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Experienced military officer's perception of important character strengths

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Abstract

Problem statement: Military officers educated from the Norwegian Military Academy are expected to become leaders in military international operations. Leadership in these contexts will demand a high degree of intellect and character. However, there is a lack of systematic research on which specific character strengths that are crucial to possess for military officers to succeed in international operations. **Purpose of study:** This paper discusses a group of experienced officer's perception of which character strengths are deemed most important for the Norwegian Military Academy's officers to succeed. **Method:** A group of participants consisting of 25 experienced military officers were given a list of 24 character strengths. They were requested to judge each character strength according to its importance for military officers. **Findings and results:** 12 character strengths were selected as the most important for military officers and their leadership. These were in ranked order: Leadership, integrity, persistence, bravery, open-mindedness, fairness, citizenship, self-regulation, love of learning, social intelligence, perspective and creativity. **Conclusions and recommendations:** These 12 character strengths were the same 12 identified as important for military officers in another study conducted at the NMA. It was therefore decided that these 12 selected character strengths will function as the basis for the development of an instrument for observing character strengths during military field exercises.

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1. Introduction

Norwegian military officers will most certainly face both challenging and demanding situations during their chosen career. These situations are also known as "in extremis" leadership (Kolditz, 2010) or the unforeseen (Torgersen, Steiro, & Saeverot, 2013). The Norwegian Military Academy (NMA) has educated military officers

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since 1750 (Hosar, 2000). One of the aims of the education is to ensure that the officers have what it takes to face challenging and demanding situations while leading others (Boe et al., 2014). Because of the current conflict pattern with contributions to international military operation, it is important for the NMA to ensure that graduating officers have what it takes to be able to face and cope with these types of situations. Research conducted at the NMA has postulated that the officers (referred to as cadets while being students at the NMA) should therefore have sufficient subject matter expertise, social proficiency, and personal foundation so that they can exercise leadership also in this type of situations (Boe, in press a; Boe, in press b; Boe, in press c; Boe, 2013; 2014). In a conceptual description of officer development at the NMA it is stated that this will demand a solid character (Boe, Eldal, Hjortmo, Lilleng, & Kjørstad, 2014; Boe et al., 2014).

The NMAs counterpart in the US, the US military academy West Point, has stated that its mission is to educate "commissioned leaders of character" (Doty & Joiner, 2009). However, this might be easier said than done, as the U.S. Army doctrine does not describe how to develop character by soldiers and officers, but only describes that it is important (Snider, 2011). A parallel can be seen here to the Norwegian Armed Forces Joint Operational Doctrine (NAFJOD) (Forsvarets Stabsskole, 2007) and the Norwegian Chief of Defence view on leadership in the military (Forsvaret, 2012) who describe the desired properties of an officer, but does not directly describe how these properties will be developed. Serving as a leader in military operations thus demands exceptional skills and abilities, but how these abilities or skills should be developed is still unclear. An important step is therefore to investigate certain characteristics that military leaders should encompass. One such characteristic has been referred to as "the ability to keep one's head at times of exceptional stress and violent emotion" (Clausewitz, 1832/1976). Using Clausewitz interpretation of this ability, this ability can be described as character or character strengths. He further stated that "A strong character is one that will not be unbalanced by the most powerful emotions". General major Joshua L. Chamberlain at Gettysburg in 1898 described character as the following: "What I mean by character is a firm seasoned substance of soul. I mean such qualities or acquirements as intelligence, thoughtfulness, conscientiousness, right-mindedness, patience, fortitude, long-suffering and unconquerable resolve" (Chamberlain cited in Tsouras, 2000).

Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & Minhas, (2011) claims that character strengths can be developed through increased awareness and effort. They also state that character strengths are specific phenomenon that co-exists with goals, interests, and values. Research at the NMA during a combat fatigue course revealed that cadets lost both their situation awareness and their ability to focus on certain missions while being sleep deprived (Matthews, Eid, Johnsen, & Boe, 2011; Matthews, Martinez, Eid, Johnsen, & Boe, 2007). Avoiding this will be important for a military officer during a mission. Working on developing certain character strengths may be a way of countering these types of incidents. It has been shown that having character and commitment has proved to be successful factors during selection of Special Forces units (Boe, 2011; Boe, Woolley, & Durkin, 2011). But which character strengths that are the most important ones for military officers is still a work in progress. The aim of this paper is therefore to investigate which character strengths experienced military officers consider to be the most important for a military officer.

2. The 24 character strengths

Peterson and Seligman (2004) present the development of a classification scheme of 24 character strengths and 6 virtues. They suggest that these character strengths and virtues are ubiquitously valued across cultures. Virtues represent "core characteristics valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 13) and are thought to be universal in the human species. Character strengths are "the psychological ingredients—processes or mechanisms—that define virtues" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 13). The 6 virtues are respectively wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Under each virtue one will find the character strengths that are related to the specific virtue. The virtue wisdom and knowledge deal with cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge. Here one finds the character strengths *creativity* [originality, ingenuity], *curiosity* [interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience], *open-mindedness* [judgment, critical thinking], *love of learning* [mastering new skills] and perspective [wisdom]. The second virtue courage entails emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal. Included in this virtue are the character strengths *bravery* [valor], *persistence* [perseverance, industriousness], *integrity* [authenticity, honesty] and *vitality* [zest, enthusiasm, vigor, energy]. The third virtue

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