Post-LDAC Reflections of ROTC Cadets: Relationship to Leadership and Performance

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In the United States Reserve Officer Training Program, cadets attend a month-long camp, where they are evaluated on leadership ability. The purpose of this study was to assess the experiences of cadets upon their return. Through semistructured interviews, with 25 cadets, 3 distinct higher order themes emerged: (a) perceived difficulty of the Leadership Development and Assessment Course, (b) psychological skills required for success, and (c) social climate experienced. Furthermore, upon completion of general inductive analysis, cadets’ responses were compared to their leadership score, thereby highlighting how salient aspects of leadership manifest themselves through cadets’ behaviors and performances.

To be a successful military leader in the United States Army, individuals must possess both key attributes (i.e., who a leader is) and competencies (i.e., what a leader does). The leadership requirement model (Department of the Army, 2006) breaks down these two necessary components. Attributes include the three subdimensions of character, presence, and intellectual capability, whereas competencies incorporate the more action-oriented items of leads, develops, and achieves. It is from this model and the specific subdimensions listed that U.S. Army Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) cadets are assessed. In scholarly work, various leadership approaches have emerged, but only a few mirror the components valued by the U.S. Army and Army Reserve.

The universal behavior approach, as explained by Cox (2012), became popular after World War II when focus shifted from traits of effective leaders to behaviors that could be learned and cultivated. In particular, key behaviors that were displayed by successful leaders were taught to prospective leaders, thus, reducing the importance placed upon identifying leaders based solely on personality characteristics (Cox, 2012). Utilizing this approach, two characteristics were found to be most salient to increase group effectiveness: consideration and initiating structure (Murray, Mann, & Mead, 2010). Consideration includes developing trust and respect for others.

Received 30 April 2014; accepted 27 October 2014.
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in the group, whereas initiating structure is clearly defining the roles of individuals within the group to establish more effective organization and communication. Universal behavior theories are important in understanding ROTC cadets’ leadership ability because of the importance of aforementioned leadership attributes. Specifically, as discussed in the leadership requirement model (Department of the Army, 2006), effective U.S. Army leaders must possess a strong physical presence and high moral character and serve as a role model to others. Research has noted that these attributes can be learned through leadership training; specifically, higher rates of ethical decision making and role modeling by participants were associated with leaders who displayed the same positive behaviors (Brown & Trevino, 2014; Cianci, Hannah, Roberts, & Tsakumis, 2014).

In addition to universal behaviors required for effective leadership in the U.S. Army, specific competencies for how a soldier leads others, develops subordinates’ abilities, and achieves the mission objective are also vital in ROTC cadet training. These action-oriented elements of leadership highlight the need to also incorporate more situation-specific components to better understand what soldiers “do” based on situational and group member characteristics (Department of the Army, 2006). Hersey and Blanchard (1969, 2012) noted the importance of both leadership style and group members’ maturity level (i.e., experience) in situational leadership theory. In particular, Hersey, Blanchard, and Natemeyer (1979) explained that maturity is task specific and often depends on the goal of the leader. Maturity, gained through experience, will increase followers’ confidence and competence levels, and inevitably lead to a greater chance of success. The key with a situational leadership approach is to assess the maturity level of the followers and to alter leadership tactics accordingly, from task to more relationship and autonomous behavior. In today’s modern military, situational aspects of leadership are becoming more important as a greater emphasis is placed upon a soldier’s ability to critically think through ambiguous and dangerous situations and then adapt as the situation unfolds (Fallesen, Keller-Glaze, & Curnow, 2011).

