ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Views on an officer career – the relationship between personality, leadership expectations and perceived qualities

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BACKGROUND
The Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) have had difficulties in recruiting a sufficient amount of cadets to the officer program during the period with an all-volunteer force.

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE
Data were collected from different officer programs. 318 respondents fostered in the all-volunteer force (AVF) system completed the questionnaire and a cross-sectional design was used where cadets received a questionnaire at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of their training.

RESULTS
The results show that the informants perceived a clear distinction between leadership challenges in the short and long term. The cadets rate their practical knowledge/experience and gaining trust as most challenging in the short term, and personnel supply and reorganization in the long term. Younger cadets rate leadership challenges higher than older cadets do, which is in line with maturing as a human being and gaining more experience. Results based on personality were consistent with previous studies. Two of the future challenges for cadets, short-term leadership and knowledge challenges, showed associations with extraversion and neuroticism.

CONCLUSIONS
The results illustrate important topics to be stressed during the three year long officer program, in order to prepare cadets both with knowledge and skills but also with confidence and trust. This is of particular importance as the need to increase the number of cadets graduating from the academic officer program is growing. It implies that more and more cadets will be recruited directly from the basic military training, i.e., being young with relatively low military and leadership experience.

KEY WORDS
personality; leadership; officer

BACKGROUND

The necessity for the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) to recruit enough officers was a challenging issue during the years with an all-volunteer force (AVF), 2011-2017. A number of strategic decisions have had a great impact on the SAF; foremost is the big downsizing of the SAF, which has been going on since the late 1990s (Nilsson & Österberg, 2021; Österberg et al., 2021). In the mid 1990s, the SAF changed orientation from an invasion-based to an operational defense with a multinational focus (Hedlund & Österberg, 2013). Additionally, conscription was abolished in 2010 in favor of a force based on voluntary participation (AVF). Adding to the huge downsizing, the recruitment pool for the armed forces in general in western societies (Szvircsev Tresch, 2008) has been reduced. The situation on the Swedish labor market has been of advantage for job seekers in the last decade, hence making it harder for the SAF to find new recruits, as there have been many jobs available. Österberg et al. (2021) noted that voluntary recruitment in Sweden has been a challenge since 2010, and the SAF need for soldiers was not met in any single year with a voluntary personnel supply system. The difficulties in recruiting soldiers also had a negative impact on the recruitment to the 3-year officer program (OP). However, Sweden's Defence Policy 2015 marked an end to the downsizing when introducing an increased defense budget and a renewed regional focus, emphasizing national defense once again.

There were also huge investments in recruiting, the retention of soldiers, a renewed civil defense, increased operational warfighting capability, and reactivation of conscription was introduced in 2018 (Österberg & Nilsson, 2019).

The strategic decisions and the difficulties in recruiting with the AVF have led to a shortage of officers in the SAF, and a strong need to increase the number of cadets graduating from the OP in order to fill the officer ranks. In addition, there will be huge retirements within the next 5-7 years in the SAF, making the challenge greater. A consequence of the lack of officers and the relatively new two-category officer system (soon to be replaced by a three-category officer system) is that many of those graduating from the military academy are suddenly put in a position where they are supposed to lead a platoon, with subordinates, far more experienced NCOs. Therefore, it is of importance to study cadets' perceptions of leadership challenges and perceived qualities critical for the military profession associated with their forthcoming employment within the SAF.

LEADERSHIP

Before the growth of the Big Five personality theory, researchers tried to find traits that predicted leadership success, and they decided that leadership success was contextual, depending on the environment and different situations. Barrick et al. (2001) described how the situation changed with the development of the Big Five, and much research supports the predictive ability of some traits for leadership. Unsurprisingly, conscientiousness has been shown to predict success in most jobs, as have low scores in neuroticism. Judge et al. (2002a) found that extraversion relates positively to leadership success. The meta-analysis by Judge et al. (2002b) revealed fairly strong multiple correlations between the Big Five traits and leadership criteria, suggesting that the Big Five typology is a successful foundation for examining the dispositional predictors of leadership.

