment and leadership potential after (Allen, 2014), training outcomes at a greater rate than staff ratings (Zazanis, 2009), positive performance (Smith, 1967), and combat effectiveness (Williams, 1947).

This growing trend of literature suggest that peer evaluations are a useful tool in measuring military members proficiency, effectiveness, or growth. An additional, less-explored method in the military context is peer nominations. While both peer assessments and peer nominations involve input from peers, the key difference lies in the nature of the feedback. Peer assessments focus on evaluating specific criteria and performance, providing a detailed analysis of an individual's abilities. On the other hand, peer nominations involve the selection of individuals for recognition or special roles based on their perceived qualities or contributions without necessarily requiring a detailed evaluation. The advantage of a peer nomination is that it is quick to acquire, yet the limitation, unexplained to the nominator is that there is often imprecision in what the nominee is being evaluated against. Limited evidence suggests that nominations are more likely to determine traits of character than evaluations (Schwarzwald, 1999), while at the same time also predicting performance after training (Hollander, 1965), and also may be useful in determining intervention in identifying negative outcomes (Fiedler, 2004).

We suggest that cadets at the United States Military Academy (USMA) who are nominated by their peers as exemplars possess certain patterns of strengths of character that would be helpful to embody in the profession.

Moral Exemplars

To develop a better understanding of the traits desirable of future officers, a useful framework resides in previous contributions to research of moral exemplars. Studies have uncovered important differences between exemplars and nonexemplars. For example, exemplars have more secure attachments and are more likely to frame difficult life experiences in redemptive terms (Walker & Frimer, 2007). For a budding military officer, who will likely undergo a series of difficult life experiences, being able to overcome them is at the heart of what military officers must do routinely.

Regarding their personality, exemplars not only seem to be resilient, but research suggests that their Big Five personality traits also differ; exemplars are higher on conscientiousness and agreeableness (Walker, 1999). Moral exemplars and nonexemplars also differ in their emphasis on basic human values, with exemplars placing more emphasis on both communal (i.e., prosocial) and agentic (self-enhancing) values (Walker & Frimer, 2007). They are also more likely to integrate these values together; in other words, they're driven by enlightened self-interest (Frimer et al., 2011).

A major limitation of previous exemplar work, however, is that exemplar personality has always been assessed after exemplar status has been established. Here we test for the first time whether exemplar status can be predicted years prior to time when exemplar status is bestowed on people.

Current Study

The purpose of our project was to determine exemplary and non-exemplary characteristics of cadets by assessing various character attributes, as rated by the cadet and their peers, in addition to other institutional performance metrics. We believed that it would be important to expand our collective understanding of not only who is considered exemplary, but also what constitutes being an exemplar. Our research questions are primarily:

1) what distinguishes exemplars from anti-exemplars when compared in groups against one another; and 2) is there a way to predict exemplarity later in life. We posit that there is reason to believe the current study advances the prospects of providing answers to both of these questions as well as provides an exploratory effort to advance the existing research regarding what we know about moral exemplars and their importance to a variety of contexts. Following this exploratory study we will be seeking to conduct a confirmatory study utilizing additional data from the next wave of character assessment surveys in the spring of 2024.

Method

Participants

$N = 261$ of individuals were nominated as positive or negative exemplars in a self-report survey, consisting of USMA cadets that attended USMA during the Fall of 2023.

Measures

Given the exploratory nature of much of this study, there were many variables included in the analysis. For the sake of parsimony, we have included descriptions of the variables noted in the Results section, although many more were assessed.

Exemplarity Nominations

Utilizing the biennial character survey, cadets respond to a series of questions regarding exemplarity. The following questions appeared in the character survey:

- What's the name of a cadet who inspires you most to be a person of moral character?

- What's the name of a cadet who you consider to have exceptionally high moral character?

- What's the name of a cadet who you consider to have exceptionally strong performance character (e.g., they're self-controlled, perseverant, or resilient)?

- What's the name of a cadet who seems to have lower moral character than other cadets?

Self-Reported Gratitude

Trait gratitude was measured using six items from the Gratitude Questionnaire Six-Item Form (GQ-6; Emmons et al., 2003). A sample item includes *I have so much in life to be thankful for,* on a scale from –3 = strongly disagree to 3 = strongly agree.

Self-Reported Purpose

Purpose orientations were coded by determining whether open-ended responses to the following prompt were considered self-oriented or self-transcendent: *Currently, what is your highest goal or purpose in life? For instance, if you were to look beyond immediate goals like "get good grades," what deeper aim or aspiration guides your decisions and actions in the bigger picture of your life?*

Self-Reported Virtue-Related Behavior

To evaluate virtue-relevant behavior, cadets were asked if, after the survey was completed, they would engage in a virtue-relevant activity. A positive response indicated virtue-relevant behavior.

School Official Evaluations

As part of the application process, candidates are also required to provide School Official Evaluations (SOE) from a math, English, and science (either chemistry or physics) instructor. The SOEs contain twelve items which are assessed by the instructor on a Likert scale (1-5 rating) response which the instructor submits directly to the admissions office.

