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Developing Leaders of Character at the United States Military Academy: A Relational Developmental Systems Analysis

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Abstract

A paucity of literature exists on the processes of character development within diverse contexts. In this article, the authors use the United States Military Academy at West Point (USMA) as a sample case for understanding character development processes within an institution of higher education. The authors present a discussion of relational developmental systems theories and relevant research areas that might be leveraged to promote the positive character development goals of USMA. They conclude with the implications of this work for informing character development research and education in other settings, including non-military institutions of higher education.

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When asked to describe someone with “good character,” people may quickly point to attributes such as integrity, honesty, and helpfulness. However, character processes, or the way in which character develops, is a far more challenging concept. Indeed, there is an abundance of research on specific character attributes or virtues (e.g., McGrath, 2015; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) but a relative absence of research on the processes of character development (Berkowitz, 2002; Berkowitz & Bier, 2014; Lerner & Callina, 2014). Identification of character development processes, and their promotion and assessment in different environments, can provide information about how to structure contexts to facilitate character development. One key setting within which character may either be revealed and/or developed is institutions of higher education (e.g., Colby & Sullivan, 2008).

The missions of many U.S. post-secondary institutions contain references to promoting character (Colby & Sullivan, 2008), and this focus may be particularly relevant for such institutions due to the developmental tasks facing most students, especially those of traditional college age (i.e., 18 to 22 years). As articulated by King and Kitchener (2004), Baxter-Magolda (2008), and Erikson (1969), this transition involves growth in one’s understanding of the nature of truth and beliefs, values and their relation to the self, professional/occupational commitments, political identity, and other critical aspects of adult life. It is therefore a prime period for personal and moral growth (Colby, 2008; Dufresne & Offstein, 2012; Nucci & Narvaez, 2008; Rest, 1994; Rest & Narvaez, 1994). When higher education gives explicit attention to these outcomes, as West Point and other military academies do, we argue that the undergraduate experience is a particularly effective setting for promoting advances in character development.

In this article, we use the United States Military Academy (USMA), also known as West Point, as a sample case for understanding character development processes within an institution of higher education. West Point is renowned as one of the world’s preeminent leader-development institutions: Its mission is “To educate, train, and inspire the Corps of Cadets so that each graduate is a commissioned leader of character committed to the values of Duty, Honor, Country and prepared for a career of professional excellence and service to the Nation as an officer in the United States Army” (United States Military Academy, 2015, p. 3). To enact this mission, USMA has, throughout its history, developed curricula and programs designed to inculcate cadets with the behaviors, attitudes, values, and virtues that reflect an evolving definition of a commissioned leader of character. In turn, the Academy leadership, in collaboration with the administration, faculty, and staff—including non-commissioned tactical officers—has identified a set of outcomes that they understand to be the repertoire of behaviors, attitudes, and competencies of commissioned officers, which are intended to be the result of the 47-month developmental program (United States Military Academy, 2015).

Although this model has strong conceptual foundations, drawing from psychology, philosophy, and leader development theory, as well as from institutional knowledge and Army doctrine, West Point’s character development and professional military ethic curriculum has not been subjected to rigorous evaluation research. We believe the integration of some key concepts from relational developmental systems (RDS) theories (see Overton, 2015) that are at the cutting edge of much of the contemporary human development research, including the development of character (Lerner, 2012; Lerner & Callina, 2014), can enhance the USMA model of character and leadership development and frame future evaluation research.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to describe current practices for developing leaders of character at West Point and to identify opportunities for advancing and assessing these models using the RDS perspective. Accordingly, we will identify key concepts pertinent to character and leadership development, with a particular

focus on theory, practice, and assessment that is relevant to West Point's goals of personal and professional development for the Corps of Cadets.

We believe that there is an opportunity for West Point to incorporate contemporary theories of human development into the application and assessment of their character and leadership development programming and experiences. We present here a discussion of RDS theories and relevant research areas that might be leveraged to promote the positive character development goals of USMA. Next, we discuss supports of and constraints to the development of character that are especially salient within the West Point context. Finally, we describe the way ahead for West Point and the larger United States Army to use RDS-based evidence to assess and evaluate their character education methods and to further develop leaders of character.

USMA as a Context for Character Development

Although the RDS approach to character development may be applicable across a range of contexts, it is important to situate the present discussion within the larger mission of USMA for preparing cadets to become officers. The cadets' developmental experiences at USMA are organized within four programs or "pillars." The first pillar is academics, which accounts for 60% of cadets' graduation requirements. The second pillar is military, which includes military instruction and ethics. The third pillar, physical, includes both formal physical education instruction, as well as organized sport. At West Point, all cadets are athletes, whether they participate in intramural sports or on NCAA teams (and it is worth noting that 25% of cadets are recruited as Division I athletes). The fourth pillar is character, which involves courses in moral leadership and Army ethics, and also sets the agenda for promoting and assessing character and leadership development among cadets (Character Program, USMA, 2015).

USMA is a unique context, and there are some unique qualities of the individuals who attend West Point that must be considered. Because research has not yet parsed out the variance in character attributes of cadets that are due to selection effects (i.e., young people with certain values and background characteristics apply to USMA) versus the transformative effects of West Point on cadets' character development, it is important to note the individual-level variables that differentiate West Point from the greater post-secondary education population in the United States.

