

LEADERSHIP AND FOLLOWERSHIP BELIEFS OF RESERVE OFFICERS' TRAINING CORP CADETS

Abstract

Using interview data from cadets (program participants) in the Reserve Officers' Training Corp (ROTC), I examined the beliefs cadets have about obedience. I scrutinize their ideas about followership and leadership, adding to the discussion on romance of and ethical followership and demonstrating how many cadets fall somewhere in the middle with their beliefs about the role of their leaders and whether they should question, obey, and/ or disobey unethical or illegal orders.

Introduction

In light of historical and recent incidents of unethical behavior and obedience, it is clear ethics and obedience to orders are critical issues in the military. Reserve Officers' Training Corp (ROTC) cadets actively and purposively learn leadership and followership and will directly utilize those skills in their future service. Considering current international conflicts and advanced technologies used by the military, cadets entering military service face a context many previous cohorts did not. Examining the beliefs these future officers hold regarding obedience, leadership, and followership, this study contributes to the debate within the leadership literature on how followers "romanticize" (i.e., idealize) leadership and/ or ethically follow their leaders.

There have been key moments in recent U.S. history, including highly publicized ones at My Lai and Abu Ghraib, where U.S. officers and soldiers have violated ethics. Given the frequency with which ethics violations occur, it is useful to understand cadets'

beliefs and knowledge about ethics and obedience before they are in decision-making positions. In this article, I examine cadets' beliefs about followership, particularly their beliefs about responding to orders they find unethical or immoral. I investigate cadets' reasoning behind the beliefs that they will obey, question, and/ or disobey, and the orders they see as unethical, unlawful, or immoral, drawing specifically on romance and ethical followership literature. I begin with an overview of ROTC followed by review of the literature in leadership and followership, discussion of socialization processes or development of leadership and followership and of language specific to military followership. I then delve into methods and analysis.

Introduction to ROTC

ROTC has operated on college campuses throughout the U.S. since 1916, with some periods of closure (Neiberg, 2000; Today's Military, n.d.). College students can choose to join and, upon completion,

commission as officers in the military (Today's Military). In 1964, the ROTC Revitalization Act led to increased enrollment in the program, and further changes to the program structure during the 1960s and 1970s continued that trend (Leal, 2007; Neiberg, 2010). The Solomon Amendment of 1996 prohibits universities from disallowing ROTC and recruiters on campuses (Galaviz, 2011).

ROTC provides a large share of commissioned officers entering the Department of Defense (DOD), roughly 35% for Fiscal Year (FY) 2011 (Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel, and Readiness [P&R], 2011). Within the Air Force, ROTC cadets constitute 44% of those commissioned (P&R, 2011), while ROTC produced 40+% of the Army's current active duty general officers (U.S. Army-a, n.d.; P&R, 2011). Cadets enter the commissioned ranks as second lieutenants.

Enrollment in an ROTC course does not automatically mean enrollment for military service. Students may participate in ROTC for two years without a contract, provided they do not have ROTC scholarships. Army ROTC cadets contract to serve as officers for eight years post-completion in return for a combination of scholarships, stipends, and other materials (Leal, 2007; U.S. Army-a, n.d.). That eight years is a combination of Active Duty and Inactive Ready Reserve (IRR), depending on whether the student received a scholarship (U.S. Army-b, n.d.). Navy ROTC entails committing to three to five years of Active Duty, depending on scholarships and jobs (NROTC: Naval Reserve Officers Training Corp, n.d.). Air Force ROTC requires four to ten years of service, depending on position (AFROTC, n.d.).

Leadership and Followership Studies in Organizations

Leadership studies have focused on a variety of fields with one subfield being military leadership.

Military leadership is unique in terms of organization size and the number of people under an individual's command within the organization (Wong, Bliese, & McGurk, 2003). The military purposively cultivates the leadership and followership of its officers. In this section, I begin with a history of followership studies, then discuss two major models, romance and ethical followership, and why they matter in the military context.

Leadership and followership are sides of a coin with arguably the same training necessary (Hinrichs, 2007, p. 74). Followers' decisions often depend, at least partially, upon the beliefs people hold about their roles as followers. Carsten and Uhl-Bien (2013) argued that studies of organizational ethics have focused on leaders and their impacts on organization, and that scholars must look at the agency (potentially) exercised by followers, including decision-making in the face of unethical requests. This is especially important when the people giving orders are also receiving orders, as military officers are.

