

Toward A Grounded Theory Of Female Leader Development In The Military

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ABSTRACT

While leadership is arguably an essential part of organizational functioning, only recently has the academic literature produced a theory of leadership *development*. Furthermore, the majority of leadership research has (1) focused on male leaders and (2) been top-down and theory-driven. Through the current pilot study, I attempted to address these gaps in prior research by producing a grounded theory of *female* leader development within a military context. The iterative processes of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding were implemented to discover the theory from the bottom-up. Results indicated that the central category in female leader development in the military was relationships. In addition, engaged experiences and incorporating feedback played important roles in the development process. Findings of this study were compared to previous research and theory development in the area of leadership development. The propositions which emerged in this study may provide a basis for future empirical research in the study of female leader development in the military.

Great leaders have changed history over the years, most notably during wartime. It is easy to think of great leaders of war from Sun Tsu, Alexander the Great, and Julius Caesar to George Washington, Dwight Eisenhower, and Norman Schwarzkopf. In fact, in a recent study analyzing data from battles from 1600 to 1973, Rotte and Schmidt (2002) concluded that leadership has consistently been an important determinant of the outcome of battle. This holds true even when controlling for technological progress in weaponry. These authors asserted that only through superior leadership and the efficient organization of troops will the technologically superior side have the ability to victor over opponents. Perhaps this is why leadership, and educating leaders, has become a top priority for militaries throughout the world.

While possibly not as celebrated, peacetime leaders are equally important to organizational success both in the military and civilian sectors. Leaders offer a source of competitive advantage by fostering a high commitment, high involvement corporate culture. Exceptional leaders provide a strong sense of vision and mission for their organization. A compelling vision is not just about insightful imagery and symbolism, but more importantly it is about generating deep emotional meaning in followers (Leavy, 1996). For example, Martin Luther King, Jr. had a vision, a dream, and led the U.S. in a battle against segregation by peacefully working for racial equality. Whether military or civilian, visionary leaders do not merely see the possibilities that the rest of us have never dreamt of, but they are also moved by strong passions to make their vision a reality.

Previous research supports the idea that leadership has been an essential part of success for both military and civilian organizations. Findings of a recent meta-analysis conducted by the Gallup Leadership Institute (GLI) showed that when the effects of 200 experimental and quasi-experimental leadership studies were aggregated, leadership had a small, positive effect on important outcomes (Reichard & Avolio, 2005). This study also found that leadership effects appeared to be stronger in both education and military settings than in other organizations. Therefore, leadership has been shown to be an important factor impacting organizational outcomes.

Women as Leaders

Although several studies have tested leadership theories over the years (for review, see Lowe & Gardner, 2000), the vast majority of samples have included male leaders and research on female leadership is lacking. For example, in the GLI meta-analysis discussed above, only nine of the 200 studies reported using a sample of all female leaders (Reichard & Avolio, 2005). This trend reflects the fact that in years past the majority of organizational leaders were men, which has been traditionally true in the U.S. military.

However, times have changed and women have attained more and more responsibility in various political and community leadership positions as they shatter the glass ceiling. In a meta-ethnographic study of female political leaders, Adler (1996) identified 25 women who have held the most senior political positions in their country, such as President or Prime Minister, and the numbers have been increasing over time. These women include Sri Lanka's Sirimavo Bandaranaike (first woman to take senior office in 1960), Argentina's Isabel Peron, and Great Britain's Margaret Thatcher (Adler, 1996). Furthermore, in Liberia, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was recently confirmed as the first elected female President on the African continent (MSNBC.com, 2005). While the U.S. has not yet had a female President, there have been 235 women elected or appointed to the U.S. Congress (Pearson Education, 2005). In addition, the number of women in executive and managerial positions in the U.S. has tripled over the last 30 years (Vecchio, 2002).

A common misconception exists that women qualified for leadership positions will inevitably leave the organization in order to raise children. A report by Catalyst (2002) indicated that women want to reach the top and are equally as ambitious as men. Further, the majority of the 500 woman executives in the Catalyst study was married, had full-time working partners, *and* had children. There is no doubt that women are moving up the leadership ladder.

Debate on Gender Advantage

While women are undoubtedly earning more and higher leadership positions, there has been some debate among researchers regarding gender advantage (see Vecchio, 2002, 2003; Eagly & Carli 2003a, 2003b). In 1991, Eagly and Karau conducted a meta-analytic study on gender and leader emergence. The findings of this meta-analysis demonstrated that men were much more likely to emerge as task leaders and general leaders in a mixed sex group, while women had a slight tendency to emerge as social leaders. In a meta-analysis on gender and the evaluation of leaders, Eagly, Makhijani, and Klonsky (1992) found there was a small overall tendency for participants to evaluate female leaders less favorably than male leaders. This negative evaluation of female leaders was larger when the women enacted stereotypically masculine leadership styles (e.g., autocratic, directive) and when the women were in male-dominated roles, such as in the military.

Taken together, these findings imply that in a predominately male, traditionally autocratic organization such as the U.S. military, female leaders may face large challenges. It was not long ago (1976) when the U.S. Congress passed into law that women should be allowed admittance into all service academies. This was the first year, for example, that women were allowed to attend the U.S. Military Academy (USMA website, 2005) and the U.S. Naval Academy (USNA website, 2005) to train to become officers and leaders in the U.S. military. While nearly 30 years have passed, it takes time for traditional cultures to change and for fairness in opportunities for women to be developed.

Other authors disagree that women in leadership positions face disadvantages. Vecchio (2002) asserted that male gender advantage due to gender stereotyping is overstated and more rigorous research is needed. Yukl (2002) went even further in arguing that there is a feminine advantage for leadership because women have preferences for inclusiveness, nurturing followers, power sharing, high interpersonal interaction, and cooperation. While the scope of this paper does not include settling this dispute, this discussion is presented here to shed light on the continuing need for research on female leadership. By focusing on the ways in which women develop their leadership knowledge and skills, the field of leadership can view a more complete picture of the leader development process.

Female Leader Development

Regardless of the disadvantages or advantages that women face in achieving leadership, little is known about how female leaders develop. While there may or may not be differences in the developmental process of male and female leaders, examining women as a previously untapped source of knowledge can only add to the understanding of the leader development process, in general. Furthermore, by developing a theory of female leader development, women can have a better understanding of how to learn to become more effective leaders. Therefore, a grounded theory study of female leader development in the military was conducted. This study attempted to answer the following questions: How do women military leaders describe their development? What model accurately depicts military women's leader development? By addressing these

questions, we can further understand the components that are necessary for female leader development in the military.

