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# UNDERSTANDING THE PROCESS OF MILITARY LEADERS' DEVELOPMENT AS PROFESSIONALS

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## ABSTRACT

Becoming a leader within his or her profession entails being professional, which is exemplified through one's professional identity, knowledge, and practice acquired throughout his or her career. These learning take place both during formal professional development (specifically leadership development) programs or informal learning within the workplace. However, the process of becoming a professional leader through learning cannot be taken for granted. Within this process of becoming, how leaders develop and grow as professionals through "translating" informal or formal learning experience into "concrete" professional identity, knowledge and practice is not entirely understood.

Leadership is being seen as the panacea to increasingly challenging and ill-structured problems within many organizations and professions. However, the profound transformation that continues in every domain covering business, education, and the military, gives a feeling that there is this constant leadership gap. Among the many professions that are interested in developing their leaders to meet these challenges, the military profession is particularly concerned with how leaders develop if they did not take part in real-world military missions that strongly contributes to affirming their professional identity. Military professionals continue to face a "volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA)" operating environment today and they need to be adaptive and agile in both thought and action. Within such an environment, understanding how military leaders develop as professionals has become more important in developing commitment and performing consistently.

However, literature reviewed suggests that no substantive theory of leadership development process has been validated comprehensively and empirically, as understanding of what gets developed in the process is not entirely clear. Most leadership development remain as individual leader development and rarely intergrate with the level of leadership as a process. Using the identity lens in development efforts could bridge these two levels and shift the focus from self-development to other development and from a leader development focus to leadership development. Impacting leaders' self-identity in the context of professional development will demand deep learning and for military organizations that see institutional training as professional development for their personnel, professional learning then becomes critical. There is a need to go beyond leadership skills and competencies to consider the ontological dimension of professional practice and of learning to be professional.

The paper will present findings from an examination of military leaders' perceptions

of professional development trajectories through three in-depth interviews. These military leaders have sufficient leadership development experience and had completed professional development programs that are designed to develop military leaders' knowledge, competencies and dispositions toward their profession in preparation for higher appointments. Through a qualitative approach, this study aims to develop an initial theoretical understanding of military leaders' development as professionals and derive the implications for designing military leadership development programs. These implications will contribute to the understanding of the changing nature of work for workplace learning and learning in continuing professional development.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Leadership is being seen as the panacea to increasingly challenging and ill-structured problems within many organizations and professions (Dempsey, 2012; Storey, 2011; Yammarino, 2013). However, the profound transformation that continues in every domain covering business, education, and the military, gives a feeling that there is this constant leadership gap (Day & Halpin, 2004). Among the many professions that are interested in developing their leaders to meet these challenges, the military profession is particularly concerned with how leaders develop their professionalism if they did not take part in real-world military missions that strongly contributes to the affirmation of their professional identity (Larsson et al., 2006). This is even more critical given that military leaders are leading in "volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA)" (Stiehm, 2002, p. 6) operating environments today. Military leaders therefore need to develop themselves as professionals who are able to embody their professional identity, knowledge, and practice (Snider, 2003) to face these challenges.

This study aims to describe military leaders' perceptions of how they develop as professionals. Using a qualitative approach akin to grounded theory, in-depth interviews were conducted with three military leaders after their participation in professional development programs that were designed to develop military leaders' knowledge, competencies and dispositions toward their profession in preparation for higher appointments. These military leaders would also have sufficient leadership development experience by the time they were interviewed. Through a qualitative approach, this exploratory study aims to develop initial insights about military leaders' perception of their development as professionals. The implications for designing professional development for military leaders will be discussed. These implications will contribute to the understanding of the changing nature of work for workplace learning and learning in continuing professional development.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Compared to the initial assessment on the lack of study in the field of leadership development (Avolio & Chan, 2008; Day, Zaccaro, & Halpin, 2004; Murphy & Riggio, 2003), despite the voluminous amount of research on leadership, Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, and McKee (2014) note the significant increase in research contributions to understanding leadership development more recently (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009). However, they argue that much more needs to be learned in the nascent fields of leadership development (Day et al., 2014), especially