The "romance of leadership" (RoL) model, developed by James Meindl and colleagues in the 1980s, posits that people who see leaders as responsible for all actions/outcomes, thus "romanticizing" that role, will be more likely to obey than those who do not (Bligh and Schyns, 2007; Bligh et al., 2011; Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2013; Meindl et al., 1985; Hinrichs, 2007). The ethical model of followership (EF), also known as "courageous" or "proactive" followership (Bligh, 2011; Kelley, 2008; Morris, 2014; Thomas & Berg, 2014), occurs when people see leadership as a "co-production" between themselves and their leader (Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2013; Hinrichs, 2007). In this model, followers are more likely to see themselves resisting unethical orders, integrating the idea that "followers have a moral responsibility to both leaders and organizations to act courageously" (Chaleff, 1998, cited in Bligh, 2011, p. 427; Kelley, 2008).

Carsten and Uhl-Bien (2013) argued that beliefs about leadership/followership stem from notions people have about the roles of followers and are developed through interaction. People believing in co-production are less likely to accept “legitimacy of authority” and more likely to consider opposing unethical requests (Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2013, p. 58). The opposite is true as well—not believing in co-production but romanticizing leaders is associated with deference and not raising questions (Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2013). Believing the follower role means working with the leader for the greater good places followers in co-productive mode, whereas those who see their correct role as deferential and view leaders to be more important than followers are engaging in romanticizing perspectives (Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2013). Carsten and Uhl-Bien (2013) found that people who put responsibility on their leaders alone were more obedient and less resistant, while those who believed in co-production were likely to obey but were also more likely to exhibit “constructive resistance” (p. 52). Additionally, Reiley and Jacobs’ (2016) research on perceptions of military leaders found those perceptions did impact the behavior of followers, such that “[w]hen followers perceived their leader to be ethical, [they] reported higher levels of organizational citizenship behaviors, or contributions to the organization that go beyond their job and are related to attitudes and perceptions” (p. 76). I see RoL and EF as a type of continuum, with particular importance to studies within the military context. Romantics may obey even if they are unsure about orders because of the belief that leaders necessarily know more than they do (Hinrichs, 2007, p. 72; also see Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2013, p. 4) or because they have been socialized to obey authority figures (Lipman-Blumen in Shamir, Pillai, Bligh, & Uhl-Bien, 2007). In the next section, I focus on socialization and other processes for developing obedience and followership.

Developing Obedience and Followership within Organizations

Social interactions and socialization entail

structural and individual processes; structures impact individuals and vice versa, while individuals simultaneously impact each other (Fine, 1984; Maines, 1977). Structures constrain individuals and also provide the context within which interactions take place and determine what identities are salient (Fine 1984; Maines, 1977).

Socialization is a process through which people learn how to behave or participate in particular contexts and through which shared beliefs, scripts, values, etc. are developed. Fine argued that “[a]ll organizations need mechanisms by which potential recruits... become affiliated with the organization” and learn what is expected of them (1984, p. 248). As roles are learned and identities developed through socialization and interactions, we absorb how we are supposed to act and in relation to whom. Professionals generally have a code of conduct or an ethical standard that members are obligated to follow (Reinke, 2006). In the military, personnel need to follow international laws guiding warfare, the U.S. Constitution, and the codes of conduct and regulations of their branch of the Armed Forces (Axinn, 2009; Reinke, 2006).

In the military, development typically takes place solely within the institution. Soldiers are disciplined by superiors and peers to identify as military, to be obedient to superiors, and to follow military norms. ROTC cadets face a more complex context, because their military socialization occurs simultaneously within multiple institutions, and they interact with civilians and military personnel during their training rather than being (re-)socialized in isolation. Concurrently integrated into higher education and military programs, cadets are not as constrained as military resocialization usually entails. Cadets are (mostly) pre-military officers being socialized into the military through participation in ROTC. Through formal socialization and informal interactions, they learn their professional obligations, including the obligation to obey. However, they should also learn that they have the obligation to disobey depending on the situation and order, an obligation which may conflict with other aspects of their identities, even the identity of “soldier” itself.

