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Does the ethical training for cadets in their required ethics and philosophy course at the United State Military Academy at West Point have a significant effect on how they reason about moral issues?

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Abstract

This study is the first to measure moral reasoning at the intermediate-concept level before and after an intervention. The aim of this study is to determine if the current ethical training for cadets at West Point has a significant effect on how they reason about and adjudicate moral issues. To achieve this aim, the research design was an intervention to see if cadets would improve their moral reasoning after receiving instruction in normative ethical theories, specifically virtue ethics and just war theory in their required ethics and philosophy course.

Introduction

The military is a profession where one's ethical training can have immediate life or death consequences. It is imperative to know whether the men and women entrusted with the protection of a country and critical discernment during wartime have received the necessary training to make sound moral judgments, often in high pressure and ambiguous situations. In recent years, the largest branch of the United States military, the Army, has been open to prioritising and evaluating the ethical training to its most elite students–cadets at the United States Military Academy at West Point (West Point). This study is the first to evaluate the effectiveness of the ethical coursework on a measure of moral reasoning at the intermediate-concept level (this comes from the neo-Kohlbergian physiological theory of moral development that is discussed in more detail below on page 3). It is the first and only study to both evaluate the efficacy of the existing coursework on ethics and also to assess cadets' moral reasoning. The study's main research question was: 'Does the ethical training for cadets in their required ethics and philosophy course at West Point have a significant effect on how they reason about moral issues, and how could this training be improved?'

Theoretical Approach

The theoretical contribution of the paper and the study is its review of ethical theories as they relate to the training of cadets at West Point. The discussion illuminates the kind of ethical discussions needed to prepare soldiers for the moral dilemmas they may encounter such as: the use of artificial intelligence in weaponry, ethics of interrogation, the complexity of wartime decision making, and issues they may encounter as cadets such as sexual harassment or whether to report the infractions of other cadets who violate West Point's Cadet Honor Code.

The three dominant major moral theories, utilitarianism, deontology and virtue ethics are reviewed and integrated with just war theory. Advantages and disadvantages for each theory are offered as they relate to the military profession. An argument is made that a virtue-and-character-based (as opposed to a rule- or consequence-based) framework is the best ethical training to prepare people for the military profession. It is argued that the distinction lies in which theory best informs moral reasoning and moral action. Soldiers may be called into service in their nation's wars, which inherently involves killing and destruction. Due to the unique duties of this profession, soldiers ***must*** be able to reason and act morally in these delicate and dire circumstances. In other words, they must be able to responsibly discern matters as urgent as when it might be morally permissible to kill from morally impermissible times to kill. When the soldier uses moral reasoning to arrive at the moral action she or he must make, what guides them in their deliberation to right action? What training can prepare one for such responsibility? In many circumstances, rules can provide important guidance. For example, the Rules of Engagement (ROE) discuss whether one can shoot at a person in a combat zone. The Cadet Honor Code addresses whether one should admit to cheating on an exam at West Point? Sometimes the right answer is straightforward and rules can help to guide right action.

However, what happens when it is not such a cut and dried scenario? Imagine a scenario where a certain terrorist organisation routinely visually records torture of coalition forces' soldiers before murdering them. Further imagine that several of your soldiers have been captured by this organisation; however, your platoon has been able to capture one of the terrorists. Can you torture the captured terrorist in order to find the location of your soldiers before it is too late? Even military examples that are not life or death can be complicated. For example, should a cadet have to tell the leadership at West Point that their best friend cheated on a physics exam? This is known as the loyalty dilemma–where virtues conflict. Should one choose honesty, or loyalty? These are very

difficult decisions to make. These situations are called moral dilemmas for a reason. Moral reasoning in these instances cannot be reduced to a calculation of the greatest good for the greatest number (utilitarianism) or if the best action is universalisable (deontology). At times the best action, morally speaking, does not provide the greatest good to the majority if the action is indefensible (such as hurting an innocent person). At times, it is not helpful to seek a universalisable option because the situation is essentially unique and person-specific. When one is faced with these difficult decisions in complex moral dilemmas, virtue ethics offers the individual action guidance where deontology or utilitarianism do not. This action guidance comes by way of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. When it comes to moral behaviour, there is simply no substitute for wisdom.