using evidenced-based research (Avolio et al., 2009). One problem that was identified is that many leadership development research do not distinguish explicitly the difference between developing leaders as individual and developing leadership as a process (Day, 2000). Another issue is the realization of the need to pay more attention to development, and not just leadership theories, given that individual leader development occurs in the context of ongoing adult development (Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2009). Complicating these is how professional organizations see their leaders learn and grow within their professions. For organizations such as the military that view leadership as their foundation of professionalism (Dempsey, 2012), the problem of understanding what constitutes being professional is not apparent to their leaders. Intersecting leadership development with professional learning further complicates the process in developing military leaders as professionals.

### **How Do Leaders Develop as Adult?**

The theories of adult development provide a useful framework for understanding leadership development and how leaders develop as adult (Day et al., 2009; Day & O'Connor, 2003; Mumford & Manley, 2003). Amongst the adult development theories, the constructive-developmental theory is the most frequently used in the management and leadership literature (McCauley, Drath, Palus, O'Connor, & Baker, 2006). Kegan (1980) suggested the "constructive-developmental" term with a social-constructivist assumption focusing on sense-making and individual psychosocial growth within a social context (Florio Zintel, 2012). As an organizing principle, the *orders of development* (McCauley et al., 2006) regulate how people make sense of themselves in challenging environment through successive "developmental movement" (Day et al., 2014, p. 75).

McCauley et al. (2006) label these movement as Dependent, Independent, and Inter-independent orders, and surmise that effective organizational leadership are demonstrated by leaders operating at higher order (Independent) than those at lower order (Dependent). They suggest that transactional leaders and transformational leaders (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987) enact leadership most congruent with the Dependent order and Independent order respectively. They explain that Dependent order leaders define themselves through interpersonal relationships similar to transactional leaders' reliance on their relationship with followers whereas Independent order leaders define themselves through self-determined identity and is similar to transformational leaders' personal value system that motivate their followers (2006, p. 639).

Although how leadership development interventions impact participants' order of development was hardly studied by any leadership research (Day et al., 2014; McCauley et al., 2006), Day et al. (2014) suggest devising a typology of individual differences in developmental trajectories to better understand and determine how leaders develop over time. Cook-Greuter (2004) submits that an adult developmental perspective allows for a better match between leaders and their functions and offers a framework to better understand and assess the individuals, teams and organizational capacity and growth potential (p. 80). Nevertheless, these models focus exclusively on the individual leader's development (Day & O'Connor, 2003) and do not study leadership development as a "multilevel development process" (Avolio, 2004, p. 94).

## **Multilevel Leadership Development Process**

Leadership development studies that focus solely on the individual leader's level would not be sufficiently comprehensive. Avolio (2004) opines that a comprehensive model of leadership development needs to include the relationship-level with followers, peers, and superiors, and the unit and organizational culture and climate-level. On the other hand, Day and O'Connor (2003) present a multidimensional approach with a horizontal dimension of leadership constructs (personal, interpersonal, and relational) and a vertical dimension of development target (individual, dyad/group, organization). These authors argue that seeing developmental resources of human, social and systems capitals that traverse the above two axes enhances the understanding of the leadership development process (2003, p. 18).

The body of work on authentic leadership development (ALD) theory could also contain the essential building blocks in developing a more comprehensive theory of leadership development that reflects the multilevel nature of organizations according to Avolio and Chan (2008). They present a foundational view of the authentic leadership development process from the perspective of the individual leader as a starting point for building a more sophisticated multilevel model of authentic leadership development. They argue for charting development "using individual person rather than norms as the yardstick" (2008, p. 225), recognizing that leaders have different starting development. The model emphasizes that leadership is "a continuous process of becoming" that "occurs potentially across the entire [leader's] life-span" (Avolio & Chan, 2008, p. 224). They add that the individual's self-concept (i.e., identity), which organized the past and present experiences, is at the core of this process of becoming.