Military Language Related to Followership

Discipline, military morale, compliance, commitment, authority, and legitimacy have particular meanings in the military. In the military context, discipline is part of the process of developing obedience and comes from internalization of socialization (Gal, 1985); disciplining, then, is the socialization process of conditioning people to be soldiers (Ulio, 1941) to the point where “[they] will do as ordered, regardless of personal peril” (Axinn, 2009, p. 4). Military morale stems from the duty to obey; it is a “conditioned quality” and, in part, comes from internalizing military socialization, being disciplined to obey and coming to have the identity of “soldier” (Ulio, 1941, p. 321; Gal, 1985).

Attitudes, beliefs, norms, and statuses impact authority as well. People in command have authority, that is, the ability to “exercise control over another’s actions” and even “legitimate power” (Hamilton & Biggart, 1985, p.8) as a part of their positions within a structure. These structures develop norms and roles, including norms for making decisions, exercising authority, and expecting and displaying obedience. In the military, people are trained (“disciplined”) to recognize and be obedient to people in specific roles or rank, rank being symbolic of legitimate authority or power.

As with discipline, Gal (1985) saw compliance as necessary for military functioning. According to him, military compliance is primarily made up of commitment and obedience. Commitment, where one stands on an issue, can be to organization, career, and/or morale (Gal, 1985). Ulmer (2010) believed obedience, commitment, and (self-)sacrifice to be the tenets of professional soldiering. Commitment can also be to certain moral or ethical positions. It is within the idea(l) of commitment that space for disobedience opens: when obedience and commitment do not jive, or different commitments come into conflict, a gap results, allowing for resistance or disobedience to result. Personal and military commitments to a position or belief do not always line up. What should a

person do if their personal and military commitments do not match? What should they do if their military commitments do not match their military orders? Officially, military personnel are obligated to disobey certain orders, specifically those breaking the Geneva Conventions or the internationally established rules of warfare (Axinn, 2009). However, even if an order is not legitimate, people may choose to obey because of “unit cohesion and peer loyalty” or the diffusion of responsibility (Einolf, 2009, p. 112-113). Cockerham and Cohen (1980) described the “doctrine of respondeat superior” (p. 1273), the legal issue of whether or not a superior officer is responsible if their subordinates act on illegal orders, since international law requires disobedience to orders to commit war crimes. If the “legitimacy” of an order is in doubt, then soldiers technically need not obey it; they may engage in “protest behavior” (Gal, 1985, p. 560) and still be in compliance with their own personal commitments and ethical positions, if not to their military commitments. However, we can look to (recent) history for examples of U.S. military personnel engaging in war crimes to see how this expected protest behavior may, in fact, not happen. The My Lai Massacre in Vietnam in 1968 and the torture of prisoners in Abu Ghraib in 2003 (see Reinke, 2006) are two such cases that became public knowledge. Sometimes, socialization may facilitate unethical behavior, as found in Haritos-Fatouros’ (2003) and Huggins, Haritos-Fatouros, and Zimbardo’s (2002) studies of torture (discussed in Einolf, 2009).

Cockerham and Cohen (1980) studied commitment as a possible indicator of attitudes, using rank as a measure of commitment and asserting that there exists within bureaucratic organizations processes where conformity and a “predisposition to obey” (p. 1273) are developed. One downside to socialization into discipline and obedience is that, while positive for maintaining a functional military, those qualities can be negative if those who have been disciplined lack a sense of personal responsibility for their own actions and/ or do not question orders. Gal (1985) and Cockerham and Cohen (1980) argued that

socialization to obey can be dangerous if it stands in the way of individual thought or judgment. Studying paratroopers, Cockerham and Cohen found less than half believed they “should have the right to disobey any order he feels to be immoral” (1980, p. 1281). When they differentiated between illegal and immoral orders (as orders may be legal but/and immoral), they found that higher ranked and more satisfied personnel believe that legal orders should be complied with but that illegal orders should not be complied with regardless of morality. They also found that rank, pro-Army attitudes, and rural upbringing predicted lack of belief in the right to disobey. Cockerham and Cohen’s (1980) findings parallel those of Mandel and Litt (2013), who found that rank and other indicators of commitment are indicative of higher levels of belief in compliance.