First, applicants to West Point are exceptional with respect to academic and athletic achievements. Information is provided on the USMA website (www.usma.edu) about profiles of each incoming class. According to the Class of 2018 entering profile, about 72% of cadets ranked in the top 5th of their high school class, and 98% were high school varsity athletes. Second, to be considered for admission to West Point, individuals must meet the following criteria: They must be a citizen of the United States, be at least 17 but not yet 23 years old upon entering the academy, be unmarried, and have no legal obligation to support any children. They must also complete academic testing requirements (SAT and/or ACT, including the optional writing portion), as well as fitness and medical requirements. USMA also differs from other colleges and universities in regard to gender distribution: 22% of the incoming class was female in 2014 (up from 16% in 2013).

Cadets may differ from their civilian counterparts at non-military institutions of higher education with respect to character values. Franke (2001) compared value orientations and attitudes of cadets and those at a private, secular university, and found that cadets, on average, were significantly more conservative, patriotic, and held more positive opinions on the military's role in war and peacekeeping than students at other colleges and universities. In a cross-cultural analysis of 24 character strengths (using the Peterson &

Seligman, 2004, Values-in-Action inventory, VIA) between West Point cadets, Norwegian Naval Academy Cadets, and American civilians aged 18 to 21 years, Matthews, Eid, Kelly, Bailey, and Peterson (2006) found that USMA cadets scored highest on the character strengths measure.¹

The West Point mission statement is an official articulation of the aims of USMA with respect to the development of cadets into professional officers. The current mission statement, in referencing “professional excellence and service,” reflects the contemporary emphasis of integrating military training with the intellectual and physical competencies necessary to be a leader in the profession of arms. Despite research highlighting differences between cadets and their civilian counterparts (e.g., high scores on particular character strengths), the developmental processes by which cadets become leaders of character have not been well articulated in the literature. The present discussion seeks to frame these processes within RDS-based ideas that might be useful to inform future research on character and leadership development among cadets at USMA.

Theoretical Perspectives for Understanding Character Development

The RDS metatheory is a set of concepts about human development (Overton, 2015), which emphasizes that developmental outcomes—an individual’s character attributes, for example—depend on the ongoing coactions between the individual and his or her environment (e.g., Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological systems model; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). These environmental contexts included in the bioecological model contain many levels of the ecology: the natural or built environment; relationships with other people, including caregivers, teachers, neighbors, etc.; cultural contexts and societal influences; and institutions, such as West Point or the Army.

A Relational Developmental Systems Approach

As explained by Overton (2015), RDS metatheory is derived from a process-relational paradigm. As compared to a Cartesian worldview, the process-relational paradigm focuses on process (systematic changes in the developmental system), holism (the meanings of entities and events derive from the context in which they are embedded), relational analysis (assessment of the mutually influential relations within the developmental system), and the use of multiple perspectives and explanatory forms (employment of ideas from multiple theory-based models of change within and of the developmental system). Within the process-relational paradigm, the organism is seen as inherently active, self-creating (autopoietic), self-organizing, self-regulating (agentic), nonlinear and complex, and adaptive (Overton, 2015). As such, within RDS metatheory, split conceptions are eschewed in favor of theories/models of development that emphasize the study and integration of different levels of organization, ranging from biology and physiology to culture and history as a means to understand life-span human development (Lerner & Callina, 2014; Overton, 2015).

¹ We acknowledge that there is negative media attention that occasionally surrounds West Point and its cadets; such events include football recruiting scandals (Roeder, 2014), lewd rugby e-mails (Lilley, 2015), and, in 2015, a pillow fight turned bloody, resulting in 30 injured first-year cadets (Stanglin, 2015). These reports are especially disturbing given cadets’ future roles as U.S. Army officers; nevertheless, they involve a small minority of cadets. Systematic research, using the model and methods we propose here, is required to understand whether such incidents are indicative of underlying negative trends with respect to character development and to what extent these negative trends exist across contexts within and outside of USMA.

Thus, the conceptual emphasis in RDS theories is placed on mutually influential relations between individuals and contexts, represented as “individual \Leftrightarrow context” relations.

The bidirectional arrow used in the RDS representation of person \Leftrightarrow context relations is intended to emphasize that the coaction of individual and context involves the entire developmental system. As such, the relations among levels of the autopoietic system, and not independent linear combinatorial attributes, are the focus in such a model. Indeed, the fusion of individual and context within the developmental system means that any portion of the system is inextricably embedded with—or embodied by, in Overton’s (2015) terms—all other portions of the developmental system. Embodiment refers to the way individuals behave, experience, and live in the world by their being active agents with particular kinds of bodies; the body is integratively understood as form (a biological referent), as lived experience (a psychological referent), and as an entity in active engagement with the world (a sociocultural and historical referent) (Overton, 2015).

The embeddedness within history (temporality) is of fundamental significance (Elder, Shanahan, & Jennings, 2015) in that this embeddedness means that change is constant in the developmental system. As such, there may be either random or systematic changes in person \Leftrightarrow context relations across time and place (Elder et al., 2015). The presence of such temporality in the developmental system means that there always exists some potential for systematic change and, thus, for (relative) plasticity in human development. This potential provides the basis of the idea that character is a developmental phenomenon and not a trait-like phenomenon. Simply put, character is not fixed (e.g., by purported genetic endowment) across time and place (Nesselroade, 1988; Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006).

As a consequence of the potential for plasticity in developmental pathways, idiographic analyses (individual-based and person-centered), and not nomothetic analyses (group-based and centered on average scores), should be the starting point for any study of character development (e.g., Molenaar & Nesselroade, 2015; Rose, 2015)—a key point to which we will return later. As well, the RDS-based idea that the features of character are not trait-like and, in turn, are at least relatively plastic, provides a rationale for enacting programs of character education (of character promotion or optimization efforts) across the life course.

