Developing Character and Teaching Ethics; a Review of the Literature

Patrick Snyder

This paper was completed and submitted in partial fulfillment of the Master Teacher Program, a 2-year faculty professional development program conducted by the Center for Faculty Excellence, United States Military Academy, West Point, NY 2015

Abstract: An overview of the teaching of ethics at the US Military Academy in its current form and a historic context of its evolution. A review of the various social science theories that support deliberate education in ethics, and with a critique of both theories and practices in use at the US Military Academy and other adult learning venues.

Recent survey data collected from US Army Officers and Non-Commissioned Officers showed that supervisors and co-workers of newly minted Lieutenants deemed “Leadership Training” and “Values and Ethics” to be the most critical areas of focus in educating future officers, markedly more than the requirement for technical or tactical expertise (U.S. Army Research and Analysis Directorate, 2012). Another recent survey of Service Academy Cadets at the US Military Academy, US Naval Academy and US Air Force Academy analyzed the Cadets’ perceptions of honor and honor education. This survey found that while roughly 2/3 of West Point Cadets thought that honor education received appropriate emphasis, 1/3 of West Point Cadets felt that too much time and too many resources were dedicated to honor education (GAO, 2003, p.67). A study of American undergraduate students found that 80% of undergraduates endorsed some form of cheating (Qualls, 2014, p. 362). These seemingly contradictory reports, along with ongoing reports of “toxic leadership” in the military and specifically embarrassing reports of significant misconduct at USMA of both Cadets (“Rugbygate” emails, NCAA Football recruiting scandals, and others) and leaders (NCO videotaping female Cadets in the showers) begs the question is it possible to educate Cadets in morality and ethics, and if so, what is the most effective way to do this.

In considering the efficacy of developing moral reasoning and ethical behavior in college students, and specifically military cadets at the US Military Academy, it’s worth considering the history of West Point’s development models since its establishment in the early 19th century. Additionally, since West Point never has, and is not currently a “traditional college”, analysis of Academy as a “total institution” is valuable. After gaining this context, analysis of the social science theory that guides current college-student development, and analysis of the success of these efforts is helpful in understanding the development of character (specifically morality and ethics) in college students and military cadets.

The honor system at West Point has existed in one form or another since the inception of the Academy. Sylvanus Thayer, the “Father of the US Military Academy” felt there were two components in building character in young men; the first was
personal discipline, which was developed through strenuous academic course-work and the Spartan conditions of the academy, and the second was moral rectitude, which was not developed at the Academy, but strengthened and refined. Those that lacked the moral fiber to succeed at USMA were quickly weeded-out by a paternalistic system that valued attrition over development, with a single instance of lying almost certainly resulting in a dismissal from the Academy (Betros, 2012, loc. 5581).

Over one-hundred years later the US Military Academy was rocked by two significant cheating scandals, the first in 1951 which resulted in the dismissal of many promising football players, and the second in 1976, which caused a shift in the Academy’s approach to honor education and character development. (Betros, 2012, loc. 6099). This evolution in the philosophy of USMA’s approach to honor was accompanied by many other shifts in honor education at USMA, including the establishment of a Cadet Honor Committee, a formalized system of honor investigations, the establishment of a Center for the Professional Military Ethic, and the inclusion of remedial programs (the Honor Mentorship Program and the Army Mentorship Program) which acknowledged the concept that ethical development was something that could be facilitated in Cadets and college-aged students (Betros, 2012).

In analyzing the ethical development of college students, the US Military Academy is unique in that it is not a “normal college”. Students at USMA are “Cadets” and are not afforded many of the same liberties as their civilian student peers, and are subject to a much higher level of scrutiny in their actions. When considering USMA, the work of Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman found in his book Asylums (1961) helps to provide context. Goffman describes “total institutions” such as prisons and mental hospitals where almost every facet of an individual’s life is controlled by, or at least influenced by the institution. Goffman illustrated how the process of socialization, where the values of an organization are transferred to an individual, is carried out through total institutions in three discrete stages.

Goffman’s first stage of socialization is alienation, where individuals are separated from society at large, and the influences of their past life, becoming more susceptible to the values of the institution. The next stage is mortification, where the individuals are shocked into compliance by experiencing almost total control of every aspect of their lives. Alienation and mortification are easily seen during the first few weeks an inmate is in prison, and also at military basic training, including USMA’s Cadet Basic Training. As individuals adopt more of the values of the organization, mortification is lessened, and the new behaviors and ideals are reinforced with rewards, which is the third stage of Goffman’s socialization model.