While soldiers are conditioned to obey, they have an obligation to sometimes disobey. Disobedience would seemingly work against military morale and commitment, but so do some orders. If given an illegitimate order, the professional military person may be required by law to disobey, to choose commitment to military morality and professional ethics over commitment to military norms and expectations (Axinn, 2009; Reinke, 2006). If a person has a romantic view of leadership and followership, however, they may not disobey, because they will not see themselves as a responsible in this context. If they have an understanding of followership that is more in line with the ethical model, then they are more likely to go against such an order (Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2013; Hinrichs, 2007). The conditions under which people are (re)socialized (e.g., going through boot camp, ROTC, officer training programs, etc.) likely make a difference in their views of obedience/disobedience.

Lipman-Blumen (2007) takes the discussion of structural factors surrounding leadership and followership further, addressing a psychological need related to leadership as “the need for membership in human community” (p. 1) and tying that in with fear of isolation and ostracism. The need to be part of the whole can keep people obedient. Walzer (1967)

argued that conscience or morals come from a shared knowledge and, in that sense, even when we act as individuals, we are still operating in accordance with our group’s norms. He saw obligations as social processes which have the potential to spawn the “duty to disobey” (Walzer, 1967, p. 164). Whereas commitments are internal compasses, obligations are external, driven, for example, by the USMC or the aforementioned international laws. As Walzer explained, “[t]he duty to disobey...arises when obligations incurred in some small group come into conflict with obligations incurred in a larger, more inclusive group.” (p.167). In other words, there are situations in which one must disobey in order to maintain one’s identity within the profession of arms.

Methods

Data Collection. As the purpose of this study was to gather information about individuals’ perceptions, experiences, and beliefs, the most appropriate methodology was asking about cadets’ experiences using qualitative interviews (Babbie, 2005; Seidman, 2006; Weiss, 1994) and grounded theory (Babbie, 2005; Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006). My questions focused on students’ decisions to join ROTC and the military, their interactions with other cadets, and their beliefs about gender integration, superior officers, and military policy in general. Semi-structured interviews yielded in-depth information about the above topics, as well as topics that I may not have thought of but which are potentially important to the participants, and are a preferred method for finding out what experiences mean to participants, expressed in their own voices and evoking of the context behind surrounding their views (Seidman, 2006). Grounded theory allowed me to let the data guide me, rather than beginning with a theory that I was looking to test (Babbie, 2005). As the interviews progressed, the interview protocol was updated, as I found new questions to ask and that some of my original questions were irrelevant or did not elicit meaningful responses. .

Data were collected via 39 in-depth semi-structured

interviews with current Army and Air Force ROTC cadets. Initial recruitment was done by contacting the commander of each program, to get permission to recruit their cadets. The commanders who agreed, emailed my request to their cadets who emailed me if they were interested in participating; I used snowball sampling (Babbie, 2005; Lofland, et al., 2006) from there. My sample was 26% women (n=10) and 74% men (n=29). (20% of all cadets in Army ROTC are women [U.S. Army-a, n.d.].) 31% were Army cadets (n=12), and 69% were Air Force cadets (n= 27). 13% (n=5) were concurrently in the Reserves, National Guard, and/or enlisted.

Interviews were conducted on or near the cadets' campus, with the exception of five interviews conducted via Skype. Interviews generally lasted between 45 minutes and two hours. Participants came from eight colleges/universities and five ROTC programs (two Air Force and three Army). My sample was limited to Air Force and Army cadets in the northwestern United States; I cannot speak to Marine/Navy or Coast Guard cadets or cadets in other regions of the U.S.

Data Analysis. Each interview was professionally transcribed, then I listened to each interview and read and corrected the transcript to increase accuracy and (re)immerse myself in the data. I also wrote memos after each interview and throughout the project, taking note of emergent themes and ideas.

Each interview was coded in NVIVO (a software for qualitative data analysis). I used some initial codes based on my questions, but, as I continued through the research process, I noted potential codes and themes within the data (Lofland, et al., 2006). When I reviewed my codes about obedience and ethics, I realized that there were multiple narratives about what the interviewees saw as unethical or immoral, as well as different coping strategies for dealing with problematic orders.