Regardless of the approach employed to understand leadership, research has documented that effective leadership produces adaptive outcomes. For instance, when the role of group membership and goal attainment is viewed as psychologically important, an increase in confidence is seen between followers, leaders gain support from subordinates, and leaders are perceived as more effective. In contrast, leaders who portray themselves as better than group members attract less social support and motivation for goal attainment from their followers can waiver (Rast, Gaffney, Hogg, & Crisp, 2012). Furthermore, the group’s task impacts the effectiveness of different leadership styles, as followers who are uncertain about the task at hand seek direct and engaged leadership, whereas those who have a firm grasp on the direction needed can benefit more from autonomy (Bass & Bass, 2008; Rast et al., 2012). Social support (as cultivated by the leader) can also increase task performance. Followers that feel a greater sense of group equality are more likely to exhibit adaptive performance behaviors (Zhang, Lepine, Buckman & Wei, 2014). Thus, competent leadership offers the potential to not only increase job performance but also improve personnel development for both the leader and the larger group (Fallesen et al., 2011).

Because the development of effective leaders is the main goal of the U.S. Army ROTC program (Vecchio, Bullis, & Brazil, 2006), it is not surprising that training is designed to best prepare cadets for commissioning as second lieutenants upon successful completion of the program. Specifically, training exercises consist of a variety of physical fitness tests, day and night land navigation courses, confidence and obstacle courses, and tactical operations featuring Situational Training Exercises (STX). Whereas assessment of cadets’ skills is an ongoing process, ROTC training culminates after the Military Science III (MSIII) year when all ROTC cadets attend the Leadership Development and Assessment Course (LDAC). During
Figure 1. United States Army Leadership Assessment Report (i.e., Blue Card).

this month-long camp, individuals are subjected to the previously described training exercises with the added variable of working with unfamiliar cadets from other universities, thus, creating a unique social climate. Finally, the aforementioned leadership requirement model serves as the template for the assessment process. Specifically, officers (i.e., cadre) complete Blue Card evaluations consisting of 19 leadership dimensions for cadets focused on their leadership presence, intellectual capability, application of leadership principles, developing subordinates, and achieving the mission (see Figure 1). Therefore, upon completion of LDAC, cadets earn a final score of Exceeds the Standard (E), Satisfies the Standard (S), or Needs Improvement (N), which is then used in conjunction with academic grade point averages to create the Order of Merit List, determining a cadet’s status (active duty or reserve) as well as the branch of service available upon graduation.

As one might expect, the valued outcomes associated with LDAC can create a stressful environment for cadets; however, when examining scholarly works focused on psychological constructs that can affect ROTC cadets’ leadership performance at LDAC, it is clear that this group is underrepresented in the literature. Specifically, research has generally centered on two areas of foci: psychological processes that explain goal attainment and the importance of affiliation (i.e., social support) related to performance. Addressing the former, Mathieu (1990) noted that goal-directed achievement patterns were mediated by leadership behavior. In particular, a greater focus on goals was noted for cadets that preferred an instrumental leadership style, as compared to a supportive leadership style. Furthermore, it is also evidenced that cadets who fear failure generally abstain from structuring their own roles toward goal attainment (Dapra, Zarrillo, Carlson, & Teevan, 1985).
Cadets’ need for affiliation with others has produced somewhat contradictory results. Frost (1981) demonstrated that peer support buffered the maladaptive responses to ambiguous tasks assigned by leaders. In particular, when social support was high, the key components of intelligence and experience were positively related to performance, regardless of leader behavior. However, Mathieu (1990) found that affiliation did not influence leadership behavior or subordinate satisfaction, and furthermore, Thomas, Dickinson, and Bliese (2001) noted that the absence of affiliation was a key component for those cadets who were successful at LDAC. Therefore, it is not surprising that Chemers, Watson, and May (2000) contended that more research is needed to better understand military leadership.

From the works presented, it is clear that research focused on psychological constructs salient for ROTC cadets’ while attending LDAC is limited and largely outdated. Thus, the purpose of this study was to identify key psychological constructs germane to U.S. Army ROTC cadets’ experiences at LDAC. Bartone, Johnsen, Eid, Brun, and Laberg (2002) have called for more ecologically sound studies in military settings that seek to understand important psychological variables because of the unique (and natural) work constraints of interacting with others in this domain. To this end, and to achieve a richness of data based on the experiences of ROTC cadets, in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with participants focused on a greater understanding of four main topics: (a) general reflections on the LDAC experience, (b) Blue Card strengths and weaknesses, (c) the social climate experienced while working with other cadets, and (d) advice for future MSIII cadets who will subsequently experience LDAC in the coming years. From data gathered and analyzed in this work, a greater understanding of the social conventions and dominant pressures, which impact behavior, can be better understood (Bartone, 2010).