DEVELOPMENTAL AND TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

The importance of effective leadership has been studied largely in the military context, and findings show that good leadership correlates positively with e.g. combat effectiveness (e.g. Ahronson & Cameron, 2007; Maguen & Litz, 2006). The developmental leadership model is the SAF leadership model (Larsson et al., 2003, 2018) and a Scandinavian version of transformational leadership (Bass, 1998, 1999).

The developmental leadership model indicates that leadership can be understood from a number of interacting factors. The interaction between leader characteristics and contextual characteristics forms leadership styles/behaviors. Two key classes of leader characteristics are recognized: basic prerequisites and desirable competencies. The more favorable basic prerequisites a leader has, the greater the potential to develop the desirable competencies and vice versa (Larsson et al., 2018). However, neither of them is sufficient in itself, since this is also affected by contextual characteristics. The contextual characteristics shown in the model should be regarded as examples of these kinds of conditions. The model comprises three basic types of leadership styles: developmental leadership, conventional leadership and destructive leadership. The writing on transformational leadership and the full range of the leadership model (Bass, 1998, 1999) heavily influences this part. However, some adjustments to the Scandinavian context have been made to the original model (Larsson et al., 2017). These include a reduction of the number of factors in the transformational domain and an elaboration of what Bass (1998, 1999) labels transactional leadership (Larsson et al., 2003). Three characteristics of developmental leadership have been suggested: 1) authentic role model, 2) individualized consideration, 3) inspirational motivation (Larsson et al., 2018).

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DESTRUCTIVE LEADERSHIP

Several studies on destructive leadership have established the negative relationship between destructive leadership behaviors and job satisfaction (Tepper et al., 2004). According to Einarsen et al. (2007), a destructive leader has a negative impact on subordinates' job satisfaction by being tyrannical (humiliates, belittles, manipulates subordinates, etc.), derailing (deceives, bullies, harasses subordinates, etc.), or passive (avoids decision-making, does not get involved with subordinates, etc.). There are also other definitions of destructive leadership that emphasize destructive leadership behaviors as volitional behavior (Krasikova et al., 2013). Destructive leadership behaviors have been indicated as the most destructive negative behavior in both military and civilian contexts (Fors Brandebo et al., 2016). Skogstad et al. (2014) argue that laissez-faire leadership can be defined as a follower-centered form of avoidance-based leadership and could be perceived as active avoidance of subordinates when they are in need of leadership and support.

OFFICER QUALITIES

The qualities essential for a military officer are numerous (Thompson & Bailey, 1993), and the list of preferred qualities would be extensive if one were made. Grönqvist and Lindqvist (2016) found that platoon officer training had a strong positive effect on civilian leadership, and that platoon officer training increased the probability of becoming a manager by 75%. However, some general characteristics should be addressed as critical for the officer profession: leadership, discipline and loyalty, abstract thinking, and the ability to act and lead during difficult conditions (Langholtz, 1998). The military officer should represent the educator, specialist, leader, and planner, and these functions come with the assignment within the organizational function. Caforio (2018) summarizes: the officer corps has constantly been a dynamic component of armed forces: it is their leadership, it holds and conveys expertise, it determines the military mind set, and it upholds and revises the military ethic (Caforio, 2018); and the situation for today's officers will almost certainly grow more complex in the future. Torgersen et al. (2013) showed that the element of the unforeseen will be more likely in the future.

PERSONALITY IN THE MILITARY

The Big Five or the Five Factor Model of personality. The Big Five consists of five broad personality dimensions (see e.g., Barrick & Mount, 1991; John & Sriva-stava, 1999). The Five-Factor Model of personality (FFM) stems from Costa and McCrae (1992) and has a slightly different structure; for example, values are considered a facet of openness in the FFM, but not in the original Big Five. However, the FFM suggests that personality comprises five independent dimensions: openness to experience, conscientiousness, emotional stability (neuroticism), agreeableness, and extraversion (Barrick & Mount, 1991). De Fruyt and Salgado (2003) showed that conscientiousness and neuroticism predict job performance across jobs, countries and assessment methods.