Qualitative Research on Leadership

As contrasted to quantitative methods, qualitative methodologies do not carry the same status, understanding, or prevalence within the arena of organizational research, especially the specific study of leadership and its development (Bryman, 1995, 2004). There are a variety of qualitative methods available to leadership researchers such as interviewing, observation, single or multiple case studies, discourse analysis, document analysis, life history, and grounded theory. The current study took the latter approach.

Grounded theory is ideal for theory development, but it has been an underutilized methodology in leadership research. In their review of a decade of articles published in the *Leadership Quarterly*, Lowe and Gardner (2000) demonstrated the increasing focus on leadership as an important issue across disciplines. However, of these studies only 39% were qualitative in nature (including those using content analysis), and only nine (of 118) used grounded theory as a methodology. While the majority of leadership studies have employed a quantitative, questionnaire methodology, Bryman (2004) pointed out that the utilization of qualitative methodologies is on an incline and reported on 66 such studies.

Bryman (1995) elaborated on several benefits of qualitative research to the study of leadership including understanding of the role and impact of contextual issues and clarification of the process of leadership. Leadership and leader development both imply a *process* that occurs within a specific *context*. Mainstream research tends to focus on static, cross-sectional analysis and fails to capture the processual and contextual issues inherent in leadership and leader development (Hunt & Ropo, 1995). Parry (1998), arguing for the use of grounded theory as a valid method for researching the process of leadership, stated that leadership is a social influence process and that mainstream leadership research methodologies have been unsuccessful in theorizing about the nature of these processes. Conger (1998) argued that due to the topic's complexity the use of qualitative methods should always be a key part of leadership research, not just when charting new territory.

As contrasted to mainstream, quantitative methodologies, grounded theory begins with concrete, contextualized information (Hunt & Ropo, 1995). A theory *emerges* as the researcher goes back and forth between the data and the explanation. With qualitative research, the depth, or *saturation*, of the data is most important rather than the size of the sample. Furthermore, the theory is context-specific (Bryman, Stephens, & Campo, 1996). With mainstream, quantitative research, however, the researcher begins with a general theory and builds a context-specific, quantitative test of the theory. The power of quantitative research increases with large samples across multiple contexts. However, there is a constant, oftentimes unanswered, call from leadership researchers to replicate quantitative studies in other contexts and cultures to ensure theory generalization. Generalization is not a problem in qualitative research because the specific context is meant to be the basis of study. However, it is important to keep in mind when interpreting findings that because of the context-specific nature of qualitative research, generalization of findings are limited to the exact context in which the phenomenon was

examined. Parry (1998) suggested that a rigorous grounded theory study would help to overcome the deficiencies found in mainstream leadership research.

METHODOLOGY

A grounded theory approach was used to investigate the developmental experiences of active-duty female military leaders. Originating in the discipline of Sociology, the focus of grounded theory is to develop a theory rooted in data from the field (Creswell, 1998). Therefore, no a priori theory was used to frame the study; rather a context-specific theory was ‘discovered’ based on the data collected. The phenomena of interest in this grounded study were the reported leadership development experiences of female military leaders. As a qualitative study, comparisons between male and female leadership development strategies were *not* part of this study.

Female officers were recruited through a point of contact at a U.S. military installation. Consenting participants included two Colonels, Colonel Dawson and Colonel Myers (pseudonyms). As stated, the number of participants is *not* the source of power in a qualitative study as it is in mainstream research, which draws upon large sample sizes. Rather the *depth* of the data gathered from participants is what provides evidence and power for the emergent theoretical findings. While saturation was achieved in this study, findings based on only two participants should be seen as an early qualitative pilot study due to the potential uniqueness of the participants. These findings, in turn, should be validated by future research before any generalization to other populations or contexts can be validly made. However, this study is one step toward addressing an under-researched area.

An important consideration with this study was the anonymity and confidentiality not only for the participants themselves, but also for the military. The study of gender issues in the military may be a sensitive subject, and the release of results from this study could potentially be volatile. Therefore, special care was taken to ensure that the identities of the participants were kept anonymous. Any potentially identifying information was excluded from this report.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The grounded theory methodology involves integration of data collection and data analysis to achieve ‘constant comparison’ (Creswell, 1998). In this study, data collection involved a variety of interviews. First, an email interview was conducted to gather basic background information on the leaders. Next, an individual in-person interview explored the emergent themes from prior data and yielded a set of models of the female leader development process. Finally, a group interview was conducted to finalize model specifications and contingencies. All interviews were open-ended and semi-structured conversations focusing on the leaders’ developmental experiences. Interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed by the researcher.

Open Coding

Grounded theory data analysis involves the rigorous process of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Creswell, 1998). By returning to the data sources before each new phase of data collection, the researcher was able to utilize the grounded theory process of ‘constant comparison’ which aids in confirming or disconfirming emergent hypotheses and assertions. For the first phase of data collection, participants responded via email to background questions (see Table 1). The initial questions were kept very general in nature in order to not influence or direct respondents. For example, the question, “how did you end up where you are today?” was general enough not to guide participants into discussing a specific pre-determined topic. The goal of the email was to gain introductory knowledge about the participants used to inform the questions posed during the in-person interviews.

Table 1. Email Background Questions.

Email Background Questions.
1. How did you end up where you are today, in your particular assignment?
2. What do you do in your current position?
3. How did you choose a leadership position?
4. How did the opportunity present itself?
5. What are your hobbies?
6. What do you do for fun? Perhaps, describe yourself as your very talkative best friend would.

Open coding of email interviews was conducted. Open coding is “the analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 101). In open coding, the analyst was concerned with generating categories and their properties and then sought to determine how the categories vary dimensionally. Therefore, open coding attempted to answer the following question: What were the general categories to emerge from the data? Based on open coding, six general categories emerged from email interview data: Family, Relationships, Watching, Feedback, Understanding, Outcomes, and Training and Education.