**METHOD**

**Participants**

U.S. Army ROTC Military Science IV (MSIV) cadets who attended LDAC and completed an interview within 1 month of their return participated in this study. Specifically, 20 male and five female cadets (\(M_{age} = 22.2\) years, \(SD = 2.6\) years) from a pool of six participating universities geographically distributed in the western, central, and eastern United States shared their LDAC experiences through qualitative interviews. Self-report ethnicity data showed that 80% of participants were Caucasian, 8% Asian or Pacific Islander, 4% African American, 4% Hispanic/Latino(a), and 4% multiple ethnicities. LDAC performance scores highlighted the fact that five cadets earned the highest awarded composite score of E, whereas 20 cadets recorded a score S—no cadet interviewed failed LDAC. Finally, five cadets who participated in this study had prior U.S. military experience before entering their respective ROTC program; however, there was no correlation between cadets who earned a LDAC score of E and prior military service.

**Instrumentation**

Researchers conducted semistructured interviews with participants focusing on four main topics: (a) reflections on the LDAC experience, (b) Blue Card performances, (c) the social climate experienced, and (d) advice for MSIII cadets who will experience LDAC in subsequent years. Interviews were conducted in identical fashion—with the same standard interview guide asked of every participant—though cadets were free to elaborate upon any topic. Finally, probes were utilized during the interview process to acquire more information regarding a specific
topic or achieve greater clarification regarding participants’ answer(s) as advised by Berg (2004) and Patton (2002).

Procedure

After institutional review board approval was received, three MSIV cadets participated in pilot interviews to assess the efficacy of questions—and were then excluded from further participation in this study. One cadet suggested an additional question, whereas another recommended modifying how a specific question was phrased. Upon completion of these pilot interviews, the interview guide was finalized.

Through a modified snowballing technique to recruit participants, cadre enlisted officers from other institutions until a database of names and contact information was compiled with 126 MSIII cadets from 15 distinct universities. Researchers then systematically contacted cadets via e-mail describing the study protocol (i.e., a 30–45 min interview), outlining the goals of the study, and seeking participation. If no response was received within 1 week, a short follow-up e-mail was sent. If the potential participant did not respond to either e-mail it was assumed that the cadet had no interest participating in the study and no further contact was initiated. However, if a cadet responded to either communication indicating an interest in participation, a digital copy of the consent form was e-mailed with two “yes/no” questions: (a) Was the cadet willing to participate in the study? and (b) Would the cadet allow the interview to be digitally voice recorded? Researchers required cadets to respond to each of these questions, and specifically to Question 1 with a “yes” statement before an interview time could be scheduled.

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or over the telephone, based on geographical restrictions. A private setting—separate from ROTC offices—was utilized for all interviews that were conducted in person, to protect the confidentiality of cadets’ responses. For interviews completed via telephone, the researcher advised cadets to field the call in a private and quiet setting and initiated all calls from a private office. In total, 15 of the 25 interviews for this study were conducted using this latter protocol.

Participation rates revealed that of the 126 cadets in the initial database, 84 never responded to either e-mail request. Of the 42 cadets who responded indicating an interest to participate, 17 later self-selected out by not responding to future communication efforts. Thus, a total of 25 cadets completed interviews, a final completion rate of 19.8%—with all amenable to having the interview digitally recorded.