Increased attention to the health of soldiers and officers deployed to places such as Iraq and Afghanistan has increased the focus on the possibility of predicting strong psychological functioning (Erbes et al., 2011). Schaubroeck et al. (2011) also stress the fact that individuals in many occupations, such as military and fire fighters, have strong features to cope with psychologically demanding tasks in their everyday life. The period after the Cold War gave rise to a new way of warfare where peace-enforcement missions or separations of parties replaced the traditional peacekeeping missions by force (Soeters et al., 2006). Bartone et al. (2009) found extraversion to be a significant predictor of military leadership amongst army cadets in field exercise, while conscientiousness was better in predicting their academic achievement. Fiedler et al. (2004) found conscientiousness, agreeableness and emotional stability to be predictors of successful job performance in a military context. Salimi et al. (2011) found extraversion to be positively related to effective management style, while neuroticism was found to have negative relations with military leadership. A study by Sümer et al. (2001) found conscientiousness, and agreeableness/extraversion to be the personality traits rated by senior officers as most relevant and important for a successful military career.

AIM

The changing nature of the officer profession, the organizational growth in the SAF and the importance of a well-adopted personality make it interesting to study how cadets perceive the leadership challenges they identify when starting their officer career. Furthermore, it is of interest to ask what qualities they address as significant for an officer, and what relationship personality has to these issues.

The aims of this study were to identify the expected future leadership challenges among military cadets, to determine the perceived qualities critical for the military profession, and to assess the relationship between the leadership challenges, qualities, personality and demographics.

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

PARTICIPANTS

A cross-sectional design was used where cadets received a questionnaire at the end of their training. Data were collected through pen and paper questionnaires. Three hundred eighteen cadets completed the questionnaires. The sample comprised 85% men, and the mean age was 23.4 years at the beginning of the OP (range 19-37). Participants were divided into two age groups: 19-22 years at the beginning of the OP (42%) and 23 years or older (58%). Three-fourths (76%) worked in the SAF prior to the OP or came directly from the basic military training. Twenty-three percent had participated in an international operation. The majority (55%) belonged to the Army, 24% to the Air Force and 21% to the Navy. In the analyses, the Army were compared to the all other branches. Subgroup comparisons were performed using the chi-square test and *t*-test. Statistical significance was assumed at $p < .05$. Data were analyzed through SPSS 25.0.

MEASURES

Leadership challenges. The survey contained 12 items with regards to the question "What do you see as your biggest leadership challenges, in the short term (1-5 years) and long term (≥ 6 years)?" The items derived from a qualitative pilot study with officer cadets concerning leadership challenges. Responses were given on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*a very low extent*) to 5 (*a very high extent*). Explorative factor analysis was performed using principal axis factoring with oblimin rotation to study possible factors. The analysis resulted in three factors:
1. Leadership – 7 items: gain trust, gain respect, manage responsibility, take decisions, find my role, lead by example, lead more experienced individuals; $\alpha = .78/.91$ for short and long term respectively.
2. Management – 3 items: organizational change, administration, personnel administration; $\alpha = .67/.77$ for short and long term respectively.
3. Knowledge/skills – 2 items: theoretical knowledge, practical knowledge; $\alpha = .78/.89$ for short and long term respectively.

Differences between short term and long term were studied at both the factor and item level using the paired-samples *t*-test.

Officer qualities. Officer quality was measured using the Caforio and Nuciari (1994) index concerning what should characterize a good officer. The cadets in this study were instructed to choose three out of 17 qualities, which they considered most important regarding their profession.

Personality. Personality was measured using the Single Item Measures of Personality (SIMP; Woods & Hampson, 2005), which is a short form of the Big Five or the FFM. The SIMP consists of five bipolar items (scale ranging from 1 to 9), presenting two dichotomous statements for each of the dimensions. Although it is a brief measurement scale, the SIMP has been shown to have both convergent and divergent validity (Woods & Hampson, 2005). Originally, when evaluated, the SIMP showed convergent and off-diagonal divergent properties, their pattern of criterion correlations and their reliability when compared with four longer Big Five measures.

ETHICS

The study was carried out in accordance with the ethical principles of human research (Swedish Research Council, 2017), i.e., the principles of respect for autonomy, beneficence, no maleficence and justice.

RESULTS

LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES

Table 1 shows that officer cadets see knowledge/skills as their biggest challenge in the short term, but management challenges were seen as bigger in the long term. At the item level, the cadets rate their practical knowledge/experience and gaining trust as most challenging in the short term, and personnel supply and organizational changes in the long term.