A cursory examination of the 47-month Cadet experience at USMA shows the various stages of Goffman’s socialization process. As the Cadets advances, they experience less alienation and mortification, and more rewards. Even though these processes ebb and flow, the argument can be made that Cadets (or Soldiers, or Officers) are always subject to these forces to varying degrees throughout their careers in the military. The military life, with its insular bases, distinct uniforms and vernacular continues the process of alienation between the soldier and society at large. The threat of punishment, or even austere training conditions continues the mortification process.
Ribbons, medals and other accolades reinforce performance throughout a soldier’s career up to their retirement.

Goffman’s model and studies demonstrated that total institutions are very effective at modifying behaviors, but were unable to assess any changes in values in the individuals involved. The recidivism rate of American prisoners makes a strong argument that most convicted of crimes are not “rehabilitated” through the corrections system, and possibly many prisoners “behave” in prison to avoid punishment. When considering USMA Cadets, the question is raised as to whether cadets are merely externally adapting to controls, or internalizing values, which is the goal of the West Point Leader Development System (formerly known as the “Cadet Leadership Development System or “CLDS”) (2009) and the West Point Character Development Plan (2015).

While West Point doesn’t require any specific courses in military ethics, it does require all cadets take classes in general psychology, which cover leadership theory and discuss many aspects of ethical development. Another required course for all Cadets at the Academy is MX400, “Officership”, which is the capstone course of the military science program at West Point. MX400 is a seminar that provides cadets with fodder for continued ethical development by familiarizing them with many of the ethical problems in the Army, and often providing them with few practical solutions. The one program that USMA provides to tie-in all aspects of the Cadets’ experiences at USMA into a comprehensive leader and leadership development program is WPLDS. Where other programs assume their cadets and students will absorb morality through their studies (Codreanu, 2013, p. 115), West Point deliberately plans to tie in all aspects of a Cadet’s experience to develop character and leadership (USMA, 2009, p. 1). The cumulative effect of WPLDS is that a Cadet should receive a congruent message on character, ethics and morality from their coursework, their observations of staff and faculty, their small group discussions, and from the behaviors of their peers.

West Point outlines Leader development by focusing on the Cadets’ sense of “Self” as well as five generalized components of development. As Cadets develop through stage theories of identity and morality, these phases of self development are then strengthened through the five components of development: Readiness, Developmental Experiences, Reflection, New Capacities and Knowledge, and Time (USMA, 2009, p.15). If the executors of WPLDS keep the components in mind, and deliberately execute them, WPLDS states that Cadet development will be enhanced.

The West Point Learning model is broken down into 6 domains with the goal of developing character and competence. The first two domains of Human Spirit and Moral-Ethical focus on character. The remaining four domains of Intellectual, Military, Physical, and Social focus on the area of competence. The West Point Leader Development System leverages social science theories to directly apply, and be qualitatively assessed in military context (USMA, 2009, p.18).

The West Point Leader Development System is built upon the work of social and educational scientists and is heavily influenced by David Kolb’s “Experiential Learning Cycle”, Robert Kegan’s work on the development of identity, and Lawrence Kohlberg’s stage theory of moral development. Kolb’s experiential learning cycle theory is the basis of WPLDS, and states that adults learn best though experiencing a challenging
situation, reacting to it, reflecting the situation and then incorporating this reflection into future decisions (Burke, 2012). Essential to this cycle is reflection, which often requires assistance or mentorship for development; as W. Edwards Deming, the father of modern production efficiency stated, “Experience by itself teaches nothing…without theory, experience has no meaning. Without theory, one has no questions to ask. Hence, without theory there is no learning”. The observation of the necessity of reflection to development is also supported by a study of American business executives conducted by McCall, et al., which found that experience and reflection were required for leadership growth (Day, 2009, p. 134).