Phronesis, is the bridge that connects moral reasoning and moral action (Annas, 1993, 73; Kristjánsson, et. al, 2020; 2021). How is practical wisdom acquired and how does practical wisdom help us make incredibly difficult decisions? It starts with the idea of habituation, which is an ongoing process of learning (Annas, 2011, 12; 2015). Schwartz and Sharpe (2010, 271) point out that practical wisdom is not something that can be taught directly; it is a learning process. Habituation involves practice through experience. Practical wisdom cannot be learned as a particular subject or a type of application for all things. Practical wisdom is embedded in the actual practices we engage in. This includes professional practice (Schwartz and Sharpe, 2010, 271). Specifically, we can develop practical wisdom as a doctor, lawyer, teacher or military officer. It is called practical wisdom, because it is practical in nature: we learn what to do, we learn through actually doing it, refining it, and getting better at it. Soldiers need to be taught virtues and then practise the virtues in a variety of contexts and situations. This will develop their practical wisdom. As it relates to which theoretical approach to morality is best for a cadet, soldier and military officer, when facing difficult decisions in complex moral dilemmas, virtue ethics offers the individual action guidance in the form of context-sensitive practical wisdom whereas deontology or utilitarianism do not.

Empirical Approach

The empirical contribution of the study was comprehensive longitudinal assessment of the cadets' moral reasoning over the course of their mandatory ethical training at West Point, as well as the program assessment of the coursework itself.

The research measures used to assess cadets' moral reasoning were an army-centric intermediate-concept measure (ICM) called the Army Reasoning and Ethical Training and Education Test (ARETE), the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS), and semi-structured interviews.

Demographics

In order to assess the amount of variance accounted for by instructor on cadet performance, and obtain a sufficient participant pool, I invited two instructors of West Point's required ethics and philosophy course (PY201) to take part in the course evaluation and study alongside myself. The resulting three instructors covered nine sections and enough of the target cadets to insure the required participant sample. Additionally, the instructors provided a mix of military and civilian background and philosophical orientation. Taken together, the sample included three of the 12 PY201 instructors (25%), nine of 38 sections (24%), and originally 139 of 589 (24%) cadets taking PY201 in the fall 2018 semester. Additionally, the evaluation included 129 (of the original 139) cadets of whom, 97 were male (75.2%) and 32 (24.8%) were female. In determining which instructors to invite, I chose a senior army officer with over 20 years of service who has taught PY201 for 10 semesters (5 years). I was a similarly experienced senior army officer with 20 years of service and at the time had taught eight semesters of the course. In an attempt at diversity, I invited

a civilian visiting professor who was in their first of only two semesters teaching at West Point to take part in the study.

Research Methods

ARETE (ICM)

The first of the three research measures used was the ARETE which is an army-centric intermediate-concept measure. There are several measurements associated with the neo-Kohlbergian physiological theory of moral development, more specifically with the Four-Component Model of Morality (FCM). The FCM's second component is moral judgment. Moral judgment is broken down further into three schemas: codes of conduct, intermediate concepts, and bedrock schema (Bebeau and Thoma, 1999; Thoma, 2006; Thoma 2014). These three levels of moral schema differ in their degree of specificity in directing moral behaviour. From their psychological theory of moral development, the neo-Kohlbergians developed a series of measures to assess moral reason, moral action and moral development. This included the Defining Issues Test (Rest et al., 1999a; Rest et al., 1999b; Thoma, 2006; Thoma 2014) (Hereafter DIT), the DIT2 and the Intermediate Concept Measure (hereafter ICM). The ICM was first developed as an outcome measure for professional ethics instruction, for the field of dentistry (Bebeau and Thoma, 1994; 1998;1999) but quickly was adopted to a variety of professions and populations (Arthur et al., 2015; Kerr, 2020; Roche, Thoma and Wingfield, 2014; Thoma, 2014; Thoma, Derryberry and Crowson, 2013; Turner, 2008). Most importantly, it has been used twice for military officers and military cadets (Arthur, Walker and Thoma, 2018; Walker, Thoma and Arthur, 2020; Turner, 2008; Walker, 2020).

