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Building Resilience: The Role of Character Strengths in the Selection and Education of Military Leaders

Ole Boe

Department of Military Leadership and Tactics, Norwegian Military Academy, Oslo, Norway

INTRODUCTION

Around the year 2000, a new trend emerged within psychology. This new trend was the positive psychology paradigm, and since its birth, it has grown a lot as a new psychology paradigm (Weiten, 2007). Embedded within the positive psychology paradigm one will find a lot of research on different character strengths. In 2004, a character strength classification system was developed. The result was the book 'Character Strengths and Virtues'. This book classifies 24 specific character strengths sorted under six virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The six virtues are respectively wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Under each virtue, one will find the character strengths that relates to the specific virtue. For instance, the 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]. Courage is a fundamental aspect for every military officer when it comes to leading others in dangerous contexts (Matthews, 2014). A lot of research into Peterson and Seligman's character strength classification system has been conducted over the past ten years (see Niemiec, 2013, for an overview of this research).

Selection of Military Leaders

Traditional selection to the military has often used personality tests as one criteria for selection. Personality traits definitely have its use when it comes to predicting job performance in many occupations (Furnham & Fudge, 2008; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). On the other hand, their use have been found to be somewhat limited for so-called high-risk occupations such as the military (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Picano & Roland, 2012). In a meta-analysis conducted by Picano, Roland, Rollins, and Williams (2002) personality and general mental ability could account for only 15 % of the variance in ratings of the suitability of applicants for high-risk occupations. More than 80 personality and intelligence measures was examined in this meta-analysis. General mental ability is a term that is used to describe the level at which an individual learns, understands instructions, and solves problems. This means that there is a need for other tools, i.e. character strengths, in order to better select and educate military leaders. The reason for this is that character strengths can be developed during later education of military leaders whereas personality and intelligence are more stable. Building upon the positive psychology paradigm by selecting military leaders upon specific character strengths is a healthy approach to selection.

Why Character Strengths are Important in the Education of Military Leaders

For the military, it is important to find leaders who will be able to face adversities without breaking down or giving up. This means

that these leaders have to be resilient. Individuals with a high degree of resilience can be described as people who have the capacity or ability to bounce back when things have been difficult or challenging (Coutu, 2002). In other words, they do not give up, but try again. Resilience is believed to be possible to develop, and the same goes for character strengths. The military system is a natural place for positive psychology and its focus upon a culture that support personal growth. Personal growth may come in the form of an enhanced resilience through the emphasis of for instance the character strength persistence. Persistence is simply stated the ability to finish what you start. Character strengths can be developed through increased vigilance and effort, and is a phenomenon that exists along with objectives, interests and values (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & Minhas, 2011). A military leader will also play a major role in affecting the soldiers' morale and character development (Williams, 2010). Certain character strengths such as persistence has a clear resemblance to resilience as they both deal with the ability to adapt well to adversity and to continue with the chosen or assigned task.

Several military doctrines in different countries has stated that character strengths are necessary for leadership. Discussions on the importance of character strengths can be found in military doctrines from for instance the United States, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada. A strong leadership consists of a critical collection of strengths, virtues, and values (Walker, 2008). For instance, in the U.S. Army (2012) doctrine on Army leadership one will find several values associated with character. These values are what the U.S. Army refer to as Army values, as well as empathy, warrior ethos/service ethos, and discipline. The Army values further incorporate seven values the U.S. Army aims to develop in its soldiers and officers, respectively loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage.

The reason that character strengths are important for military leaders is that character strengths are based on values. An individual will express his or her values through one's character. This has been found to play an important role in leadership, adaptability and achievement (Matthews et al., 2006; Gayton & Kehoe, 2015a; Picano & Roland, 2012). Gayton and Kehoe (2015b) found that for successful applicants to the Australian Army Special Forces, the most frequently assigned character strength was integrity followed by team worker, persistence and love of learning. Character strengths are thus important factors to consider if one want to select the most resilient applicants to different high-risk organizations. Continuing this line of thought, Doty and Sowden (2009) have argued that it is important to integrate the development of character in all ongoing training of soldiers in the U.S. Army. The United States Military Academy has stated that its mission is to educate "commissioned leaders of character" (Doty & Joiner, 2009). This is in line with Snider (2011), who suggests that it is important for the American army to take an institutional role and overall responsibility for soldier and officer character development.