RESULTS

As advocated by Bryman and Burgess (1994), a general inductive approach was utilized to analyze responses with the goal of identifying emergent themes from a complex set of data. Upon transcription of cadets’ digital audio files (Patton, 2002; Silverman, 2011), two authors from the byline conducted an initial read of each transcribed interview, identifying salient responses highlighted by multiple participants. Each response (i.e., raw theme) was then labeled and verified by a third author through investigator triangulation (Patton, 2002) until a consensus could be established. Higher order themes were identified by again implementing investigator triangulation, as raw themes were grouped into a small number of like categories by two authors and validated by a third author. This process of general inductive analysis is noted as an effective way to establish a link between the objectives of the study and the data collected (Creswell, 2008).
Upon completion of data analyzation, three distinct higher order themes were identified: (a) perceived difficulty of LDAC, (b) psychological skills required for success, and (c) social climate experienced. Subsequently highlighted are selected quotes from participants that establish credibility for the developed theme. Note that quantifiable data presented may total more than the number of participants in this study because responses could be coded into multiple raw themes.

Perceived Difficulty of LDAC

In a broad sense, cadets’ responses portrayed the difficulty of LDAC after they returned from camp. For cadets who voiced a definitive option, raw themes highlighted the fact that LDAC was either more challenging \( (n = 6) \) or easier \( (n = 13) \) than expected.

Jason (all names fictitious) found the month-long commitment of LDAC to be challenging because “being there is uncomfortable, being disconnected from the world is the hardest part. I was telling someone that we could have been in China for all I knew; we were in one contained bubble the whole time.” Abby—a prior service cadet—found the cognitive challenges to be most salient, as she remarked, “Mentally [LDAC] was not easier than basic training because LDAC was a lot of critical thinking instead of do this, at this time, in this uniform. You had to come up with a plan yourself.” Examining the responses of these six cadets, Harden—a prior service cadet—summed up the challenge of LDAC most succinctly when he stated, “It was easier to pass than expected but harder to get an E than I expected.”

In contrast, 13 cadets were surprised at the relative ease (or perhaps their overpreparedness) of LDAC. As evidence, both Kevin and Caitlin found that the combination of preparation and ability to replicate skills learned from training produced successful experiences; specifically, Kevin said,

> It was way easier than I thought it was going to be. I was so prepared and I went over scenarios multiple times in my head, but at LDAC as long as you can do a checklist and think inside of the box you will be fine.

Caitlin echoed these comments as she spoke about the impending stress and level of relief she experienced once returning from LDAC: “It was definitely not as hard as people portrayed it to be. Before you go people hyped it up and I thought wow I have so much to memorize. But when you go there it is commonsense stuff.”

Finally, it is interesting to note that of the five cadets who participated in this study with prior military experience, LDAC was both more challenging and easier than expected. As previously discussed, Abby and Harden believed LDAC was more difficult than anticipated, whereas Danielle’s LDAC experience was more manageable: “I really didn’t think [LDAC] was that bad at all. I thought it was more leadership and assessment training. The cadre only yelled at us when we needed it and we stepped out of line.”

Psychological Skills Required for Success

Cadets also spoke at length regarding the psychological skills they employed at LDAC, which they believed led to a successful experience. In particular, the raw themes of confidence \( (n = 20) \), domain knowledge \( (n = 14) \), being opportunistic \( (n = 13) \), and adapting to circumstances \( (n = 11) \) were most evident.

Examining confidence first, 20 cadets noted the importance of this construct, including Sean, who discussed how he displays the appropriate levels of confidence throughout the leadership process:
I knew how to come up with an [operation order] and I was confident that I knew how to make the presentation good – create good visuals with terrain models and other resources that I had at my disposal. Also in the field I made quick decisions if anything came up and I was confident in those decisions, which kept the squad moving forward.

Kyle, who also excelled at confidence, most remembered an informal conversation from one cadre member that helped solidify the belief in his abilities: “He said, ‘Hey, your ambush lane was probably the most well put together lane the squad had on STX lanes.’ I said thank you and he followed up saying, ‘At LDAC, you have great confidence.’”