The table also reveals that the challenges decrease with time; there is a statistically significant decrease in all items except the ones that belong to the management factor. Instead, two of three challenges in the management factor increase from short to long term.

SUBGROUP DIFFERENCES

Women rated leadership challenges (3.31 vs. 3.00, $p < .01$) and knowledge/skills challenges (3.65 vs. 3.21, $p < .01$) higher than men in the short term. In the long term women rated management lower than men (2.79 vs. 3.15, $p < .05$).

Younger cadets rated leadership challenges in the long term higher than did older cadets (2.67 vs. 2.42, $p < .05$). Army cadets rated management challenges in the short term lower than other cadets, and in the long-term they rated leadership challenges and knowledge/skills challenges lower. Cadets with experience from international operations rated leadership (2.76 vs. 3.14, $p < .001$) and knowledge/skills

Table 1

Leadership challenges in short and long term, mean and standard deviation on a five-point Likert scale (n = 130)

Variable	Short term		Long term		*p*
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	
Factor					
Leadership	3.05	0.69	2.52	0.91	< .001
Management	2.81	0.89	3.09	0.92	< .001
Knowledge/skills	3.29	1.06	2.32	0.92	< .001
Item level					
Leadership					
To lead more experienced individuals	3.22	1.18	2.37	1.12	< .001
To gain trust	3.42	1.05	2.63	1.17	< .001
To gain respect	3.24	1.03	2.58	1.13	< .001
To find my role	3.13	1.02	2.31	0.96	< .001
To manage responsibility	2.71	1.01	2.57	1.17	.005
To make decisions	2.65	1.00	2.46	1.12	< .001
To lead by example	2.96	1.07	2.80	1.22	< .001
Management					
Personnel supply	2.92	1.14	3.28	1.14	< .001
Administration	2.89	1.20	2.86	1.07	ns
Organizational changes	2.62	1.10	3.11	1.10	< .001
Knowledge/skills					
My practical knowledge/experience	3.45	1.22	2.32	0.98	< .001
My theoretical knowledge/experience	3.12	1.14	2.34	0.99	< .001

Note. t-tests were used to test significance of differences between mean values; ns – not significant.

(2.90 vs. 3.39, *p* < .001) lower than cadets with no experience in the short term. Cadets who were in the military directly before entering OP rated leadership challenges in the long term lower than cadets who entered OP from a civil occupation (2.45 vs. 2.71, *p* < .05).

OFFICER QUALITIES

The cadets reported that the most important quality an officer should have was by far leadership (69%), followed by responsibility (41%) and cooperation (24%).

SUBGROUP DIFFERENCES

Female cadets more frequently selected loyalty than men (23% vs. 10%, *p* < .05). Cadets who came from a civil occupation before the OP more often selected

responsibility (56% vs. 40%, *p* < .05) and discipline (9% vs. 2%, *p* < .05) compared to cadets who were in the military before entering OP.

PERSONALITY

The five personality factors were correlated with leadership challenges and officer qualities. Significant correlations are shown in Table 2.

Extraversion and neuroticism correlate significant with leadership challenges and knowledge challenges in the short term. Cadets who are more extraverted see these two challenges to a lower extent than less extraverted cadets do. Cadets who are more neurotic see these challenges more than cadets who are more stable. Furthermore, personality showed a few correlations with qualities perceived as important for an officer. Cadets high on agreeableness perceive social ability as more important and expertise of less importance. Conscientious cadets rate certainty higher.

Table 2

Correlations between leadership challenges, officer qualities and personality (n = 272)

Variable	O	C	E	A	N
Mean (*SD*)	6.0 (1.49)	5.2 (1.65)	3.7 (1.69)	5.9 (1.81)	5.0 (1.73)
Correlations					
Leadership challenges					
Short-term leadership			−.24**		.24**
Short-term management					
Short-term knowledge			−.14*		.16**
Long-term leadership					
Long-term management					
Long-term knowledge					
Officer qualities					
Certainty		.13*			
Empathy	.17*				
General knowledge	.15*				
Social ability				.15*	
Expertise				−.12*	

Note. *p < .05, **p < .01. O – openness; C – conscientiousness; E – extraversion; A – agreeableness; N – neuroticism.