While the necessity of reflection is borne out in both theory and doctrine (it is a fundamental component of WPLDS), the reality for USMA Cadets is that there is very little opportunity for Cadets to reflect. Speaking anecdotally from my perspective as a Tactical Officer, and also from discussions I have engaged in with my colleagues in the Master Teacher Program, the amount of “free time” afforded to Cadets is very limited. This reality coupled with a curriculum that offers few chances for facilitated reflection outside of psychology and leadership classes (or rehabilitative programs for indiscipline), the end result is cadets continually having developmental experiences, but missing the opportunity to “make sense” of them, integrate them and develop.

According to a 1977 Study by the West Point Study Group this problem is nothing new; "In other sections of this report we discuss what has been called the fragmentation of the educational experience at West Point, the feeling of cadets that the system never stops pulling them apart, never ceases making demands, never allows them periods of reflection and consolidation.” (Department of the Army, 1977). While Kolb’s work also supported various other types of learning (Svinicki, 2012, p. 317), in the comparison of “andragogy” (adult education) vs. “pedagogy” (child education), experiential learning is believed by many to be the most effective (Day 2009, p.42) (Knefelkamp 2011).

"Identity” is not morality, but as one moves from a juvenile self-definition ("I have value from my accomplishments, and value others for what they can provide me") to “self-authoring” individuals that understand the complexities of multiple perspectives, moral development is assumed to develop as well. In researching the moral development of individuals, the stage theory put forth by Robert Kegan has been repeatedly used in the analysis of USMA Cadets, and Kegan’s work was designed around college-aged individuals.

Kegan’s “Constructive-Developmental Theory of the Self” requires individuals to utilize both differentiation (acquiring multiple experiences and knowledge) and integration (organizing this knowledge and making connections) to advance through Kegan’s six stages. Due to this theory’s familiarity, its basis in social science, its focus on the college aged demographic and its allowance for external influences to accelerate development, this theory was incorporated into WPLDS (Banks 2012). Kegan’s stages run from “infancy” at stage zero, to “inter-individual” at stage 5. The most likely stage that students begin college is stage 2, “Instrumental Adolescence”, where they view the world in a transactional sense, and only value others if something can be gained from the relationship. Stage 2 individuals define themselves by their accomplishments, and
are easily swayed by the value others place on these accomplishments. Stage 3 individuals define their worth by the social network they have created and have the capacity to reflect on their actions. Kegan’s related concepts of “subject” (an idea that is so firmly rooted in a person that they cannot consider it objectively) and “object” (a novel idea or concept, that can be independently analyzed by a person), illustrate the process of growth and maturation one goes through; continually questioning what is “subject” throughout life and making it “object”, is what allows individuals to pass from one stage to the next (Day, D., Harrison, M., & Halpin, S. 2004, p. 42). Stage four is “self authoring adolescence” and is characterized by a person’s definition of self being based on their internal values; “I am what I think I am”. People in stage 4 are able to respect and value other’s perspectives without feeling threatened, are focused on their own integrity and can learn from other’s perspectives. Cadets are forced into differentiation throughout their USMA career, but are currently provided with little opportunity to integrate through reflection. In applying the concept of “Praxis” as described by Paulo Friere, a deliberate action and reflection cycle, I believe that Cadet development could be facilitated by involved leadership (Lennard, 2010, p.784).

In the West Point Leader Development System, The Academy defined Kegan Stages 2-4 in the context of a Cadet, and associated behaviors that might be observed specific to the Academy. Each of the three stages (2, 3 and 4) are then considered along eight different axis of “duty, honor, loyalty, service, competence, teamwork, subordination and leadership” to provide examples of behaviors associated with each stage of development. Consistent with other Army leadership models, the end state of Cadet development at USMA is a leader that will “Be, know and do”. First, being a member of the profession of arms, and adopting the identity of “Army Officer”; second knowing moral and ethical decisions, and finally, doing moral actions, which inspires others to do the same (USMA, 2009, p.18).

Of the stages, Kegan stated that very few people will achieve stage 5, and the goal of WPLDS is to have Cadets leave in stage 4, although the program admits that Cadets upon graduation are still a “work in progress” and will continue to develop throughout their careers (USMA, 2009, p.15). The reality of Cadet identity development as found by the West Point Longitudinal Survey (Lewis, 2005, p. 364) was that while most Cadets entered the Academy in Stage 2 and graduated in stage 3, with Only 19% achieving stage four before graduation. WPLDS and the stage theories of development it is based upon believe individuals must successfully master a developmental stage, and then face a new crisis where that stage cannot resolve it before moving forward. Contrary to the linear progression of stage theories, there is strong data to show higher education can accelerate identity and moral development in college aged students (Day, 2009, p. 76), possibly even “skipping” stages in stage theories. Regardless of the mechanism of development, the fact remains that many Cadets graduate from USMA in a relatively immature stage of identity development. What makes this especially troubling is the increasingly uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world that many Cadets will enter as Lieutenants in the US Army.