The study utilized an ICM as the primary measure for this study for three reasons. First, a neo-Kohlbergian theory of moral development was adopted on the grounds of its theoretical face

validity and its general credibility in the literature. Second, ICMs has been used extensively within university student populations, and professions like the military. Finally, ICMs specifically have been used to assess the moral reasoning of individuals after receiving profession-specific ethics instruction, thus illuminating the efficacy of the ethics instruction. Thus, in order to measure the moral reasoning of the cadets as part of a course evaluation, it would make sense to use an ICM.

Main features of the ARETE

The ARETE was made up of five moral dilemmas and was the core of the ARETE. A brief overview of the five moral dilemmas used for the ARETE is shown below:

Dilemma 1 – Injured US Army informant who is a local Somalian – requires a decision about how to respond to this injured man who is surrounded by a volatile crowd and completing a time-sensitive mission given to the respondent by headquarters.

Dilemma 2 – Torture/aggressive methods – requires a decision about how to respond to the capture of two soldiers when they may know where the respondent's captured soldiers are being held by the enemy. In the past, the enemy has tortured, killed and dragged the respondent's soldiers' bodies through the streets.

Dilemma 3 – Fraternisation – requires a decision about how to respond to a fellow male officer and friend who is fraternising with a female soldier, contrary to army rules.

Dilemma 4 – Honesty and accountability of sensitive military items – requires a decision about how to respond to a fellow male officer and friend who has been dishonest with a senior officer and instructs other soldiers to keep quiet about the incident.

Dilemma 5 – Honesty of military readiness – requires a decision about choosing between honestly reporting readiness deficiencies of their company, as well as the other companies who have been telling the senior commander what he or she wants to hear.

After reading each moral dilemma, cadets were asked to rate a series of possible responses to the situation described in the dilemmas on a five-point Likert-type scale:

1 – I strongly believe this is a GOOD choice.

2 – I believe that this is a GOOD choice.

3 – I am not sure.

4 – I believe this is a BAD choice.

5 – I strongly believe this is a BAD choice.

After rating the possible action choices to the moral dilemma, the cadets were asked to select the two best actions of the ones they had rated (best solution to the dilemma and then the second-best solution to the dilemma). Then the cadets were asked to select the two worst action choices of the ones they had rated (worst solution to the dilemma and then the second-worst solution to the dilemma).

After focusing on the actions related to the moral dilemma, cadets were asked (as is de rigueur in ICM research) to rate possible justifications and the importance of the justifications in making a decision on what ought to be done in the dilemmas on a 5-point Likert-type scale:

1 – I strongly believe this is important.

2 – I believe this is important.

3 – I am not sure.

4 – I believe this is not important.

5 – I strongly believe this is not important.

After finishing rating the importance of possible reason choices when making up their minds to act to the situation described in the moral dilemma, the cadets were asked to select the two most important reasons of the ones they had rated (best reason to act in the dilemma and then the second-best reason to act to the dilemma). Then the cadets were asked to select the two least important reasons of the ones they had rated (worst reason to act in the dilemma and then the second reason to act in the dilemma).

VIA INVENTORY OF STRENGTHS (VIA-IS)

The second of the three research measures used was a self-report measure, the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS). The main feature of the VIA-IS is that respondents to the VIA rate the degree to which statements reflecting character strengths ('This strength is an essential part of who I am in the world') describe them on a 7-point Likert scale (7=very strongly agree, 6=strongly agree, 5=agree, 4=neutral, 3=disagree, 2=strongly disagree, and 1=very strongly disagree). For this study, the cadets completed the rating for all 24 character strengths.