For Caitlin, realizing the importance of confidence (and that she possessed this attribute) required both a mediocre leadership performance and a “pep-talk” from a fellow cadet:

I think the most memorable thing was when I was squad leader at Garrison. It was my first leadership position and my leadership personality is kind of quiet; I mumbled and stumbled. To my peers I wasn’t confident enough to do it. One of my battle buddies came up to me and said he knew I knew my stuff and to act confident. He was right; I knew exactly what to do. Say I needed a volunteer but no one stood up, I just need to suck it up and say, ‘You do it.’ After he gave me that reality check I took charge.

Akin to fostering a strong sense of confidence, 14 cadets also shared their belief in the importance of domain knowledge (i.e., technical, tactical, and cultural knowledge) to be successful at LDAC. As one might expect, cadets spoke to instances when they applied domain knowledge with a positive result. As an example, Brad discussed how the lessons he learned could be directly applied at LDAC:

You just got to go through the drills from school that you have learned. I had an exercise at school when I got attacked from both sides and I learned from that [experience]. When it came down to a split second decision I just applied what I had already done, what I had rehearsed, and what I had learned.

Furthermore, William spoke about the benefits of his acquired domain knowledge in more general terms when he remarked, “Everything [that training offers] will help further your knowledge. Every day you learn something new so continue moving forward and don’t ever stop gaining knowledge.”

In contrast to Brad and William, other cadets discussed the importance of domain knowledge, but from a deficiency approach, highlighting how their performance was impaired. For instance, Laura (who had expectations of earning an E) discussed her contrasting experiences with day and night land navigation:

In day land navigation I did excellent and got a perfect score. I was the only one in my platoon to get 60 out of 60 but for night I was a no-go. I know if it wasn’t for that I would have gotten an overall E for camp. That was the real killer of LDAC.

Chris also shared his firsthand experience of the importance of developing a requisite knowledge base (and the personal consequences for not following his advice) when he said, “My plan was to study before I left, but I got into a routine of not studying and that would’ve given me more confidence. I’d say, make sure you study. . . . If they say, ‘Okay.’ I’d be like, ‘Seriously dude!’”
In addition to cultivating domain knowledge, 13 cadets also communicated the importance of taking advantage of opportunities presented to them—especially early on in their program. For instance, Jalen remarked,

Take every leadership experience you can get. Even if you are an MSI or a MSII, if you are offered a chance to be a leader in a STX lane—do it! You could phone it in, but if you get that experience it will benefit you. All leadership roles add up. . . . Take advantage of every opportunity.

Troy, who also believed that going above and beyond the requirements of a ROTC program would produce adaptive results, focused on opportunities more broadly available to cadets, “I would say volunteer. . . . Even if it is the color guard team, that drill and ceremony knowledge is critical when you are a platoon sergeant or any type of leadership position.”

As a tangible example as to why heeding the advice of Jalen and Troy is important, Abby noted a precarious situation she encountered at LDAC and how she effectively took the initiative to meet the challenge:

There was one time where I was a team leader and there was a squad leader above me. We were going through an ambush lane and the squad leader kind of froze and didn’t know what to do. My team was up front so I had to take the initiative, but I didn’t want to undermine her authority. I took her aside and told her to take bravo team to the right and we would suppress the fire from here. I received a strong evaluation from that.

Last, 11 cadets spoke to the importance of adapting to circumstances, with perhaps Anders doing so most articulately:

I’m going to go back to being adaptable and flexible because you can feel your tac [i.e., cadre who is evaluating you] out. How is he? What does he look for? What does he want? My tac said, ‘Look, if you do something crazy or innovative I am wiping the slate clean when the squad starts. If you do something the last group did and it is innovative, even though I saw it with them it is new, so it is innovative with me again. Do something innovative, impress me.’ We actually sat down as a squad and we all figured out some innovative ideas that we could do because this is what he wants. I think 8 out of 11 of us ended up getting Es on our STX lanes; obviously it worked.