Openness correlates positively with empathy and general knowledge.

DISCUSSION

The aims of this study were to investigate the expected future leadership challenges among military cadets, to study the perceived qualities critical for the military profession, and to study the relationship between the leadership challenges, qualities, personality and demographics. The results show that the cadets perceived a clear distinction between leadership challenges in the short and long term. As the SAF is growing, a bigger proportion of officer cadets will come directly from basic military training, whereas earlier there was a big share of cadets starting the OP having worked some years as an employed soldier. This could mean that there will be more cadets in the OP with less leadership experience, expecting different leadership challenges. At the item level, the cadets rate their practical knowledge/experience and gaining trust as most challenging in the short term, and personnel supply and organizational changes as most challenging in the long term. This seem logical following the usual way of group development and group processes. In addition, there is the challenge of becoming a platoon commander, with a far more experienced specialist officer as one's deputy

platoon commander. Furthermore, in the long term as the SAF is growing, the importance of working with sufficient equipment will also be a struggle. To supply the organization with equipment is a time consuming project that will take many years, which could raise concern among the cadets regarding whether they believe that equipment will be sufficient in the future. Younger cadets rate leadership challenges higher than older cadets do, which is in line with maturing as a human being and gaining more experience. This underlines the importance of having an experienced specialist officer/deputy platoon commander to support the newly graduated officer. Furthermore, the same pattern was found for cadets with or without experience of international operations. Cadets with experience from international operations rated leadership challenges and knowledge/skills lower than cadets with no experience in the short term. As previously mentioned, the restriction of range is salient in this sample; hence we argue the non-existence of relationships between personality and challenges in the long term. The results also reveal that the challenges decrease with time; there is a statistically significant decrease in all items except the ones that belong to the management factor. As an officer climb the ranks, at some point in his/her career, he/she will be working as staff officer. That would eventually mean more time spent behind a desk, working with management or

HR-related tasks. Therefore, the fact that the cadets rate management higher in a long perspective is reasonable.

The weak perception of the necessity of patriotism can perhaps be explained by the fact that Sweden is sometimes seen as one of the least patriotic countries in the world, partly because the country has not been affected by war for 200 years. Sweden has also traditionally had a weak base of support for conservative ideology.

There are limitations to this study that need to be addressed. First, as mentioned, the sample consisted of a group that was strongly pre-selected. This means that there is a strong element of restriction of range in the data, which of course affects the results. Furthermore, the data are self-reported. Nevertheless, this has limited implications for the generalization as officer cadets also in the future will need to pass extensive tests.

The results based on personality were consistent with previous studies. Two of the future challenges for cadets, short-term leadership and knowledge challenges, showed associations with extraversion and neuroticism. In meta-analyses of the relationship between personality and leadership, extraversion has been identified as the strongest and most consistent correlate of leadership (Judge et al., 2002a; Bono & Judge, 2004). In the military setting the two personality factors extraversion and neuroticism have shown associations with management style among leaders (Salimi et al., 2011) and been found to be significant predictors of leadership (Bartone et al., 2009). The Swedish cadets are scanned and selected based on personality. Furthermore, the cadets are socialized during the educational process, which may affect the perceived challenges as well as the perceived qualities of an officer. The restriction of range may have affected the fact that personality factors did not show more significant results, and that there was no effect on perceived long-term challenges and only a few correlations with officer qualities. In this light, it may appear somewhat surprising that neuroticism still showed significant relations with short-term challenges.

Many of the future graduated officers will lead more military experienced subordinates. This study has mapped the perceived short- and long-term challenges seen by the cadets. The results show that leadership is by far the most important quality of an officer according to the cadets. Leadership challenges were also what cadets saw as their biggest challenge in a short-term perspective, while management was seen as more challenging in a long-term perspective. Younger cadets and cadets who entered the OP from the civilian sphere rated the leadership challenges in the short term even higher.

The results illustrate important topics to be stressed during the three-year OP, in order to prepare cadets both with knowledge and skills but also with confidence and trust. This is of particular importance as the need to increase the number of cadets graduating from the academic officer program is growing. It implies that more and more cadets will be recruited directly from the basic military training, i.e., at a young age, with relatively low military and leadership experience.

Disclosure

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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