Day and Harrison (2007) also believe that "identity" can be leveraged to better bridge the developmental level between leader development and leadership development. They argue that by incorporating an identity lens in development efforts, relational and collective identities could be included to and facilitate the development of "social capital in [the] organizations" (p. 368). Lord and Hall (2005) propose that leaders taking on relational and collective identities could shift the development focus from self-development to other development and from a leader development focus to leadership development. And when leaders identify themselves as leader, they will seek self-developmental opportunities in order to improve their leadership self-efficacy (Day & Harrison, 2007). Day and Harrison (2007) conclude that leader and leadership development efforts could integrate "an identity lens" (p. 371), since the exercise of leadership is a complex human endeavor.

## **Learning in Leadership Development**

Learning could be another lens for understanding leadership as a relational process (Antonacopoulou & Bento, 2011). As both leadership and learning are processes of *being and becoming*, Antonacopoulou and Bento (2011) suggest that "leadership is learning" (p. 74). Because of its central role in leader development, Van Velsor, McCauley, and Ruderman (2010) also argue that leaders' ability to learn is critical to developing leaders. As such, leadership development efforts need to pay attention to the adult learning approaches that is being adopted (Avolio & Chan, 2008). One

learning approach is Lord and Hall's (2005) model of leadership skill acquisition that suggest when leaders progress from novice to expert, they "become increasingly capable of flexibly drawing on internal resources such as identities, values, and mental representations of subordinates and situations" (2005, p. 592). Other aspects in the context of expertise development focus on learning as the acquisition of knowledge and skills; as self-directed and self-organized effort to improve performance; as development of a personal identity; or as enculturation (Boshuizen, Bromme, & Gruber, 2004, p. 7).

However, most leadership intervention studies do not clearly articulate what, if indeed any, learning has occurred (Avolio & Chan, 2008). Most leadership training and leadership development programs also focused on a "surface learning" approach (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Ramsden, 2003) with learning outcomes pegging only at the Kirkpatrick's level 2 outcomes (Avolio & Chan, 2008). Whereas, deep learning goes "beyond these overt signs to what is being signified (i.e., meanings, context, assumptions, etc.) to achieve a better understanding of what is to be learned" (p. 218) and must "impact on one's implicit understanding of leadership, one's self-concept, and one's role as a leader" (p. 218) in leadership development (Avolio & Chan, 2008).

Moreover, Riggio (2008) suggests that organizational leaders are also "practitioners" of leadership (p. 387) that remain as students of their profession. Similar to the complex practice of medicine, law, or any other profession, the practice of leadership is a continual learning process for leaders to find ways to improve and learn how to lead better (Riggio, 2008). Policy makers and stakeholders have also emphasized the need for educational leadership development to be more closely tied to its context of use (Ng, 2013). As such, how professional learning impact leadership development remains critical to understanding the process of military leaders' development as professionals.

### **Gaps in Current Research**

The literature reviewed suggests that no substantive theory of leadership development process has been verified empirically (Avolio & Chan, 2008). It is also not entirely clear what gets developed in the leadership development process (Day & Halpin, 2004). But Day et al. (2014) argue that whatever leadership theory being used may not directly impact the effective development of individual leaders and the leadership processes. Therefore, understanding and enhancing the developmental processes is important consideration for leadership development.

The theories of adult development provide a useful framework for understanding leadership development at the individual leaders' level (Day & O'Connor, 2003; Mumford & Manley, 2003). Specifically, the constructive-developmental theory (Kegan, 1982, 1994) is helpful to the scientific study of leadership development process by examining different individual developmental trajectories and devising trajectories typology for better understanding of how leaders develop and change over time (Day et al., 2014). However, the use of this theory within the field of leadership development remains infrequent (Day et al., 2014). Moreover, focusing exclusively on individual leader's development, the adult development theories will not be sufficient in elucidating the multilevel leadership development process (Avolio,

2004).