In addition, Jalen noted the situational pressures of LDAC and how he adapted:

A lot of times you get wound up on making the perfect plan because cadre will scrutinize it. You don’t have time to make a perfect plan at LDAC. You don’t have time to do a lot of the stuff you normally do. You can’t try and lead the perfect mission, just try to lead the mission.

Conversely, Adam—a prior service cadet—shared a great example of the consequences one can experience by failing to adapt to cadre:

There was one time I got 7 or 8 Ss and that was it [i.e., the other scores were Ns]. Everyone was terrified. That is how it goes. The tac that S-blocked me day 2 or 3 asked if I was the cadet from [name of school]. She was a brand-new second lieutenant; she said, ‘Okay, well I am from [rival school].’ I didn’t understand . . . maybe there is rivalry that I am not tracking or maybe we are supposed to be friendly. It didn’t play out well, but I had to muscle through it—maybe the peer evaluation would save me.
Not only do these quotes highlight the importance of learning the style of the evaluating cadre member, but they also clearly show how adapting to new conditions (e.g., Anders and Jalen) can produce more positive results when compared to executing a preplanned strategy (e.g., Adam).

**Social Climate**

Responses for this theme highlighted the fact that cadets viewed their social interactions as either a prosocial or antisocial during their time at LDAC. Eighteen cadets spoke about the positive interactions from LDAC, with most of those detailing the ability of their squad/platoon to quickly coalesce. For instance, Maddox discussed the bond that developed among cadets in his platoon and how the variability in demographic characteristics was actually an inherent strength:

Right off of the bat all of us connected; we had people from Missouri to Arizona, all over the US. Those demographics of where they were from and how they were raised didn’t negatively affect our platoon. We were able to work collectively to have a strong and dependent squad. We even had two British cadets in our platoon and one was directly in my squad. We learned a lot from her on how the British do things and we taught her a lot about how we do things.

Furthermore, being that LDAC is structured so that cadets are both superiors and subordinates during their training, the ability to work together throughout the duration of camp is vital for individual and group success. James touched on this point when describing his experience with other cadets: “Everybody understands you are there trying to [stand out]. No one in my squad was trying to screw you over, [the social climate] was pretty helpful. Everybody was good about helping each other out, without making it obvious.”

In contrast to the majority of cadets who found the social climate of LDAC to be positive, six cadets indicated they found certain aspects to be challenging. Matt painted a detailed picture of how cadets’ divergent goals hindered his squad’s social development:

I’ll be honest, at the end I was ready to never see anyone again. There are people [at LDAC] just to get Es, there are people trying to do the best that they can because they want to stand out and have their career choice. There are guys there that don’t care at all because they are going to be reservists or National Guard. There are the middle guys that aren’t worried about doing well, but they don’t want to do bad so they do what they can. Then there are the guys that really want to genuinely do well but also want their peers to do well. The social climate was confusing for a long time because you couldn’t figure people out right off of the bat. Everyone seemed genuine for the first couple of weeks then slowly there is anger and tension that starts to show. You see cliques start forming at week 3; and at the end if you hate someone then everyone else knows who you hate.

In addition, Aaron found the social climate difficult to navigate because of gender issues that presented themselves within his squad:

I would say that [the social climate] was one of the most difficult things. In particular, we had a couple females in our squad, inappropriate sexual comments were made and this made the tension high and it was hard to work with the opposite sex. The trust was broken at that point and it was difficult to regain trust as a group.
Finally, Patrick shared his frustration with fellow squad members not adhering to the standards he expected, and how his emotional reaction led to a poor score in the area of peer evaluations:

I didn’t do so well on interpersonal tact [how well one interacts with others] because I had some people taking the easy way out... and I would let them know. I guess you are supposed to pat everybody on the back and encourage everybody all the time even if they aren’t working. That irritated me, especially the ones that wanted to be infantry or rangers because they were over there taking a knee.