Whole Candidate Score

Holistic admissions potential was measured using the Whole Candidate Score (WCS), an index of academic (measured by a CEER score, a combination of SAT/ACT percentile scores and high school class rank), athletic activities, extracurricular activities, the CFA (a cadet fitness score composed of a basketball throw, pull-ups or flexed-arm hang, shuttle run, sit-ups, pushups, and a one mile run), and SOE appraisals in the admissions profile.

Procedure

     All data used in this project was secondary data, integrated across several data sources. The first source is a biennial character survey administered by USMA's Simon Center for the Professional Military Ethic to the entire corps of cadets. The survey provides a self-report assessment regarding individual virtue and character growth, and as of 2021, has been linked at the individual level to assess longitudinal changes in character. In addition, we requested the following institutional data: admissions candidate files, demographic characteristics, and other institutional performance metrics.

     We created exemplar and antiexemplar lists and conducted analyses on both lists. The list was composed of those cadets nominated by fellow cadets as moral exemplars or moral anti-exemplars at least three times on a bi-annual character survey.

Results

     Analyses were performed using SPSS version 29. Significance was evaluated at $\alpha = .05$.

Descriptive Statistics: Exemplar Nominations

     Of USMA's roughly 4,400 cadets, 1,361 cadets (~30%) were nominated as moral exemplars. Conversely, 707 cadets (~16%) were nominated as anti-exemplars. Over 100 cadets were listed as both exemplars and anti-exemplars. Given that was nearly double the number of exemplars than anti- nominations, this suggests that people have a more refined view of who is bad than who is good. Additionally, the fact that nearly one in four members of the cadet community was given exemplar status by their peers suggests a high-quality student body of morally-focused cadets.

Simple Correlations

We first explored a large number of correlations between moral exemplar status and admissions and character survey data. See Table 1 for notable correlations, which are also explained below.

Admissions

Perhaps most notably, school official ratings strongly predicted exemplar nomination status. Candidate fitness and CEER scores also predicted both exemplar status.

Self-Reported Character Traits

Of the eight traits measured in the character survey (grit, self-control, empathy, courage, humility, curiosity, growth mindset, gratitude) only one – gratitude – was significantly related to exemplar status.

Purpose in Life

Prosocial purpose only marginally predicted exemplar nominations. We expect this nonsignificance was due to a low sample size.

Behavioral Measure

Engagement in a character-relevant behavior was barely significantly related to exemplar nominations.

Table 1: *Correlation Matrix*

	Moral Exemplar Nominations		
	df	r	p
HS Teacher Nomination$_{total}$	257	0.36	<.001
HS Teacher Nomination$_{moral}$	204	0.37	<.001
HS Teacher Nomination$_{performance}$	204	0.24	<.001
HS Teacher Nomination$_{intellectual}$	204	0.28	<.001
Admissions Physical Fitness	257	0.25	<.001
Admissions Academic Potential	257	0.17	0.006
Gratitude	81	0.3	0.006
Purpose	48	0.25	0.08
Behavior	94	0.21	0.044

Logistic Regressions

Three variables in cadets admissions file—SOE scores, CFA, and the WCS—accurately predicted exemplar status accurately 63% of the time (positive exemplars: 76.6%; negative exemplars: 51.7%).

Discussion

In this exploratory analysis, we investigated the peer nominations indicating low and high moral character. Our analyses indicated strong evidence in ways that are generally, and context-specifically, relevant. Exemplarity was significantly and positively associated with informant reports of character-relevant attributes from high school faculty, self-reported cadet gratitude and purpose, and correlated with a behavioral indicator of engaging in volitional character development strategies.

The SOE correlations with exemplar status indicate agreement in rater reports on character-relevant characteristics. What is exciting about this specific finding is the strength of the correlation for data that predates the cadet's time at USMA. This evidence suggests that years prior to a nomination, an individual may already have the observable makeup well before USMA's comprehensive development system to predict character-based outcomes. This aligns with Colby and Damon's (1992) "progressive social influence" notion that while individuals deepen their individual value commitments, they tended to embrace strong moral values earlier on in life. Perhaps these individual value commitments are observable indicators that teachers address in candidate SOE scores and the USMA holding environment further deepens and enhances the traits that make up great officers.

Although exemplarism may normally suggest that character-trait items such as self-reported grit, empathy, growth mindset, or moral motivation among others are highly relevant, these measures indicated no significant relationship to exemplars status. While gratitude and purpose alone are unlikely to distinguish an exemplar from an anti-exemplar, the strength of these correlations suggests they are incredibly important traits in the overall

portfolio makeup of exemplars. Future research is needed to determine whether this finding would replicate with a larger or different sample.