A comprehensive theory of leadership development needs to go beyond the individual leader-level to include the relationship-level as well as the organizational culture and climate-level (Avolio, 2004). However, the understanding of multilevel leadership development remains limited (Day et al., 2014; Day & Harrison, 2007). This arises from the fact that there has been no empirical work that explicitly focused on the relationship between social networks and leadership development or the role of systems in leadership development (Day & O'Connor, 2003). Avolio and Chan (2008) suggest that leaders' self-identity can be induced through deep learning within leadership development. Self-identity is part of the professional being, which is the ontological dimension of being professional. However, most professional development continues to focus on narrowly defined skills or competencies, overlooking this dimension (Dall'Alba, 2009). Although Day and O'Connor's (2003) proposal of approaching the leadership development process with the dimensions of development target, development resources, and leadership construct, and the ALD theory reviewed by Avolio and Chan (2008) are possible approaches, they remain as sound theory building that have yet to be verified empirically (Day & O'Connor, 2003). Visibly lacking in extant research are studies that characterize and theorize leadership development through the actual leadership experiences. Therefore, the factors influencing leadership development in practice are not well understood.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

In view of the gap in extant research, the research question to be addressed in this study is: "What are the dominant developmental stages that shaped the leadership development experience of military leaders in becoming professionals?"

## **METHOD**

To understand leadership development from the perspective of leaders, we propose to use a qualitative approach akin to grounded theory. This approach is chosen as it facilitates the interpretation of common factors arising from the research participants' leadership development experiences, as well as their interrelationships (Creswell, 2013). Since empirical studies of leadership development are generally lacking, this study serves as an exploratory attempt to understand how it occurs in practice. The results of this study can be used to inform future attempts at building a grounded theory of leadership development.

Within leadership research, Parry (1998) argues that the "interviewing strategy should be the core data gathering" and "interviewing over observation as the predominant source of data" (p. 96). The researchers agree with Parry's (1998) argument that the social processes of leadership, similarly for leadership development, are not easily observable, and hence interview was selected as the key method for this study. Our study thus comprises in-depth interviews with three military officers after they have completed their command and staff course. All the officers consented to participate in writing and the University's Ethics Committee approved our research study.

## **Participants**

The research participants were mid-level military officers who had just completed a command and staff course that included leadership development component. These participants were chosen because the participants of this course had similar military leadership, leadership development and professional learning experiences in a “common context” (Kempster, 2006, p. 8). On the average, they had at least 12 years of leadership experience in operational and staff appointments. Therefore, they had sufficient experience in leadership position from their past appointments to provide a comprehensive view of leadership development in a military context. These officers were relatively senior in rank and had completed a similar range of professional military education and training, and leadership development programs. As this is an exploratory study, it was felt that the common features of participants’ leadership development could be more effectively pinpointed by controlling for the variation of their profile. This will serve as baseline for future studies where subject variation could be systematically introduced.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Three face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted for the research participants after they have completed the command and staff course. The initial questions were based on provisional concepts and substantive theories derived from the literature review. The interviewees were asked to describe the timeline of critical events that shaped their learning how to lead by drawing upon the ideas of the constructive-developmental theory in the pre-interview question (Kuhnert & Russell, 1990). These initial interview questions only served as beginning guidelines so as not to limit the amount and type of data needed for the discovery of the leaders’ leadership development experiences during their professional life.

The interview questions were structured into the form of initial open-ended, intermediate, and ending questions (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012). These overlapping questions allowed the researcher to return to earlier threads in order to gain more information. When necessary, further probes to elucidate leaders’ personal developmental experience were added. The officers were encouraged to speak freely, discuss personally important issues, and to support their responses with examples from learning and professional experience when appropriate. All the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim by the first author.