Another fundamental theory that WPLDS is based upon, and arguably one of the essential moral development theories is Kohlberg’s Stage Theory of Moral
Development. This theory has six stages, which are divided into three levels of two-stages each. The first two stages are “hedonistic”, and focused only on maximizing rewards and reducing punishments. The next two stages (3 & 4), focus on conventional definitions of morality, and are greatly influenced by peer pressure. Individuals at this level will focus on the “letter of the law” but not the spirit. Contrary to common perception, this level is not embraced by the current military, who values “mission type orders” and “Commander’s Intent” instead of prescriptive orders that required “instant, willing obedience”. In the latter stages (5 & 6) individuals begin to understand that there is sometimes a difference between moral and legal, and that rules must sometimes be broken for justice to be served. Individuals in these latter levels of development have a much deeper level of self-awareness and a stronger sense of self than individuals at the lower levels (Day, 2009, p.71).

A recent study of Kuwaiti undergrads (all Muslim males, contrasting with more diverse populations studied in the West) found that most entered the University System in Kohlberg stage three or four, and remained stable in that stage throughout graduation (Nather, 2013, p. 475). Significantly, education was shown to have no impact on the moral development of students. The author of this study admits there are multiple contrary studies correlating higher education with advanced moral development, but believes that the ethical development of the group she studied was not influenced by higher education throughout their four-year undergraduate experience. This study provides credence to the concern that moral development of college students and Cadets may merely be an external adaptation of values, but not a true internalization of them.

What was not addressed in Nather’s study was the extent of moral education inclusion in any of the Kuwaiti’s coursework. While it was pointed out that all students identified as “Muslim”, it did not state how active or religious (assuming religion has a correlation to morality) these students were in Islam. Also not discussed was the nature of education the students were receiving, other than stating they were all undergraduate students at the University of Kuwait. The (possibly tenuous) assumption that may be drawn is that where some of the other research cited in this paper correlates ethical development with higher education when ethics are deliberately included in the education, the Kuwaiti study saw no growth because there were no specific efforts to educate their students in morality or ethics.

Another aspect of moral development and education is how immoral or unethical behavior is perpetuated. As a Tactical Officer over the past few years, I have witnessed three incidents of “counter-culture” organizations (Men’s Rugby, Men’s Junior Varsity Lacrosse and Sprint Football Offensive Line) where a group perpetuated behaviors contrary to the values of the Academy. Examples from “traditional undergraduate institutions” include the recent Sigma Alpha Epsilon (men’s college fraternity) racist chants captured on video or the dubious allegations of a fraternity colluding to hide a sexual assault recently reported by "Rolling Stone" magazine. In considering how these immoral behaviors continued unchecked, Day, et al. (2009, p. 76) provide a model of how immorality inside organizations are normalized. There are three components to this theory, institutionalization, rationalization, and socialization. The institutionalization is characterized by the bureaucratic nature of the organization allowing the negative
behaviors to go unnoticed or unchecked long enough that they transition from one-time indiscretions to “bad habits” that become the norm to members of the group. Rationalization is the process where individuals participating in this immoral behavior are able to equivocate either their transgression as a minor wrong in the “big scheme” of things, or justify their actions by pointing out that others don’t follow all the rules, so why should they. The final process, socialization was described earlier in this paper, and involves the senior members passing the behaviors down to the junior members of the group, allowing the process to repeat.

