Chapter 7

What sticks? The evaluation of a train-the-trainer course on military ethics and its perceived outcomes

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Abstract

Ethics training has become a common phenomenon in the training of military professionals at all levels. However, the perceived outcomes of this training remain open. In this article, we analyze the experiences of course participants who were interviewed 6-12 months after they had participated in a train-the-trainer course on military ethics developed by the Faculty of Military Sciences of the Netherlands Defence Academy. Through qualitative inductive analysis, it is shown how participants evaluate the training, how they perceive the development of their moral competence, and how they see the impact of the training on their own training practice.

Key words: moral competence, military ethics, qualitative study, outcomes, ethics education

Introduction

Professional ethics plays a critical part in professional practice in various contexts, including military organizations, health care organizations and different business corporations. Consequently, many different types of training programs or ethics curricula and courses are being offered (as a part of the curriculum or as on-the-job training) for the purpose of fostering moral competence and promoting ethically responsible conduct.

Professional ethics in these domains is “of service to professionals who have to carry out the tasks entrusted to them as honorably and correctly as possible” (Cook and Syse 2010, 119). Military personnel often have to carry out tasks in a “dynamically complex environment” (Kramer 2004) in which there is a necessity to act. This involves situations in which the rules and “laws are insufficiently clear, silent or even contradictory” (Van Baarda and Verweij 2006, 1). Dealing with this complexity requires “thinking instead of rule-following” (Kramer 2004, 27). The military organization has a responsibility to prepare military personnel thoroughly for a wide range of situations, and to consider the ethical aspects that are in play (Wakin 2000; Van Baarda and Verweij 2006; Robinson et al. 2008; Lucas 2015).

How does one teach moral competence and ethically responsible conduct? Different types of ethics education can be distinguished. Following Lynn Sharp Paine (1994), we distinguish compliance strategies and values or integrity strategies; between courses focusing on a set of moral rules (codes of conduct) and interdictions and courses that do not attempt to provide universal rules or principles for ethical decision-making (Robinson 2007; Moore 2005) but rather try to stimulate reflection, ethical decision-making and accountability (Birden et al. 2013; Knights et al. 2008; Mueller 2015). The latter can be called “learning-based” approaches. Compliance strategies can be viewed as concretely normative; there is a given set of moral rules and interdictions with which one must comply. Values or integrity strategies are
normative in a more general sense and more process-oriented, focused on reflection and fostering moral competence.

The above-mentioned distinction between learning-based and compliance-based approaches has consequences for the way these courses can be evaluated. A compliance-based approach to an ethics course teaches “a set of rules” and can be considered effective to the degree to which professionals start behaving according to these rules. In contrast, a learning-based approach needs to be evaluated according to the degree to which professionals learn a set of skills or are able to reflect on their moral motivation and ability to foster their moral competence.

The train-the-trainer course on military ethics, which is investigated in this article, belongs to the learning-based approach. The course aims to train military personnel of the Netherlands armed forces in teaching ethics to their military colleagues, not by providing rules and guidelines, but by fostering a learning process.

There are relatively few qualitative evaluation studies on the outcomes of ethics courses within the military context (Mumford et al. 2015). In other sectors, particularly health care, quite a number of evaluative studies can be found (Verkerk et al. 2007; Molewijk et al. 2008; Van der Dam et al. 2013; Weidema et al. 2013; Birden et al. 2013; Janssens et al. 2015; Hem et al. 2015; Mueller 2015). The same can be said of business ethics (Cameron and O’Leary 2015; LeClair and Ferrell 2000; Nicholson and DeMoss 2009; Sims and Gegez 2004).

In our interpretation, ethically responsible conduct is strengthened by fostering moral competence. Moral competence entails the ability to be aware of one’s personal moral values and the values of others, the ability to recognize the moral dimension of situations, the ability to judge adequately a moral dilemma, to communicate this judgment, the willingness and ability to act in accordance with this judgment in a morally responsible manner, and the willingness and ability to be accountable to yourself and to others (Karssing 2000; Sherblom 2012; Verweij 2005; Wortel and Bosch 2011; Van Baarle et al., 2015).