We collected three one-hour interview data from the officers. The form of coding and analysis was akin to grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Line-by-line coding and analysis were performed immediately after each interview for “questions that arise by making comparisons among incidents” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 207) to become the guides for further data gathering. The interviews data were analyzed line-by-line to identify the main categories and concepts, which were then compared across codes and with established concepts in published literature. Data analyses was iterative through the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Theoretical sampling frame, critical incidents, and introductory questions as recommended by Parry (1998) to overcome potential validity problem and achieve as close as possible a replicative grounded theory leadership study, was introduced into the data collection and analysis of the study. “Trustworthiness” standard of a

naturalistic investigation laid down by Lincoln and Guba (1985) was also adopted for the study. Credibility of the study was attained via the first author's prolonged engagement with the participants and triangulation based on multiple sources of data from interviews, memoing, and the participants' reflection. For member check, the verbatim transcripts of the interviews and the interpretations were made available to the participants for checking after their interviews.

## **FINDINGS**

Analysis of the data found that military officers perceive themselves to undergo three stages of development as leaders.

### **Beginning Stage**

The beginning trajectory is the storyline of the military officers' first experiences as leaders. These experiences were their initial years starting from their cadet training, getting commissioned as officers, and posted to their first appointments. They were typically holding the rank ranging from cadets to lieutenants with less than two to three years of service. In this beginning stage, the subjects had initial experiences of leading through accomplishing missions as an aircraft captain, making sure of the safety of a ship as the duty officer or even taking charge of leading a convoy as an officer cadet. The subjects shared that their beginnings as leaders were characterized by fluctuating levels of confidence to leading where they sometimes experienced fear, anxiety and self-doubt of whether they were leading the "correct way".

*Fear. Fear is one, because you don't know how you did. ... Anxiety, because you don't know what you don't know. And, the other one is, I questioned myself. "Am I leading the correct way?" ... fear is also because whether my people will listen to me if really there is a crisis. Because I'm still so junior. (Subject Alpha, Naval Officer)*

Nevertheless, all the three interviewees were highly driven by a sense of purpose during this initial stage of leadership and all of them "want to lead" even when they did not feel entirely comfortable in doing so.

*You really want to lead, I always believe that, when you are in charge, you always got to take charge. So, if you put me in charge, I need to lead, .., I need to do whatever is necessary to lead. So, even though that I need to ... sometimes [get] out of my comfort zone, I need to connect with people, so I feel that when I'm put in charge, I'm holding the rank or appointment, I need to take charge. (Subject Bravo, Army Officer)*

At this stage of their development, the interviewees expressed the need for support from seniors, be they mentoring buddies or experienced senior officers, to help alleviate their anxiety and guide them along.

*I think there were many people that have influence, but mostly it was the superiors. ... we call them [the] mentoring buddy. We always assigned this*

*senior pilot, ... he will always be around to mentor us, tell us what is missing, and what needs to be done. (Subject Charlie, Air Force Officer)*

Given their sphere of work at this stage, the subjects interviewed felt that their professional identity as leaders during these initial years remained “weak”. Their sense of professional identity were primarily vocational-based. Since they were seen to be still “under training” within their profession, they found it challenging in establishing a clear professional identity as a leader.

*It [was] just that leadership wasn't the biggest focus at that point of time. (Subject Charlie, Air Force Officer)*

Given this, the subjects shared that they could only identify themselves as “amateur leaders” that lack “practical experience.” Or as “managers” getting their “job done” without “influencing” their followers. The focus on operations and getting the “job done” would also made their leadership style to be seen as “transactional” (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987).

*... I would just say, I'm an amateur leader... How would I explain amateur? I, know the fundamentals from OCS [Officer Cadet School], through dialogues, but [I] lack practical experience. (Subject Alpha, Naval Officer)*

## **Advancing Stage**

As the officers advanced in their career, they gained more experiences as leaders. At this stage, they would have completed a few tours of duty including both operational and staff appointments. All of them would have attained the rank of Captain and completed various advanced courses in their vocational training and professional development. Formal leadership development would be part of their professional development programs they attended.

As the subjects learned to lead, their views on leadership have also changed. They realized that they have subordinates who saw them as leaders and they needed to change some of their perspectives on leadership. In various aspects, they learned to consider what it meant to lead, either to develop people or making sure that they meet the training standards safely.