Simply, then, in an RDS-based approach to understanding development, neither an individual’s attributes nor the context alone can explain how development proceeds in any particular instance; the individual and the context are entirely integrated, and therefore any explanation of development must involve understanding the person, the context, and the ways they relate to one another across time and place. When individual \Leftrightarrow context relations are mutually beneficial, when both individual and context engage in positive or healthy exchanges, these relations are termed adaptive developmental relations (Brandtstädter, 1998).

Mutually beneficial relations. Lerner and Callina (2014) presented a relational developmental systems (RDS) approach to studying character development. According to this approach, character develops through “a specific set of mutually beneficial relations that vary across time and . . . place, between person and context . . . and, in particular, between the individual and other individuals that comprise his or her context” (p. 323). Simply, character development occurs through adaptive developmental regulations between individuals. Lerner and Callina (2014), as well as other researchers in the character development field, emphasized social interactions (Nucci & Narvaez, 2008), interpersonal relations (Nucci, 2001), and communal values such as welfare, justice, and rights (Berkowitz, 2012; Walker, 2013), as necessary for understanding character development. This approach to character and character development emphasizes mutually beneficial individual \Leftrightarrow individual relations within the individual \Leftrightarrow context relationship (Lerner & Callina, 2014). Following this approach, we define character here as the set of positive attributes, or virtues, that are necessary for promoting positive individual \Leftrightarrow context relations, and particularly, positive individual \Leftrightarrow individual relations within a specific context.

Integration. As Lerner and Callina (2014) and others (e.g., Berkowitz, 2012; Berkowitz & Bier, 2014; Nucci, 2001; Nucci & Narvaez, 2008) also explained, because character development is a relational process, the nature of individual \leftrightarrow individual relationships (such as those between students and faculty) is especially important for understanding how an individual's character develops within an institution such as West Point. An example may help illustrate these concepts. Suppose we want to understand how positive character develops among cadets at USMA. We might be tempted to ask, "What are the attributes of cadets that make them more likely to develop as leaders of character?" Or we might ask, "What are the features of the West Point program that influence character among cadets?" Of course, both of these questions are important. However, using an RDS approach, a more appropriate question about character development would refer to the coactions between cadets and USMA—that is, the integration of multiple levels of the ecology—which result in the development of positive character attributes. Questions that point to individual factors or contextual factors alone reduce a developmental system to components rather than exploring the mutually influential relations of these components or factors. Therefore, a better question about how character develops would be a multi-part question that seeks to understand the confluence of character development programming and cadet attributes by determining which features of the West Point program promote which character attributes among which cadets.

Alignment. The assumptions of RDS metatheory provide the foundation for contemporary research that describes, explains, and predicts developmental changes and patterns across the life span (Lerner, Lerner, Bowers, & Geldhof, 2015; Lerner & Overton, 2008). These assumptions also provide a model for designing programs and interventions that potentially optimize human development. Because of the ubiquitous potential to change (for better or worse) that exists within the open, relational developmental system, RDS theories promote an optimistic stance in regard to finding particular combinations of individuals and contexts that can result in change-for-the-better. Therefore, an RDS approach also justifies a strengths-based approach to human development. By virtue of their ability to change, all individuals have strengths. All contexts have such strengths as well, and these strengths are resources that may be used to promote positive human development. In the context of USMA, it is the alignment between the cadet and the institution that forms the basis for the development of positive character attributes (Lerner & Callina, 2014).

Of course, individuals have some power in directing the positive development of themselves and others (Lerner, 1982). People are active in choosing and interpreting the contexts and settings with which they engage. In turn, parents, educators, practitioners, and policymakers can provide developmental assets for young people, especially, and they can try to guide young people in aligning their individual strengths with specific assets that highlight those strengths. In short, then, RDS metatheory provides a hopeful approach, emphasizing optimism about the potential to promote more positive development among all individuals.

Alignment and Integration in Professional Preparation

What are the features of the ecology at USMA that promote the alignment and integration necessary for character development? One useful approach to assessing the many educational activities of West Point is to acknowledge that the institution is engaged primarily with a particular kind of professional preparation, that is, the preparation of Army officers of character. Professional preparation is a specific type of educational model that—similar to RDS-based theories of human development—emphasizes the ongoing, mutually influential interactions between the individual student and his or her educational environment (Overton, 2015).

Based on their studies of engineering, legal, nursing, medical, and theological education, Colby and Sullivan (2008) proposed a framework for thinking about commonalities in professional preparation across different fields. They described three apprenticeships of professional preparation that must be provided to emerging professionals in any field. The first is intellectual training, which refers to the knowledge and ways of thinking important to the profession. The second apprenticeship involves learning the complex skills of professional practice in the field. Finally, the third apprenticeship involves formation of professionals whose work and professional identities are grounded in the profession's ethical standards, that is, the normative roles, responsibilities, and purposes of the profession. Colby and Sullivan's (2008) framework of professional preparation derives from literature on the formation of ethical professional identity. However, and relevant to our discussion of the importance of alignment and integration in promoting character among college students, we may also point to developmental theories of college student identity such as those described by King and Kitchener (2004), and Baxter-Magolda (2008).