Findings

In this section, I use the data to demonstrate how

the romance and ethical leadership concepts can be looked at as a continuum instead of as separate and opposing viewpoints or orientations. I show how some cadets have unquestioning faith in their commanders, while others held commanders in high esteem but could question them. I articulate the types of commands that cadets believe are problematic, and the difference between questioning and combining questioning with disobedience.

Idealization of and Faith in Command(ers). Cadets' beliefs about the military often included idealization of their commanders. Cadets demonstrated this during interviews when they talked about how they looked up to their commanders and saw them as ideal role models. Some who idealized their commanders would question them while others would not. For example, Stan looked up to the cadre (ROTC commanders/officials) and his commander at ROTC:

You know, the way he leads and the way that he talks to us is just so, always eloquent, respectfully, you know, it is just something everyone tries to...mirror. I mean, we all have our own personalities and we all have our own way of doing things, but he is a very good role model. All of the cadre are.

Several cadets' explained that they would assume commanders had special knowledge that they did not in the face of questionable commands. Some reported that they still raised questions, while others did not. Charles brought up the idea of "blindness" in followership:

[It's] plain as day. Women and children are there. It is a village. And so as an officer you have to make a call. You say, do you... just blindly follow orders? Or do you question it and potentially save lives? So, I mean, they teach us something here in Air Force ROTC about effective followership. And what that means is in a very, very tight nutshell, don't follow orders blindly. Be an effective follower. Give your input. If they

reject your input, they might know more than you do.

In the above, Charles articulates his beliefs in effective followership as a form of ethical followership, where orders may be questioned. What is interesting is that he also displays romanticization, as Charles believes in questioning orders but also limits himself. He sees himself addressing potential role strain by asking questions, then trusting his superior to know what is best. Given subordinates often do not have all of the information, they may be required to blindly trust superiors.

Patrick offered his take on this issue, using an example of a situation where someone is dropping a bomb:

[D]epending on the facility, there are too many casualties that aren't targets to warrant this strike. But then there could be information that your commander knows that you don't know—that they are a step above and they don't have time... they can't tell you all the finer points of the knowledge that they have on this. And if you follow these orders that you are given, and something turns out to be wrong with it, do you have a moral concern with yourself?...[C]an you, are you willing to pull that trigger?

Patrick is articulating potential obligational conflict: legalities may not be an issue, but one's moral identity is (see Axinn, 2009; Cockerham & Cohen). Cadets may need to put personal beliefs aside in the face of an order; by doing so, they are subordinating one identity and putting faith in their superior.

Believing superior officers would not give problematic or illegitimate orders is a way of romanticizing them. For example, Elizabeth talked about her trust in her commanders and the Air Force:

When you hear about people disobeying orders, that is usually in movies with these drastic situations, but being in ROTC and having commands coming

down on me for the first time has made me understand that I can trust the people who are giving commands above me. That is a huge component of followership and leadership—being able to trust the person giving commands above you. And I think that with the Air Force—especially with ROTC—we are being trained to make decisions that shouldn't be disobeyed because we are able to make decisions that are not really questionable.

Elizabeth believes disobedience is dramatized in the media partly because of her trust in her commanders. It is through cadets' interactions with their cadre and peers that cadets are socialized to idealize their higher-ranking officers. Elizabeth has learned that people above her are to be trusted; they would not give bad commands.

What Kinds of Orders Do Cadets View as Problematic? Elizabeth's level of faith was not characteristic of all cadets. Some cadets that certain kinds of orders would be "wrong" for them to follow: orders to publicly reprimand or be unfair to a subordinate; orders that are immoral or unethical in general; orders to commit an act that would result in killing innocents; too much collateral damage or unnecessary deaths; orders that are unnecessarily risky; orders that do not meet organizational goals; and orders that are not lawful. For example, Leonard believed one of the reasons the abuse at Abu Ghraib happened is that people put too much stock in their superiors' orders and did not voice opposition:

It wasn't just one bad dude. I mean, it went all the way to the top and up to the president. And then they turned around and said, 'I didn't know any of that was happening'...Well, this is the situation: either you are incompetent and you don't know what is happening under you, or you knew about it...[T]hey interview people like, yeah, I did know it was wrong, but I just had to follow orders...OK. I do understand where you are coming from, but that is still

not acceptable...You were just lazy. And it is tough. It is tough to speak up because of multiple things.