To assess the relationship between the cadets' responses on the VIA and improvement on the ICM at time 2, this study attended to three areas on the VIA: 1) how the cadets rated themselves on the individual character strength of 'Wisdom', 2) how the cadets rate themselves in McGrath's three different factors of 'Inquisitiveness', 'Caring' and 'Self-Control'[1], and 3) how the cadets rated

[1] Robert McGrath, Senior Scientist at the VIA Institute, grouped the 24 character strengths into three groups. For more information on McGrath's three component virtue model, see Burger and McGrath, 2019; McGrath, 2015; McGrath, 2020.

themselves on the VIA traits related to the 'Martial Virtues'. Of the 24 character strengths listed on the VIA, there are nine that seem particularly important virtues for the Profession of Arms that I call the 'Martial Virtues': Bravery/Courage, Judgement/Critical Thinking, Perspective/Wisdom, Perseverance, Honesty, Kindness, Teamwork, Leadership and Self-Regulation.

To determine whether a relationship exists between the character strengths and the ICM, a repeated measures ANOVA was conducted. The VIA scores were used as a covariant instead of a regular factor to see if change in ICM scores could be accounted for by VIA cluster scores at either time point or across the time interval. The within-subject factor was the dependent variable, which is the Total ICM Time 1 and Time 2. The between-subjects' factors were the different demographic factors of gender and ethnicity.

Semi-structured interviews

A third and critical component of the assessment techniques used in this study was the use of semi-structured interviews. These were a very helpful means of complementing the findings from the quantitative measures. Interviews were audio-recorded, then transcribed and then analysed thematically. A thematic analysis of the interview data allowed for maximum flexibility (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and the ability to deliver complex and detailed accounts of the data.

The cadets were interviewed for several reasons. It allowed the interviewer to ask the cadet why they answered the ARETE moral dilemma questions in the way that they did, especially regarding the best and worst actions and reasons for the actions of each of the five moral dilemmas. Further, the interview could help uncover whether something in the PY201 course lectures or conversations contributed to the cadet either improving or worsening their score on the moral dilemmas. The interviewer was able to ask the respondents what they were thinking about each of the VIA

character strengths and why they made the decision about why that strength was or was not an essential part of who they are. Additionally, the interview was conducted to see if the respondent made a connection between the way they answered the ARETE questions and the VIA character strengths.

Summary of the empirical part of the thesis

In short, the empirical findings of this thesis contributed to extant literature in the following ways:

It ***confirmed*** existing research finding that show that:

• Female cadets outperformed the males in moral reasoning.

• The female cadets came into the study with a better grasp of the concepts measured by the ARETE and improved over their time in PY201. For instance, the female cadets improved on all five of the moral dilemmas on the ARETE, whereas the male cadets went down in all of the moral dilemmas, except for the one on torture.

• The male cadets were inconsistent across the dilemmas, remained flat post-test, and had a more scattershot profile than the female cadets.

It ***extended*** existing research through the following findings:

• Students conflated common virtue-and-character related terms, such as empathy and compassion. Such lack of virtue literacy is well-known from previous literatures, but mainly drawn from studies of younger students.

• The finding that cadet performance was tied to familiar dilemmas versus unfamiliar dilemmas was statistically significant.

• The cadets were not able to carry over ethical concepts or reason about them correctly in different circumstances, topics or situations, which has important implications for future ethical training inmilitary contexts.

Implications for future research

It is the fervent hope of the author that the research momentum aimed at assessing and providing excellence in ethical training at West Point does not slow down. Future research is needed to increase the cadet sample size and the number and diversity of instructors involved in the ethics courses. The benchmark course, PY201, typically has 12 to 15 instructors teaching between 500 and 600 cadets in a given semester. That could mean four to five times more than the number of instructors participating in the current study and more than four times the number of cadets participating. This would provide more substantial data to examine trends in demographics such as gender and ethnicity. To further test the moral reasoning of cadets over time, it would be beneficial to follow a full class of cadets (roughly 1100 cadets in each of the four classes at West Point) and test their moral reasoning once a year for each of the four years they are at West Point, possibly as they take courses that include some type of character education as part of their curriculum across the academy. By doing so, researchers will generate a large sample size and multiple assessment points across four years. Such research is ambitious in scope but well worth the effort when it comes to the training of those entrusted with the ethical responsibilities of national security and war.

(Word count 3,165)

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