Colby and Sullivan (2008) argued that the central foundation on which integration of understanding and skill must be based is in the third apprenticeship, which includes professional identity and the values of the profession as they relate to the personal and moral aspirations of the individual. At USMA, the professional identity that cadets are meant to internalize is one of a United States Army officer, and the values of the profession are illustrated by Army doctrine, such as the seven Army Values (Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, Personal Courage; AD RP 6-22, 2014) and Title 10 of the United States Federal Code, which establishes the legal requirements of a commissioned officer.

According to Colby and Sullivan (2008), the three apprenticeships must be fully integrated with each other if they are to constitute fully effective professional preparation. In the preparation of Army officers at USMA, this integration means that, both within and across the academy's three pillars, intellectual training must be fully meshed with the skills of practice and with ethical standards. Although the three pillars are differentially relevant to the three apprenticeships of professional preparation, each should draw on and help cadets connect knowledge and understanding, professional identity and character, and areas of complex physical, technical, tactical, and other skills.

The RDS perspective described above recognizes that successful alignment of the person and context involves the integration of multiple levels of the individuals' ecology. In order to optimize the professional development of cadets and to promote a professional Army ethic, it is important to consider not only the educational setting and strengths of the individuals but also the extent to which the values of the profession are threaded through every aspect of cadet's preparation.

Narvaez (2008, p. 321) explained that "It is in the community that students apply and hone their ethical competencies," since "the purpose of ethical behavior is to live a good life in the community." In other words, the psychological qualities of an individual that make him or her effective and adaptive in a given context are defined by that context, and especially by the other individuals—parents, teachers, mentors, peers, and others—who play an important role in socializing character attributes (see also Lerner & Callina, 2014). At USMA, the context, or community, involves the curriculum, programming, and policies of the school, as well as less tangible practices of the Academy such as the traditions, values, and the cadet peer culture (Damon & Colby, 2015).

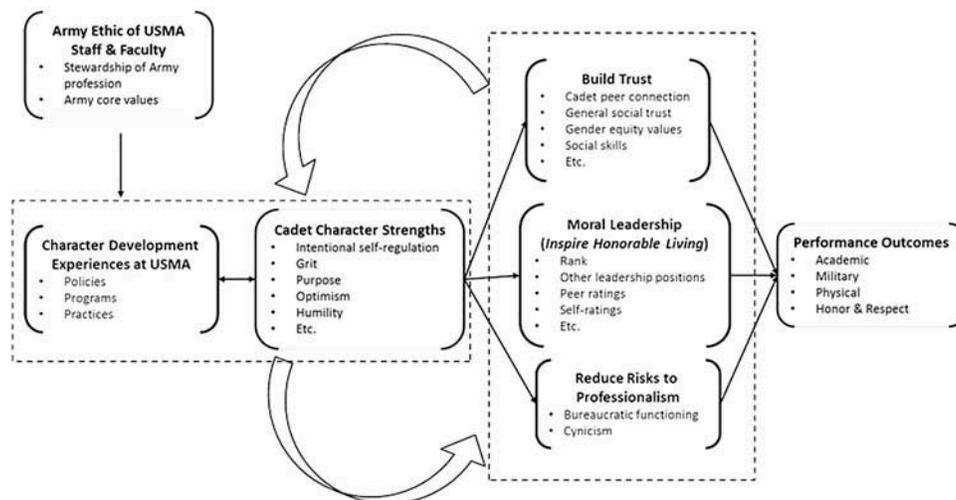
According to Colby and Sullivan (2008), the professionalism of a field is supported by integration of goals across the institutions responsible for educating future professionals (West Point); the values of the profession itself (for example, the Army values); the interests of stakeholders, such as the clients or constituents served by the profession (American citizens and government); and the aspirations of the

individual professionals themselves (cadets and officers). We would further argue that another group of important stakeholders in the present context is the potential followers, including enlisted personnel, non-commissioned officers, junior officers, and even potentially some civilians who will be led by graduates of West Point, as well as the allies, non-combatants, and even the enemy who engage with the U.S. military and expect its officers to uphold certain standards (such as those outlined in Title 10 of the U.S. Federal Code or the Geneva Convention). All of these stakeholders comprise the community that supports, sets expectations for, and benefits from, the positive character and leadership development of cadets at West Point.

Character Development at USMA: An RDS-Based Model

Figure 1 illustrates an RDS-based model of character and leadership. This model was developed based on conversations with USMA staff and faculty, internal USMA documents (e.g., Character Program, 2015), and a review of the literature on character and leadership development among USMA cadets and U.S. Army Officers.² As shown in the figure, staff and faculty at USMA have a professional Army ethic, which is the set of “laws, values and beliefs” of the Army culture (The Army Ethic White Paper, 2014). The Army’s expectations for professionalism are articulated by the capstone doctrine publication, ADP-1 (2012). One example of this ethic is a duty of stewardship of the Army profession, which motivates USMA staff and

Figure 1. The theory of change by which the staff and faculty at USMA create character development experiences that capitalize on cadent character strengths to build trust, inspire honorable living, and to reduce risks to professionalism.



² Conversations with staff and faculty took place during the 2013–2014 academic year, funded by a planning grant to Richard M. Lerner from the John Templeton Foundation. The main purpose of these meetings was to better understand the character development goals of different stakeholders at USMA and to determine the feasibility of conducting a longitudinal study of leadership and character development among cadets. The longitudinal study, funded by the Templeton Religion Trust, launched in the beginning of 2016.

faculty to promote the positive professional development of cadets. A second example is the aforementioned seven Army core values, which all members of the Army profession are expected to uphold.