Axial and Selective Coding

To gain more in-depth information on female leader development in the military, individual, in-person interviews were conducted. Each in-person interview lasted approximately 45 minutes to one hour. Questions asked during these interviews were designed to follow-up on the six general categories which emerged through open coding of the email interviews. The questions asked in the individual interviews listed by the six emergent categories are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Individual, in-person follow-up interview questions.

Theme	Questions
Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Can you tell me about how your family impacted who you are today and how you interact with people? ▪ Can you tell me more details about some of the experiences that you have had, for example, (excerpt from email) can you tell some stories?
Relationships, Watching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How did you develop skills to deal with people? ▪ How did you gain this knowledge of group dynamics? ▪ How did you motivate them? ▪ What were your strategies? ▪ How did you deal with dissenters? ▪ Can you tell me about the guidance you've received and how that has changed you? ▪ Can you give me an example of a time you provided mentoring to someone? ▪ Have you had the opportunity to develop those around you?
Feedback, Understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Are there any other barriers that you can think of that you have faced? ▪ How do you adapt to moving frequently and starting over earning your people's respect? ▪ Please describe more about the _____ (excerpt from email) experience, or another challenge that you faced, and what you learned? ▪ Working in a traditionally male organization, how have you dealt with this?
Outcomes / Leader Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ In your email you mentioned a focus on learning and self-improvement, are these key strategies for your success as a leader? ▪ What other strategies do you feel are important?
Training and Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Can you tell me about how your formal training has impacted your development and how you lead on a daily basis and interact with those who work for you and with superiors? ▪ How do you see the military training that you've received impact your day-to-day activities and how you interact?
Other questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Anything else you want to comment on that you feel is helpful in your development as a leader? ▪ Is there anything else we haven't talked about that you feel is important to your leadership development?

To analyze interview data, axial and selective coding was conducted on the transcripts generated during the individual interviews. Axial and selective coding attempted to answer the following questions: What were the common outcomes of the women's experiences? What theory explains the common experiences of the leaders?

The purpose of axial coding was to further a precise and complete explanation about the female leader development process. Axial coding was defined by Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 123) as "the process of relating categories to their subcategories, termed 'axial' because coding occurs around the axis of a category, linking categories at the level of properties and dimensions." During axial coding, categories were systematically developed and linked with subcategories. Four major categories or themes emerged during axial coding, each with a set of associated subcategories (see left-hand column of Table 3).

Table 3. Themes from data.

Emerging Themes – Time 1	Revised Themes – Time 2
Relationships	
Growing up in family environment	Values instilled in formative years through parental interaction (honesty, dignity, respect, faith)*
Establishing key relationships	Establishing key personal relationships (external & internal)*
Watching soldiers and superiors	Observing interactions/human behavior*
Engaged Experiences	
Experiencing educational challenges	Experiencing educational challenges
Experiencing challenging assignments	Experiencing challenging assignments
Experiencing making mistakes	Experiencing making mistakes
Incorporating Feedback	
Receiving feedback about self / identifying personal values	Identifying personal & military values*
Understanding people, ‘how things work,’ and ‘how the military works’	Understanding people, ‘how things work,’ and ‘how the military works’
Leadership Strategies / Outcomes of Development	
Supporting and caring for people	Supporting and caring for people
Involving employees in decision-making /working with people	Involving employees in decision-making /working with people
Appearing confident / controlling fear / displaying equal respect for others regardless of status	Appearing confident / controlling fear / displaying equal respect for others regardless of status
Getting the best out of difficult situations / viewing mistakes as important	Getting the best out of difficult situations / viewing mistakes as important
Organizing and managing work and time / focusing on task / persevering	Organizing and managing work and time / focusing on task / persevering
Working within the big picture / Compromising to meet mutual goals	Working within the big picture / Compromising to meet mutual goals
Balancing work and play / Having fun	Balancing work and play / Having fun

* indicates revised theme

Once themes and sub-themes became clear through axial coding, selective coding was conducted. The purpose of selective coding was to integrate and refine the theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Through immersion in data, the analyst integrated and refined the major themes to form a larger theoretical scheme. Based on this examination, the author drafted two competing models of the female leader development process (available upon request). These two competing models, which attempted to explain the process of leader development and capture the interrelationships among emergent themes, were used as a basis of discussion during the group interview.

Theory Validation

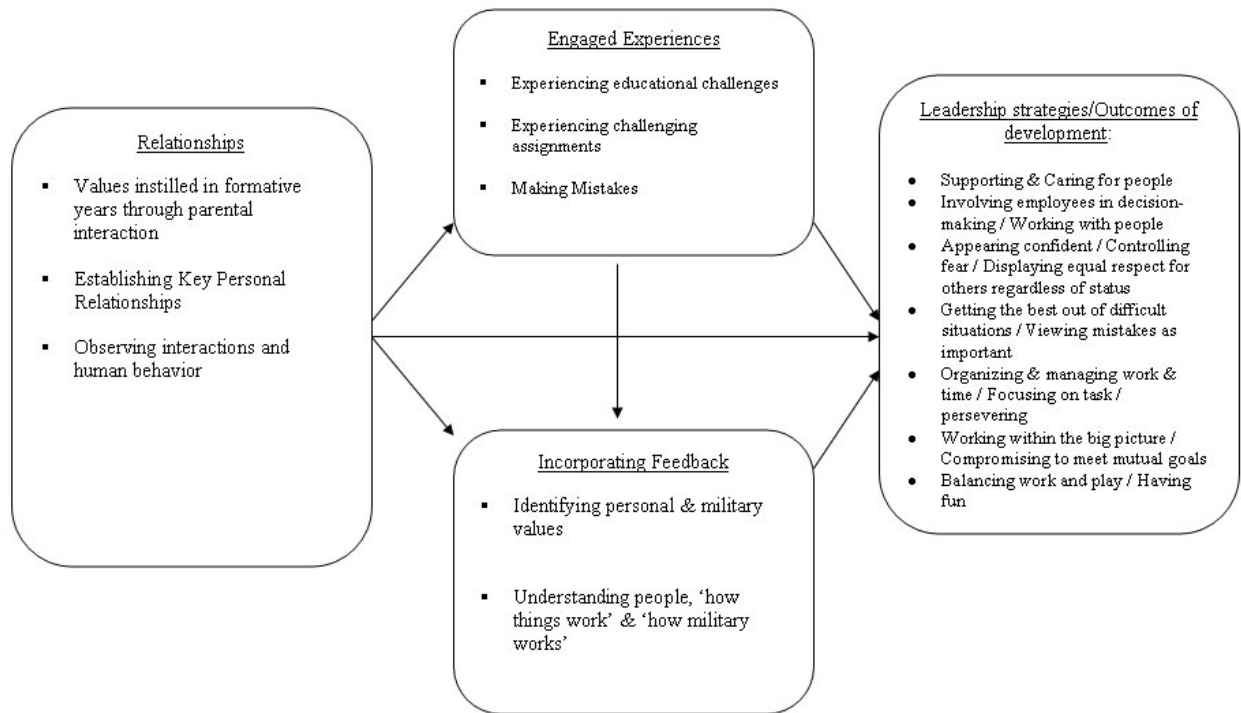
In the final phase of data collection, an in-person, group interview was conducted lasting approximately two hours. During the group interview, emergent themes were discussed and revised by the participants. Revised themes are listed in the right-hand column of Table 3. In addition, the two competing models developed during selective coding were discussed and revised during the group interview, and a new model of female leader development in the military was specified, including specification of the model’s contingencies. Model