The virtue-related behavioral indicator associated with exemplar status supported the notion that performing behaviors empirically associated with character formation should be linked to improved character formation. Goal-setting and execution (Mendonca et al., 2023) is empirically associated with behavior change and character change in particular. In addition, these behaviors are specifically relevant to the military context. Goal-setting within the context of the military is widely regarded as a behavior of high-performing officers; likewise, as aspiring officers, setting goals demonstrates to those within their social contexts that exemplars are driven to meet their outcomes. In addition, military leaders generally adopt the notion that trustworthiness is a combination of one's ability, integrity, and level of regard, or care, for those around them. Similarly, reflection is encouraged in multiple military contexts, yet specifically at USMA reflection is increasingly seen as a trait supportive of cadets achieving their developmental outcomes.

Overall, there were many different data sources that affirmed the potential power of these exemplar status indicators, as well as where we might further dig into effective assessments of cadet character in the future. The success of triangulation within this exploration of exemplar nominations is an encouraging start to understanding what and how cadets are nominated. Over time, there is an opportunity to also consider how cadet-level information predicts officer-level outcomes, to see how exemplarity, as perceived by cadets, impacts anything, if at all, about officer success and impact.

We were most surprised by the associations between the rater reports in this study and the exemplar status, namely the high school faculty scores. Although we expected some relationship, we did not expect such a strong effect. The predictive value of the admissions variables have potential for immediate action as it relates to how data can be useful for

decision-making, or at least highlighting profiles of particular cadet candidates and current cadets. Each cadet receives SOEs at admissions. Admissions could use SOE scores to indicate cadets that may be promising leaders or potentially problematic candidates, and use that as part of a holistic evaluation of an admissions packet.

Potential Uses for Exemplar Evaluations

Considering the promising results of the current study, it is worth discussing the potential venues for an exemplar status system outside of the narrow use case of the military. We considered where effective informant reporting is desired and already collected, particularly where leadership potential is taken into account. Lifting from this analysis, other institutions of higher education could consider some sort of exemplar nomination system as part of their admissions process, or consider ways to incorporate systems that capture information that correlated with the exemplar nominations, such as character-relevant faculty evaluations. Considering the patterns of relationships found in this analysis, an exemplar evaluation might also be useful for hiring practices. In the case of admissions and hiring, though, it might be difficult to retrieve something akin to the anti-exemplar nominations in such a process. Businesses could also consider these types of evaluations for promotions and assessing company climate, determining where there might be strong or weak moral leadership within the organization.

Limitations

The study had several limitations. The majority of the assessments in this analysis were self-report, which can be subject to social desirability and limited scope when assessing constructs as complex as character. In addition, the self-reports in this study are potentially subject to response bias. In addition, some data were missing in linking the datasets, which means that with more information, the analyses might be more nuanced. In addition to the drawbacks of self-report, there are also shortcomings of rater reports and nominations, to

include the system being gamed when it comes to who is nominated, nominations just being an indication of general popularity, and the limited provision of feedback. These are limitations that we hope to address with further data collection in future research, asking questions about social closeness to nominees, and attempting to collect more information on popularity-related metrics.

In addition, the imperative to complete such reports, self and rater, is very unique to the mission requirements of a military academy. As such, it might be difficult to replicate data collection with the same fidelity in other contexts. Similarly, generalizability of these results might be difficult outside of a context like a military academy.

Worth reiterating is that although these results are promising, the study is exploratory and replication is required to determine how robust the results are. We intend to preregister our hypotheses in a follow-up study and determine the reliability of these findings. This study is not only empirically exploratory in nature, but we also have yet to find a clear theoretical angle that creates clear sensemaking of these findings. We intend to use these findings and our confirmatory study to either (a) look outside of our disciplines for theoretical frameworks or (b) start to generate our own from these findings.

Recommendations for Further Research

In addition to further research addressed in the discussion, there are many other analytic opportunities with these types of data. We intend to assess how these relationships with exemplar status calculations are affected by cadet class year, and whether the effect of the relationship with admissions variables in particular get weaker as the cadet is closer to graduation. In addition, with more data, we could perform a network analysis and see where the most nominated or outlier individuals are within a network of all nominated, and unnominated, individuals. In addition, with a network analysis, we could also evaluate reciprocal nominations, determine how often individuals are nominating those that nominate

them (and whether negative or positive), as well as the demographic features of nominators and nominees (e.g., do underclassmen typically nominate upperclassmen? Do women typically nominate other women?). We also intend to bring in more institutional rater reports that would allow us to capture (1) peer-rated leader-relevant perceptions as determined by cadet peers in training environments, as well as (2) 360 rater reports of character- and leader-relevant attributes that may serve as a way to confirm exemplar nominations and the associations found using the method in this particular study.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this exploratory study focused on the trait characteristics of exemplary military officers will assist in our collective understanding of leadership evaluation within the military. Particularly given the uncertainties and complexities of the modern battlefield, our military recognizes the importance of character alongside traditional military qualities. The exploratory findings from this study demonstrate that exemplary leaders are not simply those with great performance metrics.

As military organizations grapple with the challenges of the future. Change is a constant and ambiguity is part of the context where military leaders operate. The integration of character-focused evaluations into leadership selection processes is now becoming increasingly imperative. This research serves as a critical step toward understanding the complex interplay between exemplarism and leadership effectiveness, paving the way for a more holistic and informed approach to identifying and developing exemplary military leaders in the years to come.

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