*The change came about, when I was slowly going for my staff tour, and towards the OC[Officer Commanding]-ship is where I realized that, now, I really have people under me and I need to be in charge of their life, their training, their standards, their safety. (Subject Charlie, Air Force Officer)*

Certain aspects of the interviewees’ leadership became “real” for them. For example, the pilot realized the heavy responsibility of leadership whereby he needed to make sure that his leadership “skills and techniques” were proper and he did not make errors that could lead to disastrous consequences.

*And that was when I realized there are no errors that can be made. It forced [me] to make sure that I know my leadership skills and techniques properly. (Subject Charlie, Air Force Officer)*

Compared to the weaker professional identity in the beginning stage, the interviewees have a stronger sense of their profession. One of them felt strongly about making sure that the military profession should not be seen as a private corporation. He believed that dedication to the defense of the country should not be seen as a transaction with expectation of returns.

*Personally I thought they got to do more, to not make it like a corporation. ... Because [by saying it is] sacrificial, it kinds of connote [that] we want something back from the country, so [it should be] like "I dedicate my life"*  
(Subject Alpha, Naval Officer)

Another officer believed that his job was a "noble" profession. He "always tells people" not to just focus on monetary incentives or career progression when performing their daily tasks. He tried to influence the perceptions of the juniors when they felt disenfranchised with the organization.

*I take our job as a profession. ... I always tell people that your job is a noble profession. If you're looking at money as your incentive, then you probably not going to go anywhere far, because when the push comes to the shove, no money you won't go, that's not good. ... And I tried to influence the way the youngsters that comes in think, I try to influence the way that people that already gave up on the organization think. (Subject Charlie, Air Force Officer)*

And similar to the earlier stage of leading with a sense of purpose, what kept the officers "on their toes" in leading their subordinates at this stage was the need for them to feel capable to "lead by example." To be able to lead by example also meant that the officers had to be "seen" to be "more capable" than their followers.

*... leadership by example really shapes me, it carries me for many years.*  
(Subject Bravo, Army Officer)

## **Maturing Stage**

As the officers progressed to the next stage of their development, more experiences led to their maturing identity as leaders. At this stage, they would have accumulated, on average, a minimum of 12 years in service (not inclusive of their undergraduate years of study). Besides other vocational-based training, they have also attended the command and staff course as part of their formal professional and leadership development in preparation for the next higher-level appointments. Compared to the two previous stages, especially to the beginning stage, the officers were more confident and capable of directing their followers.

*... I'm more confident in myself. Partly because of, maturity, duration in the service, exposure, and the various appointments you hold, that will give me the confidence... So, ... I think, I can stand in front of people and talk. I'm more confident of expressing myself. (Subject Alpha, Naval Officer)*

Given the subjects' maturity in their profession, they saw themselves beyond being "well-trained" vocationalists with the ability to lead units in operations. Contrasting

with the previous two stages, they no longer saw themselves merely as operational in their combat roles, but were able to contribute in building capabilities beyond their vocations and at a wider organizational level.

*I would say that I'm a well-trained vocationalist, a well-trained pilot, in my own field. And, I will say that, I can probably, lead the unit in terms of, operations, and in terms of, capability development, well, so that is in the professional identity. (Subject Charlie, Air Force Officer)*

They started to see a “new” spectrum of roles and responsibilities as leaders.

*I see myself, instead of a stovepipe naval combat role ... trained to fight war, I see myself ... contribute in other areas like ... grooming [subordinates], ... [help] imbue leadership, ... engagement ... I can see a new spectrum of roles and responsibilities as a leader. ... I'm not restricted any more. (Subject Alpha, Naval Officer)*

Going beyond getting the “job done” in the beginning stage, the interviewees also saw the need to engage their followers in this stage. They started to develop their leadership philosophy that included belief in taking care of their followers.