contingencies indicated when the model does/does not hold. For example, only experiences that were *challenging* were seen as relevant in the leader development process. By challenging, participants meant an experience that pushed or stretched their skills beyond where they were when they began. This includes both negative and positive challenges. These contingencies are presented in the discussion section. Once again, the grounded theory process of ‘constant comparison’ aids in confirming or disconfirming emergent hypotheses and assertions.

FINDINGS

From the analysis of field data, a theory was developed including a model portraying female leader development in the military (see Figure 1). This model was composed of four major themes: (1) relationships, (2) engaged experiences, (3) incorporating feedback, and (4) leadership strategies/outcomes of development. In the following passages, themes of the model will be described, theoretical propositions will be formally stated, and support for the model will be provided using the leaders’ own descriptions.

Figure 1. Model of Female Leader Development



The Central Category - Relationships

During selective coding and the follow-up discussions in the group interview, it became clear that *relationships* was the central category in this theory. A central category in grounded theory has analytical power because it pulls together the other categories to provide an explanatory whole (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Relationships was considered a central category because all other major categories were connected to it, it appeared frequently in the data, and linkages to all other categories were not forced. Therefore, relationships was a core factor in the development of the female leaders.

Relationships → Leader Development

According to the data, relationships led directly to the development of leadership strategies. The three specific sub-themes of relationships included the following: (1) values instilled in formative years through parental interaction, (2) establishing key personal relationships both in and out of work, and (3) observing other leaders' interactions as well as observing human behavior, in general. The following four excerpts from interview transcripts demonstrate how these three sub-themes of relationships impacted the women's leader development. In her email interview, Colonel Dawson offered the following discussion of the first relationships sub-theme, parental interaction, and its impact on her leader development:

“My father taught me how to be tough, stand up for myself, and set high goals and manage growing up with two brothers. He taught me that everyone is equal and deserved to be treated with the same respect...Both [of] my parents taught me honesty, love of family, God, and Country.”

Colonel Myers also stressed the importance of family as essential to her military and leadership success when stating:

“I believe that the values instilled by parents and family are those that form a person's character, work ethic, and approaches to life situations...I believe the discipline I experienced encouraged me to be organized and helped me to adapt to military life. I credit my parents with much of the success I have experienced in the military.”

While the influence of parents was clearly an important contributor to the leaders' development, other key personal relationships, the relationships second sub-theme, were also stated as important. Colonel Myers discussed the role of mentors in her leader development in the following excerpt:

“I have also learned to listen from those who have had experiences before. And that's where mentoring is a critical part, I think, of helping us develop as people and as leaders. If you can engage someone that you are comfortable with and they can share with you their experiences. And you say, well, you know, when I'm in that situation I'm going to remember this discussion and apply these concepts myself.”

Finally, observation of interactions and human behavior, the third sub-theme of relationships, was also linked directly to the development of leadership strategies. One example is the following quotation by Colonel Dawson:

“I watched people interact and I watched their different personality and especially those that I would call were in leadership roles, instructors, and professors.”

Based on this and other data, the first theoretical proposition was developed. It is worth noting that the first proposition was considered very important by the participants and, therefore, served as the foundation of the model of female leader development in the military.

PROPOSTION 1: Relationships lead directly to the development of leadership strategies.

Engaged Experiences → Leader Development

Another important theme in the leadership development model was engaged experiences. Engaged experiences referred to effort and energy exerted over time and life experience. These women were not sitting idly by and magically becoming leaders. Rather, they were actively engaged in challenging educational experiences and challenging work assignments both in and out of the military. The three sub-themes of engaged experiences were (1) experiencing educational challenges, (2) experiencing challenging assignments, and (3) making mistakes. The following quotation supported the second proposition regarding the impact of engaged experiences on the leaders' development. Colonel Dawson described her arduous educational experience as the following:

“My...program that I went to started out with a huge number of people and only 13 of us graduated. It was very, very challenging. I remember working and studying...Getting up early in the morning and getting there early enough to study...And I would study at night. I remember Monday through Friday I got very little sleep. If I got 2 hours of sleep, I was doing really good. Throughout all of that, I think it helped me to organize myself and try to manage my time. And I think for a leader you've got to be able to do that. Like I said I have an open door policy and people can come see me, but people can tell you that I get my work done in a timely manner. And I think that has helped me tremendously.”

As Colonel Dawson pointed out, her engaged experiences, in this case in education, resulted in the development of the specific leadership strategy of time management. This is but one example of how the women in this study developed as leaders by facing educational challenges. Other data referred to the influence of the other experiences sub-themes, experiencing challenging assignments and making mistakes, as direct influences on leader development. Therefore, the second proposition was developed such that the engaged experiences of female leaders resulted in the development of their leadership strategies.

PROPOSTION 2: Engaged experiences lead directly to the development of leadership strategies.