The Army ethic of the staff and faculty at USMA motivate and inform the policies, programs, and practices that comprise the character development experiences of cadets at USMA. These experiences may be formal policies, such as the Honor Code (“A Cadet will not lie, cheat, or steal, or tolerate those who do”), or informal practices such as classroom discussions about a moral dilemma. As shown in the figure, these character development experiences promote cadet character attributes or virtues. Matthews (2008, 2014) identified character strengths that were of critical importance for soldier performance and for successful completion of basic training at USMA; these included bravery, zest, fairness, honesty, persistence, optimism, leadership, self-regulation, and teamwork. Character strengths in these studies were operationalized by Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) Values-in-Action inventory.

It is important to note the bidirectional arrow between cadet character strengths and character development experiences. On the one hand, we expect that experiences at USMA will enhance cadets’ character strengths. In turn, we expect that cadets who score higher on measures of character strengths will benefit more from character development policies, programs, and practices, and, as well, contribute to the quality of the overall “character context” of USMA. (For ease of presentation, the model depicts a linear process; however, please note the feedback loops, which indicate that a construct may be an antecedent in one moment of analysis, but the same construct may be an outcome in another moment of analysis.)

Cadet character virtues, enhanced in the context of character development experiences at USMA, are expected to be associated with the three key outcomes emphasized in the figure: building trust, inspiring honorable living, and reducing risks to professionalism. Together, these three outcomes are the professional development outcomes that USMA (and the larger Army) expects from graduates who are commissioned as second lieutenants and “officers of character.” Again, note the hypothesized feedback loop that exists between these three professional development outcomes and the USMA person \leftrightarrow context relations. We conceptualize building trust, inspiring honorable living, and reducing risks to professionalism (including cynicism and bureaucratic functioning) as both individual-level manifestations (outcomes) of successful person \leftrightarrow context relations, as well as institutional-level influences that shape cadets’ developmental trajectories. Finally, we expect that positive development as a leader of character will predict higher scores on cadet performance metrics, including academic achievement, military training, and fitness scores.

As illustrated in Figure 1, cadet experiences—especially their perceptions of experiences at USMA vis-à-vis character development—should mediate the relationship between staff and faculty values and whether cadets manifest specific character strengths. In turn, cadet character strengths will both moderate and (longitudinally) mediate the relations between character development experiences and the three professional development outcomes (trust, honorable living, and professionalism). We would expect that cadets with higher scores on character strengths and professional development outcomes will be more likely to have higher scores on their academic, physical, and military performance ratings than cadets with lower scores on character strengths and professional development outcomes.

We believe that the issues of alignment and integration promoted by an RDS perspective are important for any institution to understand and to evaluate the processes by which its programs, policies, and practices—situated within the goals and values of the institution—influence the positive development of the individuals who work or are educated within it. As indicated by the bidirectional arrow in Figure 1, the institution and the individual are mutually influential and, to the extent that positive alignment exists, cadets will demonstrate higher levels of character attributes. As we will discuss later, using RDS ideas to model character development within an institution has implications for the ways in which character education

programs are designed and evaluated, with a particular focus on individual differences in pathways of development and contexts in which character attributes are emphasized and applied (Rose, 2015).

In the following section, we describe additional topics that have been the foci of conversations with staff and faculty at USMA as we have sought to understand salient features of the West Point experience that potentially support or constrain positive character development. Each of these foci is conceptualized as an outcome (i.e., trust, honorable living, and professionalism) of the development of positive character attributes shown in [Figure 1](#); as ethos of the institution, these foci are important for shaping cadets' development as leaders of character. We relate each of these topics to the theme of alignment and integration emphasized in RDS-based theories.

Developing Leaders of Character: Supports and Constraints

The developmental trajectory of any individual is characterized by both constraints and supports present in the environment. The training at West Point is intensely focused on meeting the goals of the institution to develop professional officers. The constraints and supports provided by the institution, therefore, act to shape the developmental pathways of cadets during their 47-month experience. In the following sections, we explore aspects of USMA that pose potential risks to the professional development of cadets, as well as strengths that promote professional development. We propose that, to the extent to which USMA's programs, policies, and practices reflect mutually beneficial relations between the individual and the context—by emphasizing alignment between individual strengths and environmental assets—those experiences will promote professional development among cadets. However, to the extent that aspects of the West Point experience decrease the probability of adaptive developmental regulations necessary for positive character development, we expect to observe vulnerabilities in individual cadets' professional development and perhaps even risks to the profession of arms.

Promoting Professional Development (Supports)

Several revisions to the Cadet Leader Development System (CLDS) show that the leadership at USMA is becoming increasingly oriented toward a strengths-based, systems approach to cadet training and development. For instance, in 2013, the Cadet Leader Development System was transformed into the West Point Leader Development System (WPLDS; Character Program, 2015); where the previous curriculum placed an emphasis on the cadet, the revised model incorporates the entire West Point organizational system. In concert with the WPLDS revisions, the current superintendent of the Academy, Lieutenant General Robert Caslen (who began his term during the 2013–2014 academic year), focuses on two areas to promote an ethos of moral and ethical leadership at all levels of organization at USMA. These two areas are building trust and inspiration for honorable living, and these areas represent the supports that help promote the professional development of cadets into leaders of character.