A General Lack of Describing How to Develop Character Strengths

Paying attention to character strengths in the military is not really something new. The basic principles of character and morality was

*Correspondence regarding this article should be directed to: ole.boe@krigsskolen.no

stated almost 100 years ago. In the USMC magazine "the Gazette" from June 1919, the basic principles of morality were described as respect, confidence, contentment, harmony and pride. According to Jenkins (1919) these traits were designated as the foundation of all morality.

More modern version of this line of thinking can be found in different military doctrines and governing documents, as the military has understood the importance of character building programs. However, according to Snider (2011), the U.S. Army doctrine does not describe how to develop character in its soldiers and officers, but merely acknowledge the importance of character development. The same is found in the Norwegian military doctrines as well. The Norwegian Armed Forces Joint Operational Doctrine describes the desirable properties of an officer, but gives no indication as to how these properties are to be developed (Forsvarets Stabsskole, 2007). The same can be said for the governing document outlining the view of the Norwegian Chief of Defence on leadership in the military. The document mention what is expected from an officer, but not how it can be achieved (Forsvaret, 2012). The Norwegian Army's guidelines for officer conduct describes five traits and attitudes expected from an officer. An army officer should be brave, resourceful, competent, caring and loyal (Hærstaben, 2006). How this will be achieved is not described. One may also find a list of character strengths that characterize a good military leader in the U.S. Marine Corps. These character strengths are judgment, dependability, integrity, decisiveness, courage, and knowledge (Lint, 2014), but the development of these character strengths are somewhat vaguely described.

Schumacher (2005) argue that in order to be successful in completing Special Forces training, twelve personal attributes are needed. Intelligence and physical fitness, the first two attributes, are thought to be purely objective. The remaining ten attributes are referred to as character strengths, and the U.S. Army Special Forces will look for evidence of these character strengths in each applicant. The ten character strengths are: motivation, trustworthiness, accountability, maturity, stability, judgment, decisiveness, teamwork, influence, and communications. Again, how these character strengths will be developed is not clearly elaborated upon.

A Promising New Research Direction

Previous research has identified 12 character strengths that are the most important ones for military leaders (Boe, Bang, & Nilsen, 2015a; 2015b). The 12 character strengths were leadership, followed by integrity, persistence, bravery, open-mindedness, fairness, citizenship, self-regulation, love of learning, social intelligence, perspective and creativity. A newly developed method for investigating different character strengths "live" in different contexts has shown some promising results (Bang, Boe, Nilsen, & Eilertsen, 2015; Boe, Bang, & Nilsen, 2015c). This line of research is adding an objective measurement of character strengths to supplement the usually used subjective measurements of character strengths in selection and education.

CONCLUSION

Selecting military officers to serve and to lead in high-risk environments and organizations requires that one manage to identify the most suited persons. These officers may find themselves in situations that may require leadership "in extremis" under the direst most immediate adverse and unforeseen conditions (Kolditz, 2010). Clausewitz' (1832/1976) called this "the ability to keep one's head at times of exceptional stress and violent emotion." He referred to this as character, or character strength, and stated that a strong character will not be unbalanced by the most powerful emotions. Certain character strengths have been found to be important for military leaders. This means that using these character strengths in selection

will be valuable in order to find the most resilient leaders for the military. Continuing to build upon the same character strengths when educating the already selected leaders will also be valuable in order to further develop resilience in these leaders. The positive psychology paradigm, with its emphasis on strengthening what already is good, is very well suited for the military and its thinking on how to select and educate military leaders. Using character strengths in the selection and education of military leaders will thus be an important contribution when it comes to build resilience in these leaders.

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