While Leonard acknowledges that it is hard to go against one's commanders no matter where you are in the chain of command, he saw both the subordinates and commanders as culpable. He clearly articulates a belief in ethical followership, where it may be necessary to refuse even if you get in trouble.

Four cadets said that reprimanding or treating an enlisted person unfairly is unacceptable. For example, Stan explained that he would question orders to reprimand subordinates, and, if the superior officer did not reconsider, he would "take the heat for it" because their job is, in part, about protecting people under their command. If there is a misunderstanding or problem, his job is to take the punishment but to not reprimand subordinates, especially if the issue is not a big deal.

Eleven cadets said that they would question or disobey immoral or unethical orders. Three cadets specifically discussed sexual abuse and/or the covering up of sexual abuse, while two others mentioned cover-ups more generally. Sean gave a hypothetical situation in which someone reported sexual harassment to him. He realized a situation could come up where a superior officer directed him to ignore the report; in such a case, Sean believed he would still try to help the person, because doing otherwise would be a blatant disregard for the airman's well-being. "I would have to...be like, I can't ignore this. I have to help them. I have to...at least send them some resources...Don't you worry about the culprit. I'll take defensive actions against him and he will be prosecuted and things like that."

Sean is extremely idealistic. While there is no way of knowing how many of the officers in the Air Force handle reports of harassment or sexual assault as the cadet says he would, we know that these are major issues in the military know (see <https://www.rand.org/nsrd/projects/rmws/publications.html>). Further, offering resources and "helping" does not

mean one is not simultaneously sweeping reports under the rug. And it raises the question, how will the airman avoid blowback from comrades (and commanders) if one does take action?

Ten cadets discussed attacking civilian areas or towns where human costs would be too high to justify the target. Richard said that being "ordered to torture somebody or commit genocide, of course, I would never do that. And then just very obvious ethical dilemmas—I would not do them." Prompted for more information, he explained some of the complexities of killing civilians:

[B]ombing a town that has civilians in it, but also harbors terrorists, then you have to weigh tons more things. So, I just want more details in that case. And if it was going to be like there is one terrorist and it wasn't a ridiculously high value target... If he wasn't that guy, and there was just like a town of civilians there, and you are bombing them, and the civilians die as well, even though there is technology to not do that, then I probably wouldn't do it. Because it just doesn't make any sense. And plus, I mean, if you weigh it out and the press finds out, they tend to do more damage to an organization and our effort than it would have benefited from killing that target.

The problem Richard sees is not simply whether or not there are civilians, but how much value targets have. He understood that collateral damage (injured and killed civilians) could hurt the military's larger agenda, so the killing had to outweigh the costs. Interestingly, concern about the military as an organization being damaged by publicity is a serious concern for Richard, not just human lives.

Laura also discussed killing civilians:

[N]ot that I think this happens, but if we were told to shoot civilians for some reason, I am sorry, that is not within what we are supposed to be doing. I mean, as far as what the law says—military law—

just shooting civilians, I am not going to do that. I am not just—they have done nothing. They are not the opposing force. I think that—if that situation were to come about, that is potentially where I could—where between my religious values and just moral values would warrant breaking order.

She articulates how her values are drawn from different places (morals, religion, law), and that shooting civilians goes against all three. She understands the basic law about shooting civilians but seems unaware that her example of harming civilians has happened historically, even recently.

Six cadets believed they would question orders they considered unnecessarily risky to their comrades, which is related to four who believed orders that hurt the mission or organization or did not “advance” them were questionable. These are examples of organizational thinking—thinking about the impact of actions on organizations rather than the impact on themselves or others as individuals. Some cadets argued that it hurts the military when unlawful/immoral actions are taken because the US (or military) can make enemies, and the perception of the military comes to be negative. Others argued that such actions can hurt morale and/or the ability to complete missions. The quote above, from Richard, is one example of these understandings. In fact, he gave more details on the negative impact

...because of the lack of support and the... hatred that is going to be going towards the military. So, we rely on support from the country [the military is in]. So if there is a gigantic outcry...they will make our job a lot harder... [T]hat difficulty with our job might cause us to fail at our mission.