Trust. As shown in [Figure 1](#), building trust is one professional development outcome that should be evident as cadets develop character strengths in the context of USMA programs, policies, and practices. Trust has been identified as the “bedrock” of the Army Profession (ADP-1, 2012); accordingly, the current superintendent emphasizes trust as a core value that is essential to enhancing the leadership development of cadets at West Point. The implications of the non-toleration clause of the Honor Code (that the cadets will not tolerate lying, cheating, and stealing) are that each individual within the organization can be held accountable for “upholding the ethical standards that guide the profession of arms” (United States Military

Academy, 2013). In other words, there must be a sense of trust that, at every level of organization, the rules and expectations for good character are known, internalized, and enforced reliably and fairly. Trust promotes the Army's organizational identity as a profession (Davis & Peterson, 2013).

Clearly, trust is critical for maintaining the integrity of a profession, both within the organization and between the organization and its clients, in this case, the citizens and government of the United States. Some researchers have pointed to perceptions of low trust (e.g., Collins & Jacobs, 2002) and evidence of dishonesty (Wong & Gerras, 2015) throughout the military. However, the 2014 Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey (Riley, Hatfield, Freeman, Fallesen, & Gunther, 2015) found that a high percentage of Army personnel (over 80%) report "moderate" to "very high" trust across rank groups.

Sweeney, Thompson, and Blanton (2009) proposed a model of the development of trust in subordinate-leader relationships. Specifically, the model hypothesizes that subordinates will trust leaders who trust them. They must also perceive that the structure of the organization—including the organizational norms and regulations—promotes cooperation and encourages leaders to trust their subordinates. Finally, leaders who demonstrate competence and cooperative interdependence will be rated by their subordinates as having a dependable character, which in turn builds trust between subordinates and their leaders. The model was tested among soldiers and unit leaders in the U.S. Army engaged in combat operations in Iraq in 2003 (Sweeney et al., 2009). The authors found that dependable character, structures that promote trust, and leaders' intentions to trust others were predictive of trust across rank groups. The authors also found that subordinates' trust in their leaders predicted the leader's ability to influence the unit under his or her command.

We believe that a similar model can be applied to understand the role of character in trust at USMA, for example, between cadets and the staff, faculty, and administration. As illustrated in [Figure 1](#), trust should contribute to cadets' performance at USMA because trust helps promote motivation necessary for group performance (Dirks, 1999). In turn, we would expect that the quality performance of USMA cadets would help them build trust as young Army officers upon graduation.

Honorable living. "Inspiration for honorable living" is the second area of support for ethical behavior at USMA. This area refers to a way of framing the Honor Code both in terms of what the cadets are expected not to do, that is, not to lie, cheat, steal, or tolerate those who do, with regard to the "full expression of integrity and virtue" that meets the high ethical standards for leadership in the Army (United States Military Academy, 2013). For example, rather than meeting the minimal requirement of not lying, cadets should embrace truthfulness in all aspects of their lives; rather than merely not cheating or stealing, cadets should strive for fairness and respect in all of their relationships and in their actions. This conceptualization of the Honor Code identifies not only observable indicators of positive character, such as treating others with dignity, but also points to virtues such as unconditional respect for all people.

The emphasis on honorable living articulates more fully the expectations that USMA and the larger Army—and indeed, the nation—have for cadets as future officers, rather than merely the minimum behavioral requirements that are necessary to graduate. Rather than focus on the daily behaviors that, if they are caught, will prevent them from receiving their commissions, cadets are encouraged to live well the life that is good for them to live in their community (Narvaez, 2008). The message built around inspiration for honorable living is known as the Spirit of the Code, which refers to the spirit of the Honor Code, intended to promote positive behaviors such as fairness, honesty, and cooperation. Together, the focus on honorable living and building trust echoes a strengths-based approach to human development that defines good character as the presence of positive behaviors, rather than as the absence of negative ones, and also the emphasis on mutually beneficial individual ↔ individual relations (i.e., adaptive developmental regulations) that comprise character development processes (Lerner & Callina, 2014).

In this analysis, we conceptualize honorable living as reflecting moral, authentic leadership. The defining characteristics of an authentic leader include transparency, trust, integrity, high moral standards, and leading by example (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumba, 2005). According to Gardner and colleagues (2005), “An authentic leader achieves authenticity through self-awareness, self-acceptance, and authentic actions and relationships” (p. 345). Thus, the predominant model of authentic leadership development is a relational one, emphasizing the importance of successful alignment between person and context, specifically between the leader, follower, and organization (Luthans & Avolio, 2003).

The development of authentic leadership is therefore analogous to the process of positive character development framed by RDS metatheory. Within an RDS-based perspective, a person’s psychological capacities (i.e., individual strengths such as character virtues) are aligned with a highly developed organizational context (i.e., ecological assets, such as the character development experiences at USMA). Thus, self-awareness, self-reflection, and self-regulation, with respect to exploring, identifying, and committing to one’s core values, are central to an individual’s development as a moral, authentic leader (Luthans & Avolio, 2003).

Risks to Professionalism (Constraints)

The themes of inspiration for honorable living, building trust, and authentic leadership provide evidence for supports for professional development at West Point. These areas reflect alignment between individual strengths and contextual assets. However, constraints to professional development exist as well. Risks to high-quality work include burnout, cynicism, and lowering standards of excellence (Colby & Sullivan, 2008). Certain vulnerabilities may promote risk, including misalignment between a professional school and the defining purposes of a profession (Colby & Sullivan, 2008) noted above. Thus, where supports to professionalism are reflected in greater integration of multiple levels of the ecology in which cadets are developing, risks to professionalism are reflected by disconnection or mismatch among the specific needs and goals of the individual cadets and the general needs and goals of the institution (cf. Rose, 2015).