*Because to me, people are the ingredients of making a mission successful. So, for me, my leadership philosophy, or my command philosophy, [is that]... If my people are happy, my people are well trained, my people are taken care of, the rest of things [will] just follow. (Subject Alpha, Naval Officer)*

Finally, the interviewees’ leadership identity became more pronounced at this stage and some saw themselves as commanders having greater perspectives from their “failures” earlier in their career. They also saw the need to be the “bridge” between higher headquarters and the “ground levels.” They realized the importance of communicating the “right message” to the ground by understanding the “intent” of higher management.

*I have advanced from being a tactical level leader, a small team leader to becoming a unit commander. I'm ready to be a unit commander. ... I have already seen more perspectives of where I have possibly gone wrong in my earlier part of my career as a leader. (Subject Charlie, Air Force Officer)*

## **DISCUSSION**

Our findings indicate that the officers’ leadership development experience in becoming professionals could be divided into three dominant developmental stages of beginning, advancing and maturing stages. Within these stages, leadership and professional competence were identified and described in terms of the attributes (e.g. accomplishing mission) possessed by the officers (Dall’Alba & Sandberg, 2006; Sandberg, 2001; Yukl, 2010). Though this seems similar to the Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) five-level skill acquisition stage model, the stages uncovered in this study also clearly illustrates that there was more than “a single development path towards becoming professional” (Dall’Alba, 2009, p. 131) military leaders.

Dall'Alba and Sandberg (2006) argue that the “focus on stages veils more fundamental aspects of professional development” that “directed attention away from what is being developed” (p. 399). Though they acknowledge Dreyfus stage model in highlighting progressive skill development with increased experience, they propose an alternative model with a vertical dimension that pays attention to “variation in embodied understanding of professional practice” (p. 400). In our findings, the officers' understanding of being a professional military leaders is embodied in their professional and leadership identity, especially during the maturing stage, that incorporate their development beyond skill acquisition.

The military officers in our study learned leadership knowledge and practices as part of their professional learning, but “employ those knowledge and skills in various ways and to differing ends” (Dall'Alba, 2009, p. 137). This is similar to Dall'Alba's longitudinal study finding that professionals “construct, enact, and embody the knowledge and skills they encounter to varying extents and in a range of ways” (2009, p. 137). But, Webster-Wright (2010) finds that most professional development literature inherently sees knowledge as a “transferable object” and supposes professionals be studied “separate from their professional practice” (2009, p. 704). Professional development in most professions continues to occur in transient events (e.g., lectures, journals, conferences) using didactic delivery by an expert that failed to result in changes in practice (Houle, 1981; Webster-Wright, 2010; Yip & Wilson, 2010). Even innovative leadership development interventions such as mentoring, communities of practices, and action learning is still not enough if the “philosophical assumptions about professional development is not challenged and re-conceptualized” (Webster-Wright, 2010, p. 11).

Several implications for leader professional development can be derived from this study. First, leadership development focusing narrowly on pre-defined skills or competencies overlooks and undervalues the ontological dimension of professional practice and of leaders' learning to be professionals (Dall'Alba, 2009). Instead, Dall'Alba (2009) suggests an approach that emphasizes inquiry-directed to practice that conceive professional education program as a “process of becoming” (2009, p. 53). A curriculum that is not overloaded or closed to inquiry, but encourages “letting learn” (Dall'Alba, 2009, p. 68) would allow professionals the space to pursue the questions related to their profession and who they are becoming. This echoes John Dewey's philosophy that education cannot be done directly, but indirectly through creating the appropriate learning environment (Garrison, 2010, p. 69). Within the adult developmental field, Day et al. (2009) also use similar term of “letting go to develop,” for leaders to let go of certain day-to-day technical responsibilities and focus on new responsibilities as they moved to the next higher appointment.

Second, the process of becoming a leader within his or her profession entails embodying his or her professional identity, knowledge, and practice (Snider, 2003) learned throughout his or her career (Webster-Wright, 2010). These learning can take place both during formal professional development (specifically leadership development) programs or informal learning within the workplace (Daley, 2001). What changes through these learning is brought about by the “understanding of being a professional that underpins all interpretation, reflection, action or interaction as a professional” (Webster-Wright, 2010, p. 176). Webster-Wright introduce the notion of authentic professional learning (APL) that involves a change in

understanding of being a professional that “embodied and expressed through a particular way of being a professional in practice” (2010, p. 179). Therefore, as practitioners of leadership (Riggio, 2008), leaders need to embrace the notion of authentic professional learning that brings about the understanding of being a professional.