Similarly, Anthony said

[A high level person in the Air Force said] that if you are given an order that basically doesn't advance the Air Force's mission ... then you can disregard it because it is not helpful. More realistically, it would

be more an order that would get you or people that are under your command killed unnecessarily.

Not much concern is articulated there for civilians, but there is concern for comrades and mission.

While the above cadets focused on mission completion and risk, others focused on rule of law (RL). RL includes the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) and the Constitution. Charles is one of ten cadets for whom RL is the basis for his future obedience. An order may be immoral or unethical and legal; if an order is legal, it requires obedience. Charles explained

[we] are Americans...We are not conscripted into this military. And we follow the Constitution, not people, because people can be corrupted. We swear an oath to the Constitution, and not people, and in our oath—our commission of office—we will obey the lawful orders of those appointed over us. If an order is not lawful, you are not required by law to follow it. And as an American volunteer for this service, you are not required to do anything that is against your—I mean, you might have to do stuff that is against your moral belief, but if it is against a law, you are not required to do it.

Randal also drew on the Constitution when he explained,

[S]ay in active duty, whether I am lieutenant or not, whoever my superior is makes like a bad judgment call or is doing something unconstitutional is probably the best reason for me to step in and disobey is because our duty as officers is to uphold the Constitution...That is in our oath. It is on the paper we sign. We affirm to uphold the Constitution of the United States.

In these cases, leaders are not romanticized, and followers are to take an active role in making decisions around obedience. These cadets in

particular use what is seemingly an objective measurement of legality—is it constitutional? A couple of cadets referenced other sources of legal standards and how they would raise questions to try to get the order changed so that they did not have to disobey.

Christine believed that she

...would probably disobey an order if I knew what I was being ordered to do was wrong—like by the books...If the standard is different than what you are telling me to do, then you know, I might do that. But I would probably try and go around that order and talk with somebody, you know, higher up maybe...to see if we should do it this way, even though we are being told to do it some other way. So I would probably make that argument and it might get changed, but I would probably do the right thing rather than whatever I was being ordered to do.

In her opinion, she would question and resist and “do the right thing,” potentially by skirting the chain of command. Another example of this questioning mentality comes from Mary, who explained that cadets have learned about lawful orders and they would need justification from their superior officer to disobey.

Well, one thing they at least teach us about—like I haven’t been in a situation like that, but they teach us about what a lawful order is and what an unlawful one is...[I]f somebody ordered me to do something that I know was, like, against the rules, and they didn’t have the justification for why they were doing [it], or something that is going to put people in danger, or other resources in danger...then I would first raise the concern to them so that I didn’t have to disobey. I could say, like, ‘Hey, why are we doing it this way? Did you consider that this might happen?’

Mary is explicit that there is an order to the actions

she would take if concerned about her directives and that she has been taught right from wrong, at least legally. She is not definitive about disobeying, but “raising concern” is the first step Mary would take if unsatisfied with the justification or legality.

In some cases, cadets argued that both moral and legal standards should be used. After Jonathan said he would not obey an order that is illegal, I asked “Illegal by what standards?” He answered the “UCMJ. Or...you know, basically if he was telling you to fire on civilians or something like that. Obviously you wouldn’t follow that. If I thought the order was morally or ethically wrong I wouldn’t follow it.” In his case, certain orders are wrong regardless of their legality.

In summation, some cadets did not use their moral beliefs per se to distinguish what they would and would not do; rather, they used rule of law to draw lines against unlawful violent actions. Others drew lines for orders in specific contexts, like abuse, unnecessary death or risk, or hurting the organization or mission. Some of those who did use their moral or ethical beliefs explained how they derived said morals from religion, or other personal histories. Now that we have an idea about what kinds of orders cadets view as problematic, the next section discusses beliefs about handling problematic orders.

Questioning vs. Questioning and Disobeying. Ideas of how to deal with problematic orders such as questioning and/or disobeying them often depends on where someone is on the romanticization – ethical followership continuum. Cadets who do not consider disobedience, who believe in obeying no matter what the order is, are fully on the “romance” side. These are the “conformists” in Collinsons’ (2006) analysis. Only three cadets said they would never disobey an order. Five cadets gave answers that are heavily biased toward the romance perspective, where they would believe in their command nearly without question. Of the five, three do articulate some degree of questioning or willingness to disobey.