However, as we explain below, it is important to take an idiographic approach to cadet development in general, and character development, more specifically. Therefore, the West Point developmental system, which is crafted to hone different leadership skills as a cadet progresses from their initial (Plebe) year through graduation, four years later, would need to be modified to identify and accommodate the specific attributes of character that reflect particular strengths of specific cadets. Such matching of individual strengths with developmental requirements of the institution would enhance each individual’s probability for optimal performance (Rose, 2015) and, in turn, promote overall enhancement of institutional functioning. How an institution aligns person and context to maximize the fit between individual cadets, who possess specific interests, abilities, and character strengths, and the goals of the institution, to create general system-producing leaders of character, remains a daunting task, whose ultimate validity remains still to be evaluated. Nevertheless, creating and evaluating such a fit are important goals because they may help diminish potential areas of constraint on professional development of cadets as they train to become leaders of character. We note in the following two potential constraints toward achieving such fits: bureaucratic functioning and cynicism.

Bureaucratic functioning. Snider and Watkins (2002) noted that a tension exists between the military as a profession and the military as a bureaucracy. They defined bureaucratic functioning as the focus on “application of knowledge embedded in organizational routine and process” rather than on expertise of professionals (Snider & Watkins, 2002, p. 8). On the one hand, the military requires soldiers and officers at

every level to demonstrate expertise in the Profession of Arms. On the other hand, the military is a vast hierarchical organization that relies on specific operational efficiencies, which are more or less automatized.

According to Martin and McCausland (2002), strategic leadership of a profession, rather than of a bureaucracy, builds on the components that Colby and Sullivan (2008) described in their three apprenticeships, noted previously. In particular, strategic leadership of the Army profession should involve expert knowledge, practice, and ethical standards. These components of the organizational culture should be adaptable in new strategic environments, such as the current transition of the Army to a smaller, more flexible force (as articulated in the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review, Department of Defense, 2014). In this model of strategic leadership, the interactions with the external environment are also critical to maintain the organization's legitimacy for a professional domain.

Using the distinction made by Snider and Watkins (2002) between the military as a profession versus a bureaucracy, the qualities of the practices described by Steele and Snider suggest that when bureaucracy begins to take the place of professionalism, the profession is threatened. The creativity and innovation that characterize professionals are replaced by automaticity, and the organization loses its flexibility and adaptability (Martin & McCausland, 2002).

Distance between professional and personal values. Other risks may reflect a lack of integration of values and goals within the ranks of military leadership. In a study of 13,500 Army leaders, primarily at the rank of lieutenant, captain, and major, a lack of congruence was found between the beliefs and the practices of leaders in the Army (Snider, 2003; Steele & Walters 2001). For example, while the beliefs espoused by the Army are guided by values of trust, commitment, and camaraderie, many soldiers noted that organizational practice promoted micromanagement, diminished well-being, and lack of training standards. Steele and Walters (2001) recommended closing this gap by focusing on promoting character strengths within the Officer Education System, such as officer cohesion, bonding, trust, purpose, and life-long learning. Accordingly, the Army has established a renewed focus on Army professionalism, including a strong emphasis on character in the new system of performance evaluations (ADRP 6–22, 2014).

Cynicism. Cynicism is another constraint to cadets' character and leadership development within their professional education as Army officers. Cynicism is conceptualized in various ways in the organizational psychology literature (see Dean, Brandes, & Dharwadkar, 1998, for a review). According to Bedeian (2007), cynicism is "an attitude resulting from a critical appraisal of the motives, actions and values of one's organization" (p. 11). Such critical appraisal reflects evaluations and judgments about the organization that may or may not lead to a pejorative assessment. Nevertheless, research indicates that cynicism predicts higher burnout, lower satisfaction and commitment, and adversely affects behaviors both within and beyond the employee's role in the organization (see Cole, Bruch, & Vogel, 2006, for review).

It is vital for cadets not only to observe moral behavior but also to observe that such behavior is consistently practiced in all arenas of their experience. Berkowitz and Fekula (1999) argued that displaying character (for example, through the Army Ethic, as illustrated in Figure 1) is a key strategy for promoting positive character attributes on college campuses. However, the authors noted that, "observing hypocrisy, in the particular form of preaching good character but overtly practicing the opposite. . . thwarts the objectives of character education" (Berkowitz & Fekula, p. 20). Students who observe such hypocrisy "are likely to become cynical, reject the legitimacy of the character message, and even engage in undesirable behavior."

Implications of RDS Theory for the Study of Character in Higher Education

Thus far, we have described character development within a very particular context. We believe that USMA is an exemplary instance of how principles of RDS theories may be applied to understand character development processes within an institution of higher education. Such processes involve the alignment of goals and integration of values or virtues between the individual and the institution within which he or she is embedded (see [Figure 1](#)).

The implications for RDS-based ideas to inform the science and study of character development extend beyond USMA and may be applied to character development research and education in other settings, including other service academies and non-military institutions of higher education. Alignment and integration of individuals and their contexts occur within dynamic systems: The individual, the context, and their mutually influential, bi-directional relations are constantly changing. However, given the enormous possibility for diversity within a dynamic system, the theoretical and statistical models needed to reflect an understanding that developmental phenomena are more useful when they tell researchers and practitioners something about multiple pathways toward a given outcome (in this case, becoming a leader of character) and about the influence of context (for example, whether a cadet is honest across multiple contexts; [Rose, Rouhani, & Fischer, 2013](#)). Therefore, we propose that the science and study of character within higher education, the military, or any other institution, must take an individualized, person-centered approach.