Relationships → Engaged Experiences → Leader Development

Furthermore, it is suggested that relationships impact the development of leadership strategies through engaged experiences. In other words, engaged experiences partially mediates the linkage between relationships and leadership strategies. For example, Colonel Myers made the link

between key personal relationships and the development of leadership strategies while engaged in challenging work assignments in the following interview excerpt:

“I think relationships are very important. And you build those relationships. Whether it’s the ability to call somebody up and say this is my problem and what do you think about it or just having a good mentor to help you get through those rough spots to talk things out. To be able to call somebody and say I hate this assignment, I hate life, and what do you think about that. That is important. And to share with people who have seen it and are willing to share their experiences in a conversation just tell me about when you were. I think I’ve gained a lot of knowledge in those conversations.”

Key personal relationships impacted the development of leadership strategies through their engaged experiences, in this case a challenging assignment. When she was neck deep in a challenge, Colonel Myers came to rely on the relationships she had made with key others ultimately impacting the development of her leadership strategies. Based on this and other data, the third proposition was established.

PROPOSTION 3: Engaged experiences partially mediate the linkage between relationships and the development of leadership strategies.

Incorporating Feedback → Leader Development

A third vital variable in the model of female leader development in the military was incorporating feedback. It is suggested that incorporating feedback impacted the development of leadership strategies directly. The theme incorporating feedback was composed of the following two sub-themes: (1) identifying personal and military values and (2) understanding people, ‘how things work’ and ‘how military works.’ The leaders in this study expressed that through increased self-awareness via feedback, they were able to develop effective strategies for leading. This assertion formed the basis of proposition four.

PROPOSTION 4: Incorporating feedback leads directly to the development of leadership strategies.

Relationships → Incorporating Feedback

Again, as a central category in this theory, relationships formed a foundation for the incorporation of feedback. While discussing her first assignment as a leader, Colonel Myers pointed out the connection between relationships and one sub-theme of incorporating feedback, understanding ‘how things work’ and ‘how the military works.’

“My maintenance officer was a very wonderful person who taught me a great deal. To this day, I still remember their names, oddly enough. I may not remember a lot of names in between. We worked really hard together.

They taught me about the line military. It was a very worthwhile experience.”

Relationships not only with superiors and peers, but also with subordinates were key to the women’s leadership development and to incorporating feedback in understanding ‘how things work.’ When referring to one of her non-commissioned officers (NCOs), Colonel Myers added, “They had a wealth of experience and I had absolutely nothing. So, they kind of guided me.”

Colonel Dawson provided a further explanation of the importance of relationships to the incorporating feedback sub-theme of understanding ‘how things work’ and ‘how the military works.’

“And like I said before it’s not just the rank. I’ve learned some things from privates, specialists, [and] the younger enlisted. The senior NCOs are wonderful. So many senior NCOs, I get on a new area and don’t know what to do, [they] just take ya by the hand and show you. [They] spend the time with you...And they said you can’t know everything that’s what I’m here for is to help you. They bend over backwards, They give ya the shirt off their back and never expect anything back. That’s the type of people, its phenomenal.”

Relationships also impacted the other sub-theme of incorporating feedback, identifying personal and military values. When describing her relationship with her parents, Colonel Myers detailed the linkages between her relationship with her parents and her own identification of personal values.

“It was that kind of very disciplined environment, where I went to school, I came home, I worked on my homework, and I did things with my family. There was not a whole lot of being out and about. It was a very disciplined environment. If you had chores, you came home and did your chores. I was taught to be respectful of adults. Things that I consider to be very basic, but as I look around me now they are not necessarily very basic. I think that helped. It kind of starts to form you, and form your way that you deal with issues and people and organizing yourself and those things around you.”

In the above excerpt, Colonel Myers talked about how her parents instilled the value of respect, a personal value that she incorporated into herself. Therefore, one component of incorporating feedback, identifying personal and military values, seemed to result from the leaders’ relationships with their parents. Because of the importance of relationships to incorporating feedback, proposition five was articulated.

PROPOSITION 5: Relationships lead directly to incorporating feedback.

Relationships → Incorporating Feedback → Leader Development

As discussed above, feedback was oftentimes the result of key relationships. Furthermore, the above excerpt explained how the values instilled through parental interaction began to form the way Colonel Myers understood people and led people (i.e., the development of her leadership strategies). Therefore, incorporating feedback was proposed as a partial mediator of the linkage between relationships and development of leadership strategies. In other words, relationships resulted in the development of leadership strategies through the leaders' incorporation of the feedback from the people in those relationships. For example, Colonel Dawson stressed the impact of her relationship with her parents as a promoting feedback which, in turn, resulted in new leadership strategies in the following passage:

“My mom and dad always taught me that people were equal, no matter rich or poor, where you were from, or the color of your skin, just that everybody is equal and should be treated as such. So, growing up, I try to see people as individuals.”

Again, Colonel Dawson described her incorporation of feedback about personal values and understanding people as a mediator between relationships and her developed leadership strategies. Relationships also provided a playhouse for observing interactions and human behavior, one relationships sub-theme. For instance, in describing how she learned to understand and interact with her followers, Colonel Myers stressed the importance of observation.

“You have to watch a soldier because they don't do these things. So how do you watch soldiers? How do you mentor them? How do you train them? When do you use a light joke and when do you nail them hard? When do you let them get away with stuff? When do you reward them? When don't you reward them? You learn how something that might appear innocuous may be interpreted as a reward or as getting over. So, you have to put yourself in the shoes of that soldier's coworkers and what do they perceive. Your action may be intended one way, but...”

To summarize, key relationships led to both aspects of incorporating feedback, identifying personal and military values and understanding people, 'how things work' and 'how the military works,' which in turn resulted in the development of leadership strategies. Therefore, incorporating feedback was proposed as a partial mediator between relationships and the development of leadership strategies.

PROPOSITION 6: Incorporating feedback mediates the linkage between relationships and the development of leadership strategies.

Engaged Experiences → Incorporating Feedback

Furthermore, leaders asserted that important feedback also came from their engaged experiences, including from educational challenges, challenging assignments, and making mistakes. This linkage is shown in the following excerpts of data. First, when referring to her civilian and military education, Colonel Myers commented on the link between her engaged educational experience and incorporating feedback in understanding the military and 'how things work.'

“So both of those are educational processes that gave me background, simple knowledge base in one or the other arenas be it military or strictly [my occupation]. So that...helped me... It gives you the framework.”

In this second quotation below, Colonel Myers made the connection between her challenging military assignments, a sub-theme of engaged experiences, and incorporating feedback in order to understand people.