Although the concerns of these individuals were in the minority of the cadets who participated in this study, their answers do show how one aspect of LDAC impaired squad effectiveness, an issue all cadets will confront when leading others upon graduation.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to assess the experiences of cadets at LDAC, in relationship to salient psychological constructs that affect leadership. Through in-depth interviews with 25 ROTC cadets, a more comprehensive understanding of LDAC was conveyed via the main themes articulated. Furthermore, by examining the qualitative differences between cadets, findings can contribute to the broader topic of leadership.

Between the two groups of cadets in this study (those who earned the score of E and those who earned the score of S), differences are noticeable in how participants articulated the experience of LDAC. In particular, those who returned with satisfactory marks dictated much of their experience in a point-by-point manner, where the answers supplied overtly matched the information they learned. As an example, during a general warm-up question focused on how a cadet would define leadership, Gabrielle remarked, “I am a firm believer of leading by example. You don’t want anyone to do something that you wouldn’t do. If I don’t do it why would I expect someone to do it for me?” Furthermore, Patrick stated, “[I] just go by the book definition, which is somebody who inspires, develops, motivates and provides purpose and direction.” In contrast, cadets who exceeded the standard (e.g., Anders, Aaron, and Matt) used contemporary examples when responding to each question that provided a detailed narrative of their LDAC experience. This distinguishable difference may be based partially on the socialization process of each cadet, as military units have traditionally subscribed to more universal approaches to identify future leaders (Fallesen et al., 2011). Therefore, family members or peers—who have previously served—may have influenced cadets who provided the most succinct answers.

When examining the results of this study within the broader context of leadership, it is also evident that many cadets developed new strategies and left LDAC with a greater appreciation of situational variables that can influence leadership. Perhaps the best example of a positive attitude shift was from Laura (who failed night land navigation and was excluded from earning an E at LDAC), when she remarked, “Embrace the suck is something we always say. It is really just a good attitude and wanting to be there. Just focus on what you are doing, give it your best, and the payoff will be high.” The notion of learning psychological skills for effective leadership—and then applying them based on environmental demands—directly relates to situational leadership theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969, 2012) and has been shown to be an adaptive in multiple settings. In a military context, Bartone, Snook, Forsythe, Lewis, and Bullis (2007) found that psycho-social development is possible, as 47% of West Point cadets
POST-LDAC REFLECTIONS

experienced a significant increase in their developmental level over time. Furthermore, in high-level sport, the preferred coaching style (as compared to perceived success or failure) is significantly related to democratic behaviors, social support, and appropriate feedback (Høigaard, Jones, & Peters, 2008; Moen, Høigaard, & Peters, 2014), which stem from a situational style of leadership. Thus, in highly stressful conditions that can impact performance, the ability to display effective (i.e., transformational) leadership should be a valued part of any curriculum (Zhang et al., 2014).

Perhaps based on the experience of squad members at LDAC, one interesting distinction was noted related to the social climate cadets experienced. Specifically, 85% of cadets who earned the score of S enjoyed the social interactions with fellow cadets, whereas 60% of cadets who earned the score of E found the social climate to be frustrating. Referring back to Matt’s comment—who scored an E and discussed the fragmentation of his squad as LDAC progressed—one can observe why leadership is characterized as a process and not an end product. Thus, the direct linking of leadership with performance measures can be problematic. Instead researchers and practitioners should consider assessing the deficiencies within leadership and then identifying experiences that can aid in a future leader’s development (Hunsaker, 2007). Furthermore, implementation of a curriculum designed with the aforementioned point embedded will allow for increased interaction between future leaders and subordinates—a point noted by Larsson et al. (2006) to be vital in leader development. Conversely, the failure of cadets in this study who left LDAC with an E to effectively cope with the challenges from fellow squad/platoon members may negatively impact their ability to develop adaptive behavioral patterns upon graduation.