Toward a Person-Centered Approach

As we discussed earlier, developmental science is the study of change. Developmental scientists do not ask whether there is change but, rather, if and how one instance of a specific change matters for another specific instance of change. For example, developmental scientists might ask which cadets or students select mentors, and whether positive mentoring relationships are associated with increases in scores on specific character attributes. However, [Molenaar \(2004\)](#), [Nesselroade \(Nesselroade, Gertstorf, Hardy, & Ram, 2007\)](#), and [Rose \(2015\)](#) explained that the standard approach to statistical analysis in the social and behavioral sciences is not focused on change but, instead, derived from mathematical assumptions regarding the constancy of phenomena across people and time. These assumptions, the ergodic theorems, lead to statistical analyses placing prime interest on the population level. Inter-individual variation, and not intra-individual change, is the source of this population information. But, as we have discussed, development is nonlinear and characterized by autopoietic (self-constructing) and hence idiographic intra-individual change, features of human functioning that violate the assumptions of ergodicity. Accordingly, use of RDS ideas as a frame for research requires a rejection of use of data analytic tools predicated on the ergodic theorems and the associated traditional statistical procedures.

What does non-ergodicity mean for the study of character development? Methods and analytic techniques used to study character have typically relied on the assumptions of Gaussian (normally distributed) processes. An ergodic Gaussian process must obey two necessary conditions: (a) stationarity, that is, the mean and variance of the process have to be constant in time; and (b) homogeneity, meaning each participant in the population or group must obey the same dynamic model ([Molenaar, 2004](#)). Thus, the assumption of most statistical analyses used to model character is that the structure of inter-individual variation of a developmental process at the population level is equivalent to the structure of intra-individual variation at the individual level.

However, all processes of development have time-varying means, variances, and/or time-varying sequential dependencies (Molenaar & Nesselrode, 2015), and therefore the structure of between-person variation (at the population level) is not equivalent to the structure of within-person variation (at the level of individual). Developmental processes are therefore non-ergodic. As a consequence, to obtain valid information about character development, it is necessary to understand individual developmental pathways, to capture the non-ergodic nature of within-person change, and then to produce generalities about groups that apply as well to the individuals within them. Rose and colleagues (2013) made the distinction between the typical scientific method of “aggregate-then-analyze,” compared to the approach we propose here, which is “analyze-then-aggregate.”

What these ideas mean for understanding character development is that researchers cannot learn about the specific character strengths that mark an individual (his or her signature strengths) by studying a group of people within which the individual is embedded and computing means about inter-individual differences in character attributes. As Rose (2015) demonstrated convincingly, these average profiles may not represent the profile of any individual in the group. Idiographic analyses must therefore be the first (primary) step researchers take in the understanding the development of character and leadership attributes. The implications of this person-centered approach are that character development programs within higher education institutions must be framed by RDS ideas that highlight the potential for diverse pathways toward positive outcomes (such as the model we present in Figure 1), and they must be assessed or evaluated by methods that focus on within-person change (e.g., time series analyses or P-technique factor analyses).

Conclusions

The development of leaders of character at USMA is not a concern of the Academy alone. As an institution that trains leaders in a particular profession, it is obligated to the profession and to its clients, the citizens, and the Constitution of the United States of America. As an institution that trains individuals to fight and win our nation’s wars, USMA is obligated to national interests, including training cadets that will represent the United States to the international community. According to Colby and Sullivan (2008), the professionalism of a field is supported by integration of goals across key stakeholders. This view of effective professional education, one that promotes character and leadership among its trainees, reflects an RDS-based approach to human development that emphasizes the strengths of individuals and assets within their context (Lerner & Callina, 2014).

Accordingly, the authors of this report have recently launched Project Arete, a five-year study of the development of character and leadership among cadets at USMA (funded by the Templeton Religion Trust, 2015). This study, grounded in the RDS-based ideas described here, will use Figure 1 as a guiding model for understanding issues such as alignment and integration of goals, attitudes, and behaviors across multiple levels of the cadets’ ecology; the role of trust and moral leadership in promoting character development among cadets; and whether bureaucratic functioning and cynicism threatens cadets’ positive developmental pathways to officership. We will identify character development strategies and activities at USMA that are especially salient in promoting character and leadership attributes among cadets. The aim of Project Arete is to provide a “way ahead” for West Point and the United States Army to assess, inform, and enhance character and leadership education to develop professional Army officers.

Moreover, we believe that this approach may enhance the ability of the staff, faculty, and leadership at West Point to identify the signature character strengths of each cadet and then to build leadership training approaches, and assigned career paths, on these individual analyses. This discussion of non-ergodicity and

its methodological implications is not just an academic exercise. It could have profound implications for enhancing the military leadership of our nation and, as well, for building more fulfilling careers for the young men and women who are giving so much to our nation. Indeed, if the non-ergodic approach to character development and leadership is proven useful at West Point, the implications for building leaders of character across other sectors of our society are profound. One size does not fit all: Analyses of average do not suffice in attempting to understand the development of any attribute of human development (physical or psychological/behavioral), and unless we match our training/development programs with the individuality of the people we are attempting to educate, we will be needlessly wasting human capital and missing opportunities to optimize the opportunities for young people. These efforts will provide a model for organizations with similar goals, including youth organizations, sports leagues, schools, professional organizations, and other institutions of higher education.

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