Applying an education on ethics to the problem counter-cultures is a current effort underway by the US Military Academy. In addition to formal education requirements, Cadets are required to participate in small group discussions under the “Professional Military Ethics Education” or “PME Squared” that are generally held each week. The planning for this program is centralized by the Academy’s Simon Center for the Professional Military Ethic, while the execution is de-centralized at the Cadet Company level. Either senior ranking Cadets teach the classes to junior Cadets, or external mentors (often Academy professors and instructors, or retired military officers) facilitate a discussion with the Cadets on contemporary/ timely concerns. As related by the Simon Center to Tactical Officers, the intent of the program is to be proactive, or quickly reactive in correcting negative trends in Cadet behaviors or culture (M. Knox, personal communication, 2013). My personal observations as a tactical officer lead me to believe that the small group, facilitated discussions generate more Cadet participation and enthusiasm, which I assume leads to greater learning.

A further complexity when considering moral development of USMA Cadets or undergraduate college students, is “what is a Cadet”, or “Who is a college student?” Some of the criticisms leveled against Kohlberg’s work are that morality is contextual and changes from generation to generation, as Katie Canon pointed out in her theory of moral discernment (Knefelkamp, 2011 & 2014). If this is true, is the moral code of USMA, and the ethical education of the US higher education system able to keep pace with the required changes? How can one ensure education is evolving instead of devolving? A study of ethics education in the Romanian Military Academies highlighted this challenge, especially as the Romanians transitioned from Communism to Democracy (Codreanu, 2013, p. 111). The earlier discussion on the history of the USMA honor code and systems reviewed the 1950’s cheating scandal. During that scandal many players of the West Point football team were involved, and were encouraged by the legendary head football coach Earl “Red” Blaik to be completely forthcoming with the expectation that the system would afford them some leniency. When all were expelled, Blaik felt betrayed and bitter and pointed out years later in his memoirs that the USMA Honor System was antiquated and run by a “bunch of old, sanctimonious men” (Betros, 2012 loc. 5835).

Another aspect of ethical education not captured by Kohlberg is that gender variances were ignored in his work. Kohlberg came to the conclusion that men generally achieved higher moral development than women, whom he termed “under-developed”. Carole Gilligan challenged this assumption in her research and theory on moral development (Evans, 2010, p.111). Gilligan tried to apply the work of Kohlberg
specifically with US students in “rough” high schools. Gilligan was focused on the utility of moral education; can education become more efficient at teaching morality? How can we more effectively education morals and ethics? Does an increase in teaching morality equate in a decrease in indiscipline of students and an increase in overall learning (Knefelkamp, 2011). Gilligan found that while men generally focused on “rights and responsibilities”, women tended to focus more on “care and connection”. While according to Kohlberg’s theory these distinctions reflected varying stages of development, to Gilligan they merely pointed to different areas of development (Evans, 2010, p. 114). Gilligan’s research also pointed out that people tend to score higher on pen and paper morality assessments than they perform in real-life. This critique was brought up again in the 1980 work of Augusto Blasi who pointed out there is a significant gap between moral reasoning and moral behavior, and education should focus on how to bridge this gap (Day, 2009, p.74). Anecdotally, a 2014 study conducted by R. Christopher Qualls researching the effects on childhood discipline with college-aged cheating found that men cheated more often than women, adding further questions to Kohlberg’s work.

Other critiques of Kohlberg’s model point out that the epigenetic stage-theory view, with its rigid adherence of a systematic advance from one stage to the next isn’t realistic. Fischer & Bidell in 1998, Fischer and Pruyne in 2002, and Stevens-Long and Mischaud in 2003 all viewed moral development as a web, or a series of vectors where each strand develops and adapts due to contextual influences (Day, 2009, p.38). These critiques are similar to the ones leveled at other stage theories of development, like Erikson’s Life Stages or Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (and maybe Bloom’s Taxonomy).

The general framework adopted by the US Military Academy in the development of ethical behavior is one that can be found in many other institutions. A 2013 article published in the journal of the Academy of Management Learning and Education titled “Developing Leadership Character in Business Programs” explored many of the same issues addressed at West Point; is morality a stable competency, or can it be developed; what is the most effective way to teach ethical decision making and behavior; what is the role of staff and faculty in this process? Throughout the article by Crossan, et al. the findings were very similar to the West Point Leader Development System. Where USMA charges every member of the staff and faculty to assist in the ethical development of Cadets, Crossan and her colleagues stated that “it takes a village” and said the support of all university faculty was required to develop ethics. Additionally, both West Point and Crossan stated that effective moral education requires structured classes and “opportunity” training found through other classes, and both agree on the fundamental requirement of reflection to solidify the lessons of experience.