“Time is a great teacher. And the unique thing about the military is that it gives you lots of different experiences. In the military in 10 years, you could probably have 10 different jobs. In the military you deal with constantly different groups of people. So...as a leader I learned about people. I learned a heck of a lot about just general people, how people work, how they think, how they act, how they react.”

Finally, Colonel Dawson makes the connection between her military training, another sub-theme of engaged experiences, and incorporating feedback through the identification of personal and military values in this reference:

“Several military school training[s] we have had and throughout it teaches you leadership. In...training, one of the papers I wrote was on leadership. What I thought was a good leader. Leadership in the military is embedded from day one. Military values, selfless service and helping others. It’s just a part of us.”

Taken together, these data support the linkage between engaged experiences and the incorporation of feedback resulting in the seventh proposition.

PROPOSTION 7: Engaged experiences lead directly to incorporating feedback.

Engaged Experiences → Incorporating Feedback → Leader Development

Furthermore, incorporating feedback emerged as a partial mediator between engaged experiences and the development of leadership strategies. More specifically, the leaders in this study reported that heightened feedback from engaged experiences resulted in the development of leadership strategies. Through a discussion of a sub-theme of engaged experiences, making mistakes, Colonel Myers provided a clear explanation of how engaged experiences and incorporating feedback interacted to lead to the development of leadership strategies.

“But I got there by making mistakes along the way. And I continue to make mistakes everyday, but if you learn from those mistakes then you are better for it and you apply those lessons later. The first time I interacted with unions, probably not the best experience in the world. But you learn, next time I’m not going to do that. I am going to approach it from this perspective or that perspective... So, I think the way you learn is simply by making mistakes. So, that’s why as a leader one of the most valuable

things you can do is remember it's not a zero-defects organization. You have to let people make mistakes. You don't progress unless people make mistakes."

Based on this and other data points, the final proposition was put forth detailing incorporating feedback as a partial mediator of the engaged experiences to leader development relationship.

PROPOSITION 8: Incorporating feedback partially mediates the linkage between engaged experiences and the development of leadership strategies.

Leadership Strategies

While not of primary focus of this study, the dependent variable was female leaders' leadership strategies. In this study, leadership strategies refer to the techniques that the participants reported engaging in as part of their leadership including their general leadership style, values, impression management, behaviors, and attribution processes. The leadership strategies reported by the women in this study included the following: supporting and caring for people, involving employees in decision-making / working with people, appearing confident / controlling fear / displaying equal respect for others regardless of status, getting the best out of difficult situations / viewing mistakes as important, organizing and managing work and time / focusing on task / persevering, working within the big picture / compromising to meet mutual goals, and balancing work and play / having fun. These seven themes represented the women's perspective on what effective leadership is, that is, how they lead.

While further analysis of women's leadership strategies may be very interesting and may be the source of future research, the purpose of this paper was *not* to describe a theory of female leadership; rather it was to describe a theory of female leader *development*. While many of these leadership strategies can be extracted from the numerous quotations presented both in this paper and in the interview transcripts, I have excluded any description of the outcomes of leader development in the current findings because the paper focuses, instead, on the development process itself.

Summary of Findings

Taken together, the sub-themes of values instilled in formative years through parental interaction, establishing key personal relationships, and observing interactions and human behavior demonstrated the central importance of relationships to female leader development. Therefore, relationships represented a central category in this theory of female leadership development in the military. Relationships led to engaged experiences, incorporating feedback, and the development of leadership strategies. Engaged experiences included the sub-themes of experiencing educational challenges, experiencing challenging assignments, and making mistakes. Engaged experiences, in turn, led to incorporating feedback and the development of leadership strategies. Incorporating feedback consisted of the sub-themes of identifying personal and military values and understanding people, 'how things work' and 'how the military works.' Incorporating feedback, then, led to the development of leadership strategies. Finally, engaged

experiences and incorporating feedback interacted to lead to the development of leadership strategies.

DISCUSSION

The model of female leader development put forth in this paper is well-supported by data gathered in the study. However, this begs the question as to how well the model is supported by or compares to other research on leader development. Before addressing that question, though, the model contingencies are discussed.

Model Contingencies

Two contingencies of the model were determined during the third phase of data collection, the group interview. As stated, the purpose of model contingencies was to specify special conditions when the model does/does not hold. First, the participants were adamant in stating that the values instilled through formative years must be 'good' values. Good values mentioned were honesty, dignity, respect, and faith. In addition, military values consist of loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and courage. A second contingency of the model concerned engaged experiences. The participants stated that while making mistakes was an important part of both educational and on-the-job experience, a successful outcome of the experience was necessary for the model to hold. Perhaps, this is due to the forces of the performance-oriented culture of the military. In order to advance to the next leadership position in the military, one's educational and on-the-job experiences must ultimately have been successful (i.e., 'up or out').

The Central Category - Relationships

The theory of female leader development in the military put forth in this paper implied that relationships were central to women's development into leaders. Relationships with parents, key others (i.e., mentors), and the opportunities to observe other leaders formed the basis of the model of female leader development in the military. In the following paragraphs, each of these three components of relationships is discussed and contrasted with previous research on leader development.

Relationships and Leader Development. First, some authors have speculated on the importance of the impact of parents on leadership development and effectiveness later in life, but little empirical research is currently available on this topic. For example, Avolio (1999) briefly discussed the importance of parents as the first-line leaders and that teachers and then managers pick up the development of leaders where the parents left off. He offered anecdotal data about the importance of the role of mothers when pointing out that Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and Nelson Mandela were all primarily raised by their mothers.

Micha Popper and his associates have discussed the role that parents play in developing transformational leadership. In the only known empirical study on the topic, Popper, Mayselless, and Castelnovo (2000) found significant correlations between secure attachment and transformational leadership in officer cadets for the Israel police. In addition, Popper and Mayselless (2003) discussed how transformational leaders exhibit many of the same behaviors as good parents including building self-efficacy, setting high expectations, and valuing critical

thinking. While parenting style is implicitly an important predictor of later leadership development and effectiveness, future longitudinal research on the topic is warranted.