Chee, Loke, and Tan (2011) appropriated and extended Collen (2003) human inquiry framework as a conceptual tool for undertaking research on human learning. Using a performative framing, subsuming *ontos*, *logos*, and *praxis*, they emphasize that “human knowing is inseparable from human doing and human being” (p. 5) and is further subsumed within the context of axiology since “knowing, doing and being are inherently value-laden activities” (p. 5). For professionals, values shape how they make judgements and take action, based on what they consider are important to their clients, their profession, and organisations for which they work and the society at large (Webster-Wright, 2010, p. 190). However, Day et al. (2009) lament that there has been little discussion of values in management or leadership theory, besides the more recent trends in positive psychology and positive organization research. This has implications especially for military organizations that see value-based leadership and ethical conduct as part of their profession (Day et al., 2009).

## **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

We acknowledge that the number of interviewees were not sufficient to generalize the findings, which was never the intent of the study. But we emphasize that the study helps gain better understanding of the relational and processual issues of leadership development within substantive discrete contexts of the interviewees’ military organization. This study constitutes an initial exploratory study that could contribute to the emerging field of qualitative and non-positivist research within the field of leadership development. Because of the large number of positivist/objectivist/functionalist quantitative research within the leadership development field, there are many calls to use alternate forms of qualitative and non-positivist lens to look into the issues of leadership development. Further study using a qualitative approach from a non-positivist perspective will contribute to the increased calls for more qualitative (Parry, Mumford, Bower, & Watts, 2014) and interpretive (Mabey, 2013) approaches in the leadership development discourse. A qualitative approach also promises the possibility of understanding the developmental process “bottom-up” from the leaders lived experience, instead of the typical “top-down” approach of hypothesis testing with a priori conceptions. Their contribution is in giving a “better conceptual grasp” (Parry, 1998, p. 91) of the basic social processes of leadership development.

Another limitation of the study was the lack of theorizing of the leadership development experiences of the interviewees by establishing the factors that impact these experiences. The study was also limited to military leaders of specific leadership experience. Future research could build upon this study to develop a grounded theory of their development in order to derive the implications for designing military leadership development program. In future studies, subjects with a wider variation of military leadership experiences could be sampled. This will contribute to the body of knowledge of designing military leadership development program for professionals, since there are more leader development practices than their scientific

understanding (Day, 2000; Day & Zaccaro, 2004). Being professional allows leaders to have a sense of belonging to the community of military profession, incorporate their understanding of complex leadership practice, and ethical conduct associated with effective engagement in the VUCA environment that the military operates in (Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010). Gaining theoretical insight into the research domain of professional being, knowing, doing, and valuing could also help influence the design of leadership development program for military professionals to cope with changes in their leadership practice in the VUCA operating environment.

## CONCLUSIONS

Through this exploratory empirical study, it has been shown that military leaders developed as professional leaders in the organization. Their developmental trajectories though seemingly to be in stages, were in fact not entirely stepwise according to a well-defined Dreyfus stage model. Rather, these military leaders developed their professional leadership practice “horizontally” and at the same time “vertically” where they each had to sense-make what it meant to be a professional leader within their organization. The learning that they have experienced as part of their professional leadership development transformed them into the professional military leaders at the point of the study. Their development also took place in the social context of their various appointments that they held throughout their career. What shaped them went beyond their individual efforts, and included the social action/interactions with their peers, subordinates, and superiors and the wider organization.

The implications of this study show that understanding the process of military leaders' development as professional could build upon having clarity of his or her professional being, knowing, doing, and valuing. The professional learning throughout one's career must go beyond the acquisition of knowledge and skills and examine the ontological assumption of what it means to having a professional identity of a military leader, especially in the rapidly changing VUCA operating environment.

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