For example, Travis explained, using an incident he had heard about, that some things he has the right to disobey—but leaders have more responsibility/ culpability than followers:

Not obey an order? If I feel that [if] a command would violate sort of like the rules of engagement, I would definitely not obey that. As a soldier, you do have a right to disobey a command if you deem it against [some other] rules that apply...But in the end the person who made the command is sort of responsible for that command and the actions and... that happen afterwards...

Those who are willing to ask questions but generally feel that superior officers are in the right, or that they still need to do as their superior says, are tilted toward romanticization. If a follower is open to questioning or disobeying orders, as those who hold “resistant” identities (Collinson, 2006) may be, they are open to ethical followership to some degree. In the middle are those like Christine and Mary, who would question to get out of disobeying but do not go past “doing the right thing.” Then there are those who would simply disobey orders that they cannot have on their conscience and/or which are illegal, who are fully on the ethical followership side.

Cadets willing to question and/ or disobey demonstrate at least some belief in ethical followership. This accounts for 28 cadets’ views, including those who would question and/or disobey and those who saw themselves not obeying an order but who did not explain further. They may not be at the “ethical followership” end of spectrum, but they are somewhere between the middle and the ethical end, depending on their beliefs about what it is they would do if given an unethical order.

Discussion

Arguably, the cadets’ norms and beliefs reflect larger society (see Sondheimer, Toner, & Wilson, 2013). Currently, most research on perceptions around

leadership and followership is based in business settings. This study addresses the concepts in a different, but important setting. The military has a lot to offer this arena since, as Ulmer (2010) argues, it is a place where younger adults can learn and practice leadership skills.

Research on ROTC cadets is important for understanding students’ receiving military leadership training in the 21st century. Research on the leadership/followership beliefs of future officers has potential to facilitate development of more responsible and ethical behavior in multiple arenas. People in the military and DoD should have an idea of what kinds of orders (should) require questioning or disobeying. If the perceptions and beliefs of cadets do not match expectations, those in leadership may need to develop more or different training. Ulmer (2010) pointed out that “...sensors and mechanisms for responding to arrogant, abusive leaders who have not created a public spectacle are less well developed” (p.141). Having an idea about and responding to the attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions cadets hold before they enter the officer ranks is a good start to preempting problematic personnel.

Given ideals about military ethics and the sometimes-contradictory nature of orders (on one hand, always obey orders; on the other hand, never obey certain kinds of orders), understanding cadets’ perceptions is critical for engagement with cadets as they. Those understandings are fundamental to determining if curricular or other changes are necessary to push cadets towards beliefs in line with ethical military standards.

Limitations and Future Research

Future research should include cadets throughout the United States and control for selection bias, as: it’s possible very engaged cadets or those definitely staying in the program are the ones who volunteered to participate. Future studies should compare cadets to students who have left ROTC

to see how they may differ. Additionally, Air Force and Army cadets may be different from cadets in other branches; future studies should include all branches. Participants in other officer training programs should be studied and, if possible, compared to ROTC cadets.

This study cannot predict behaviors. I cannot speak to whether or not cadets will ever question or disobey real orders. That requires a longitudinal study following cadets after they begin military service.

Conclusion

Through this research, I found evidence of both ROL and EF among cadets. While not all cadets had concerns about what they could be asked to do during their service, most of them did believe that they had limits to what they would do. Cadets articulated beliefs about what they should or would not obey and stated when they would question orders involving unethical behavior, including covering up issues, harming personnel, and killing innocents.

In spite of those expressed beliefs, I see reasons for concern. First, cadets did not have a unified idea about what kinds of orders are illegal or illegitimate. Second, cadets' ideas about when to disobey ranged from refusing to embarrass soldiers to refusing to kill innocents to not wanting the military to look bad. Problematically, those who felt that it was inappropriate to embarrass soldiers did not speak about killing innocents. It is alarming that not all cadets could think of orders they would disobey or question and that not all answers included civilian casualties or other illegal or immoral actions.

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