Second, previous research has supported the impact of mentoring on leadership and career development. Some organizations have formal mentoring programs, while others rely on informal processes to enhance leader development (Day, 2000). A recent meta-analysis on mentoring did, in fact, find support for the benefits associated with being mentored, although effect sizes with objective career outcomes were small (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004). The impact of mentoring seemed to depend on the type of mentoring given. More specifically, career mentoring, which consisted of sponsorship, exposure and visibility, coaching, and protection, had a stronger relationship with compensation and promotion than did psychosocial mentoring. Furthermore, qualitative research on protégés found that networking opportunities outside the organization, challenging assignments leading to skill development, help in developing lateral as well as hierarchical relationships, and personalized feedback and career strategy were positive mentoring experiences (Eby & McManus, 2002). Ensher and Murphy (2005) provided a nice review of mentoring research and recommendations for both the protégé and mentor in enhancing these relationships.

Developmental relationships have been discussed by other authors as central to the leader development process. Most notably, McCauley and Douglas (1998) categorized these developmental relationships based on the *role* that the key person plays in the leader's development. For assessment, it is important for leaders to have a feedback provider, a sounding board, a point of comparison, and a feedback interpreter. McCauley and Douglas (1998) also discussed the roles of dialogue partner, assignment broker, accountant, and role model as important for meeting the challenge aspect of leader development. In addition, for the support function in leader development, leaders need a counselor, a cheerleader, a reinforcer, and a cohort. In sum, the finding of the current study that key relationships are important to leader development is also supported by previous research.

Day (2000) pointed out that an important part of mentoring is the opportunity to observe and interact with important organizational constituents. The third component of the central category, relationships, was observing interactions and human behavior, and has been discussed by prior research as important for general learning. Most notably, observational learning formed one of the key components of Albert Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. Social learning theory asserted that human behavior can be best explained through a continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioral, and environmental factors. For example, in Bandura's (1965) famous BoBo doll studies, he demonstrated how children repeated more aggressive behavior after observing videos of adults performing aggressively, even when reinforcements were controlled. Therefore, previous research supports the assertion that observation is definitely a part of learning and therefore may be one component of leader development.

Relationships and the Practice of Leadership. Relationships are not only important for the development of leadership but also for the practice of leadership. As early as the 1950s and the Ohio State leadership studies, leader behaviors were dichotomized into initiating structure and consideration (Bass, 1990). The consideration dimension describes the extent that a leader shows concern for group members' well-being. According to Bass (1990, p. 511), "the considerate

leader expresses appreciation for work, stresses the importance of job satisfaction, maintains and strengthens the self-esteem of subordinates by treating them as equals, makes special efforts to help subordinates feel at ease, is easy to approach, puts subordinates' suggestions into operation, and obtains subordinates' approval on important matters before going ahead." A recent meta-analysis found that across 163 effects, consideration had a moderately strong, nonzero correlation with leadership outcomes (Judge, Piccolo, & Ilies, 2004). Furthermore, consideration had a stronger relationship with follower satisfaction, motivation, and leader effectiveness as compared to initiating structure.

Leadership research has also emphasized the importance of interpersonal skills as an important leadership skill (Bass, 1990). Interpersonal skills refer to one's ability to work with people. This includes the ability to coach, teach, counsel, motivate, and empower others. Desimone, Werner, and Harris (2002) asserted that leaders need to learn interpersonal skills including the following behaviors: indicating respect, immediacy, objectivity, planning, affirming, consistency of behavior, building trust, and demonstrating integrity. Finally, in an under recognized but important observational study of real managers, Luthans and his colleagues found that successful managers spend more time interacting with outsiders and socializing/politicking, two behaviors that would fall under the building relationships realm of leadership (Luthans, Rosenkrantz, & Hennessey, 1985).

In more recent research, a similar concept of "individualized consideration" reflects a focus on relationships in the practice of leadership (Avolio, 1999). Individualized consideration, part of the theory of transformational leadership, refers to the empathy a leader shows for followers' needs and desires. An individually considerate leader places the emphasis on treating each follower as a unique individual, not just an interchangeable part. General characteristics of individualized consideration are empathy, valuing of individual needs, and encouraging continuous improvement. Furthermore, individualized consideration has also been discussed as an effective strategy for developing followers into leaders, a major premise of transformational leadership theory. As a basis of effective leadership, a relationship-orientation has been well established in prior research.

Consideration, interpersonal skills, and individualized consideration as discussed here are leadership strategies. In other words, they are outcomes of leadership development, rather than part of the development process itself, which is the focus of this paper. For a more direct comparison with previous research, we now turn to another model of leadership development to contrast the current theory and the role of the central category, relationships.

Relationships and Authentic Leadership Development. It is surprising that given the importance of leadership and the numbers of scholars dedicated to the topic that there is still a lack of knowledge and science of leadership development (Day & O'Connor, 2003). However, there is a promising theoretical model of leadership development that recently hit the academic literature, Luthans and Avolio's (2003) Authentic Leadership Development (ALD) theory.

In the ALD model (Luthans and Avolio, 2003), the construct of relationships is *not* explicitly included. It may be argued that the concept of relationships is implicitly included in the ALD theory. For example, life experience may incorporate previous relationships (i.e., with parents or

key others), which result in the positive psychological capacities. Nonetheless, 'relationships' is not an overt part of the 2003 ALD theoretical model. The role of relationships in ALD was discussed more recently, however, in the special issue of *The Leadership Quarterly* dedicated to the topic (see Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

Perhaps, this discrepancy is due to the nature of the ALD model's origin. While the current model is based on a grounded theory approach, the Luthans and Avolio (2003) model is theoretically-based. Although all the linkages in the model are based on prior theory and empirical research, the actual decision on which variables to include was based on the authors' theoretical, top-down perspective. A possible explanation as to why the construct of relationships was not included in this model may be an artifact of the majority of previous theory and empirical research findings on leadership being derived from male samples. I argue that, given the findings of the current study and previous research explicated in the previous section, the construct of relationships should be explicitly included in future theoretical frameworks of leadership development.