Strengths and Limitations

The paucity and dated research on cadets’ psychological skills that can affect LDAC leadership scores warranted further explanation. Specifically, heading the call from past research (Chemers et al., 2000; Fallesen et al., 2011), the present study was the first to examine LDAC experiences from a qualitative perspective and link (albeit elemental) cadets’ responses and overall LDAC performance. Moreover, results highlight how key notions discussed by Hersey and Blanchard (1969, 2012) in situational leadership theory manifest themselves for ROTC cadets at LDAC. For instance, Anders discussed the importance of adapting to environmental constraints, and Aaron shared his frustration with the maturity of his squad members. Through the responses of these participants (who both scored overall Es at LDAC), one can see that although universal behaviors may be compulsory for military leadership, the ability to utilize learned behaviors based on organizational requirements may in fact distinguish capable leaders from extraordinary ones (Bartone et al., 2007).

There are a number of limitations with the current study. First, this work was qualitative in nature, limiting the generalizability of the results to the larger ROTC population. Although methodological steps where implemented to increase the external validity of the present study (e.g., a geographically diverse sample), these cannot replace methodology where quantitative means are employed to draw systematic connections between psychological variables and measureable performance outcomes with a large sample (Bartone et al., 2002). Second, this work focused on the “experience” of LDAC from a psychosocial perspective. Although this decision was appropriate to gain a broad understanding of cadets during the month-long camp, the present methodology limited the researchers’ ability to explore each unique issue discussed by cadets during their interviews. Finally, only cross-sectional data were collected from participants as they returned from successfully completing LDAC. Longitudinal work
focused on the developmental process of cadets prior to and after experiencing LDAC would provide a more complete picture of cadets’ leadership development (Bartone et al., 2007). This latter suggestion would also allow for experimental work to be conducted where the efficacy of defined independent variables, related to leadership, could be assessed over time and enhance the legitimacy of psychological skills embedded within the ROTC curriculum.

**Applied Implications**

Leadership is an important variable to understand, especially when small groups are subjected to stressful conditions with serious consequences (Bartone et al., 2002). In particular, it is known that in military settings leaders must work with subordinates to facilitate two-way communication, as important shared attributes (e.g., morality) can result in conflict when new members enter an established group (Bartone, 2010). Furthermore, leaders must lead by example to create both a cohesive unit and instill notions of duty and responsibility (Department of the Army, 2006). For instance, participation in rudimentary training and drilling with one’s squad or platoon afford a leader with the opportunity to both link specific skills cultivated to future mission success and help facilitate group member “buy-in” toward a larger common goal (Bartone et al., 2002). Thus, constant and continued interaction with subordinates, peers, and commanding officers is in itself a leadership skill that young officers need to develop as they refine their leadership style (Larsson et al., 2006).

In addition to the aforementioned points specific to a military context, it is known that effective leadership hinges not only upon the development of physical skills and abilities but also upon key psychological skills for the greatest effectiveness (Bartone et al., 2007). Although physical skills and abilities will be specific to the objectives of each organization, the psychological skills necessary for success in a variety of settings may be more discernable. Based on the results, it is clear that developing foundational knowledge and then having the confidence to execute courses of actions is a prerequisite for success (see Feltz, Short, & Sullivan, 2008, for a review). In addition, seeking out opportunities and then using these experiences to adapt to situational demands can also yield positive outcomes. While in its infancy, Bond et al. (2011) found that the concept of psychological flexibility significantly correlated to one’s ability to learn, satisfaction at a task, and turnover rate within the larger organization. Therefore, providing opportunities for both successes and “controlled failures,” and then conducting systematic debriefings of decisions selected, can help produce leaders who recognize how to best adapt to stressful performance situations in the future.

**CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, it is implied that effective leadership is positively associated with military performance (Bass, Avolio, Jung, & Bensen, 2003). The data presented in this study help to better illuminate cadets’ perceptions of key psychological skills and processes necessary for success at LDAC. In addition, the ability to link qualitative data to objective measures of performance (utilized by the U.S. Army) provides researchers with a new lens in which to explore how competent ROTC leadership can be better measured. Although psychological variables may not fully explain the variance between satisfactory and exemplary leadership performance, leadership development is a process and over time small differences in cognitive aspects can profoundly affect leadership success (Thomas et al., 1991).
REFERENCES