In reviewing the literature associated with ethical development and education of undergraduates and military/service academy cadets, a few trends surfaced. Most (not all) social scientists agree that morality is a process that continues as one matures and is educated. Additionally, most agree that this process may be accelerated through a deliberate process, and there was consensus on the requirement for reflection. Tying this back to my work at USMA, my chief concern is the limited amount of reflection
offered to, or required of Cadets. The West Point Leader Development System provides a framework for incorporating the diverse Cadet experiences (education, social, military, athletic, spiritual, etc.) and states that Cadet development is the responsibility of everyone in the USMA Community; Cadets, staff, faculty, coaches, et al. Regardless of the scientific research available, or what new studies come out, I believe that character education will always remain an important dimension of service academy education, and from the cursory readings involved with this paper, it seems a strong case for the deliberate inclusion of morality and ethics in other higher education programs is of value.
References


Annotated Bibliography

P.J. Snyder
Dr. Evans & Dr. Finn
Master Teacher Program-USMA


This book provides the historic context of the US Military Academy, including a chapter dedicated to studying the evolution of the USMA honor education and enforcement system. More recent developments, including the Simon Center for the Professional Military Ethic are also discussed.


This book focused on the need to incorporate ethics into all facets of higher education, and provided illustrations of how morality and ethics can be woven into various facets of higher education.


This article defined the requirement for students in business programs to develop morally and ethically throughout their business education and training both in university programs and in corporate training programs. The case was made that this education does not necessarily need to come from classes deliberately designed to teach ethics, but can be incorporated into almost any discipline. This article’s findings ended up closely mirroring many of the concepts of the West Point Leader Development System.


This book combined lessons on leader/leadership development with lessons on adult education. Providing an overview of many of the theories of self-development (identity and morality) along with research on how to accelerate development, this book appeared to be aimed at corporate culture and the desire to efficiently and effectively develop leaders.


Provided context to the paper in showing that many problems faced by Cadets, staff and faculty of USMA are the same now as almost 40 years ago. Specific concerns cited in the report of lack of time for reflection, and tactical officers over-burdened with “administrivia” are echoo today by many of my peers and friends at the Academy.

Goffman’s book is the seminal work when considering total institutions, such as the US Military Academy. Goffman provides two examples of total institutions, each taking about ½ of the book; the first being a mental hospital and the second being a prison. When considering the experience of a USMA Cadet, it is important to remember the 47-month experience at the US Military Academy is markedly different than the four-years many students spend in college and to consider the effect of this unique experience on moral and ethical development.


A detailed, scientific study of West Point Cadets and their identity development according to Kegan’s model. The study found that most Cadets enter USMA in stage 2, lower than Kegan believed, and most graduate in stage 3. Very few Cadets achieve Kegan stage 4, which is one of the goals of WPLDS.


Journal article describing a study of male undergraduates in Kuwait and the impact of higher education on moral development, as assessed using Kohlberg’s scale. Main finding was that higher education had no appreciable impact on moral development, which is at odds with other research and theories.


Journal article that analyzed the variety and frequency of punishment that undergraduate students received as children, ranging from lectures to beating/kicking, and the frequency of cheating and immoral behavior exhibited by undergraduates. Findings correlated increasingly physical punishments with increasing levels of academic dishonesty and immoral behavior. Findings also showed that males cheated more often than females, which appears to be contrary to Kohlberg’s assertion that men are more ethically advanced than women.


A study that analyzed attitudes and perceptions of Cadets at various military academies along various axis of belief. One of the key findings was the difference between an occupational view and an institutional view of the military profession. If a Cadet viewed the military merely as an “occupation”, they were less inclined to internalize all the values of their military, where if a Cadet viewed their military as an “institution” to which they were joining, there was a greater chance of value internalization.


Survey conducted by the US GAO of Cadets/Midshipmen at each of the service academies, along with staff and faculty of each institutions. Analyzed
perceptions of work load, quality of life, ethics, equal opportunity and sexual harassment, comparing each institution with the other academies.


The current published doctrine (there have been fragmentary updates, but this is the most recent complete document) from the US Military Academy on the comprehensive program to develop military cadets into leaders of character. Defines the program, the roles of those involved, and provides a basic overview of the social science supporting the doctrine.