Engaged Experiences

Other leadership researchers have discussed the importance of concepts similar to engaged experiences to leader development. While the construct of relationships is not an overt part of the Avolio and Luthans (2003) ALD model, what is included are the concepts of life experience and trigger events/challenges. These concepts are similar to the engaged experiences category of the current model (see Table 4). In addition, Day (2000) discussed the role of "stretch" assignments as a source of development and Bass and Riggio (2006) presented previous research on the impact of differences in life history within the context of transformational leadership development (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Engaged experiences, as they are referred to in the current study, may consist of events with both a negative or positive connotation and vary in duration. With regard to negative experiences, Moxley (1998) pointed out that hardships often promote self-reflection and learning. Examples of hardships include business mistakes and failures, career setbacks, personal trauma, problem employees, and downsizing. On the other hand, in their recent book expanding the explanation of ALD, Avolio and Luthans (2006) provided an in-depth discussion of "moments that matter" to leadership development. These authors stated that important moments, or trigger events, which may last a few seconds or endure for years, can contribute to one's development. They especially made a point that these include not only negative events, but also positive moments in one's life, such as the birth of a child or a promotion at work. In fact, the leaders in the current study were clear in pointing out that the outcomes of the challenges they faced had to be positive in order to impact their leader development. In sum, the current study's finding that engaged experiences are an important component of leader development corroborates previous theory and research.

Table 4. Comparison of Theory Components

Theory of Female Leader Development	Authentic Leadership Development Theory (Luthans & Avolio, 2003)
Model Component Similarities	
Engaged experiences	Life experience
Understanding people / how the military works / how things work	Understanding of organizational systems/support
Identifying personal and military values	Self-awareness
Incorporating feedback	Self-regulation

Incorporating Feedback

However, as Day and O'Connor (2003, p. 15) stated, "development is not a matter of mere experience; rather, it depends on how the experience is organized and interpreted in terms of underlying concepts or knowledge structures." Van Velsor and Guthrie (1998) provided a nice discussion of enhancing the ability to learn from experience as key to leader development. Therefore, it is the incorporation of feedback as a result of engaged experiences that results in the development of leadership strategies.

Previous research has positioned feedback as crucial to the process of leader development. As stated, the Luthans and Avolio (2003) ALD model included the concepts of an understanding of organization systems/support, self-awareness, and self-regulation which parallel the current model's components of understanding people / how the military works / how things work, identifying personal and military values, and incorporating feedback, respectively (see Table 4). Furthermore, self-insight, self-regulation, and self-identity formed the basis of psychological processes underlying leadership behavior in London's framework (2002). London (2002) also extensively discussed the role of feedback in the support of leadership development. Other forms of feedback include 360-degree feedback, which is a system of gathering input from the 'entire circle' of constituents of the leader – subordinates, peers, direct supervisors, indirect supervisors, customers, etc. (Day, 2000). 360-degree feedback has been discussed extensively in organizational literature and specifically by Chappelo (1998) and Atwater and Waldman (1998) with regard to leader development. It may not be a stretch to go so far as to say that feedback plays a role in *every* leadership development framework/discussion in the literature. Therefore, this aspect of the current model can be validated by prior research and writings on leader development.

Limitations and Future Research

While this is a grounded theory study and the depth of the data rather than the sample size drives the validity of the research, the implications of this research are limited to the context in which it was discovered and by the leaders who served as participants. Several study artifacts limit the extent to which findings can be interpreted, including the following: (1) any uniqueness of the two women serving as participants, (2) the influence of a female research investigator, (3) the singular location where the participants were stationed, and (4) the categories of questions that were asked. While it may be true, no argument can be made on the basis of this study alone that relationships, experiences, and feedback are core to any or every leader's development. However, the purpose of this study was not to extend to populations outside of those assessed here. Rather, the purpose was to describe the process whereby two female military leaders have developed. It is up to future researchers to assess any potential generalizations by testing study propositions in other contexts and with other populations.

There are some significant opportunities for future research to examine the impact of relationships on leader development. As stated, longitudinal research on the impact of parenting style during childhood on leader development and effectiveness during adulthood would be particularly interesting. Research questions might include the following examples: Does infant secure attachment versus ambivalent or insecure attachment impact leader emergence/effectiveness during adulthood? Does temperament or emotional maturity during childhood impact adult transformational leadership? Does authoritarian versus laissez-faire parenting style impact the adult's leader's ethical decision-making? The possibilities for linking early childhood experiences to later leadership criteria are endless. In addition, future research can investigate the types of relationships (i.e., deep and long versus short and intense) that have the greatest impact on leader development. Furthermore, researchers can examine what aspects of relationship promote the meaningful incorporation of feedback and result in leader development. For example, literature on mentoring has discussed the importance of the trust between mentor and leader in terms of how receptive the leader is to mentor feedback (Ensher & Murphy, 2005). Others could examine additional aspects of relationships that matter. In sum, there are several avenues for future research to scientifically investigate the role of relationships in leader development.

Implications and Conclusion

The current study has implications for the study and practice of leader development. The eight theoretical propositions which emerged from this study can be used to generate hypotheses to be tested and validated through future empirical research on leader development. Furthermore, the major contribution of this study was to focus future research on the role relationships play in leadership development, not only for women, but also for male leaders. By looking more closely at the processes underlying two Army officers' leader development, this study has drawn attention to the need to incorporate the concept of relationships into future leader development models and studies. Through the contribution of a theory describing the developmental experiences of female military leaders, this study was one step toward filling a major gap in the leadership literature.

With regard to the practice of leader development, women looking to develop their leadership ability and advance in the military can learn from the findings of this study. Female military leaders should seek to build relationships with key mentors, who are junior, peer, and senior to the target leader. By relying on mentors outside of the direct chain of command, the development of female officers can be enhanced. In addition, women pay attention and observe the interactions of other leaders with their subordinates and human behavior, in general. According to the current model, much can be learned by just watching and taking note of strategies other leaders utilize to inform what the target leader may or may not want to incorporate into her own leadership style. Additionally, young leaders should seek out challenging experiences both within and outside the military. They should work to incorporate feedback they gain from these engaged experiences and from the relationships they have with key others in order to continually develop. While the focus of this study was female leader development, it is likely that these same approaches to leader development may be equally as effective for men.

In conclusion, the current study attempted to tap a rarely used female sample as a source of understanding the leader development process. By taking a grounded theory approach, the complexities, processes, and contexts of leader development were captured in this study. The result was a theory of female leader development in the military yielding eight theoretical propositions and highlighting the central role of relationships to the development process. This is a similar theme found in other discussions of leader development, which indicates that there may be more similarities than differences in the female versus male leader development process. Recommendations were made to include the concept of relationships in future theories/models of leader development. Finally, implications for the practice of leader development were made.

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