The aim of this article is to investigate the development of moral competence during and after attendance of the train-the-trainer course on military ethics. Therefore, we pose the following important research questions. First, with regard to the content of the training: how do participants evaluate the training? Second, how do participants perceive the development of their moral competence? And third, how do participants see the impact of the training on their own teaching?

In the following, we first provide a description of the context of the study and the methods used. Next, findings are presented. We present how the participants of the train-the-trainer course on military ethics evaluate different elements of the training. We then describe how the participants perceive the development of their moral competence and subsequently address their perceptions on the influence of the training on their own way of teaching. We conclude the article with a discussion of our findings, the practical implications, and the limitations of this study.
Context

The military ethics train-the-trainer course was launched in 2006 by means of a five-day pilot. Since then, it has developed into a nine-day course consisting of three non-consecutive blocks of three days in order to give participants the opportunity to put their newly acquired theory and tools into practice in between the blocks.

The aim of the course is to train participants to become trainers in military ethics and, at the same time, strengthen their moral competence. The assumption is that a person who engages as a trainer in ethics and moral competence is an example to others. The course participants are commissioned and non-commissioned officers who already teach military ethics to military personnel or plan to do so in the future (without having had any proper education to do so). Two trainers are present throughout the course. Intake interviews are performed with each participant before the beginning of the course.

To foster moral competence, the participants are invited to choose two personal development objectives to work on during the training. The participants are provided with a list of 17 “development objectives” based on the six elements of moral competence (Wortel and Bosch, 2011).

The participants are not provided with a clearly defined blueprint for ethics training. Rather, several topics and work formats are offered that they can use as inspiration for their own courses and training.

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1 The train-the-trainer course on military ethics was developed at the instigation of the State Secretary for Defence and designed by the Faculty of Military Sciences (FMW) of the Netherlands Defence Academy (NLDA).
### The train-the-trainer course on military ethics

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Methods

In this section we describe the collection and analysis of our qualitative data, and the role of the researchers.

Data collection

The first two authors each performed semi-structured in-depth interviews, using an interview guide (Patton 2002), with participants who had taken part in two different train-the-trainer courses on military ethics. Each interview lasted about one hour and took place at a location of the interviewee’s preference. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. We included two different groups of the military ethics train-the-trainer course on order to increase the reliability and authenticity of this study (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 301). The data collection period was 6-12 months following the train-the-trainer course. Of a total of 22 interviewees, 13 are men and nine are women, aged between 26 and 50, varying in rank from sergeant to major, and originating from all four armed forces services (i.e. the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and the Military Police Corps). Eighteen of the interviewees are trainers and four of them are managers and policymakers who are responsible for designing ethics education and do not teach military ethics themselves.

In the interviews, the participants were asked to describe what they had learned, how they evaluated the training, how they perceive the development of their own moral competence, and how this affected their daily work, including their training practice. In our questioning, we focused on concrete examples with regard to their moral competence, instead of directly asking them whether or not they perceived growth or a lack of growth with regard to their moral competence, thus fostering the emergence of individual experiences (Patton 2002). We aimed to capture the interviewees’ accounts of change, how they made sense of what to change, how to change, and their subsequent actions (or non-actions). We asked questions such as: What did you learn and retain? What made an impression on you? What did you find difficult? Were you able to work on your development objectives? Why? If yes, what contributed to the development of your development objectives? What is the training’s impact on your daily practice as an ethics trainer? What were you able to strengthen? What is still an obstacle for you?

Research ethics

The interviews were recorded and the transcriptions sent to the interviewees for checking. It was made explicit to the participants that the data from the interviews would be processed anonymously and used in a scientific article. For that reason, we do not refer to specific ranks or gender when quoting statements made by interviewees. All participants gave oral
consent. Some examples were considered sensitive by the interviewees and were given off the record during the interviews. These examples are not referred to in this article.

**Data analysis**

Data analysis took place between June 2014 and January 2015 and was conducted through framework analysis, in which we included deviating cases (Green and Thorogood 2014). After familiarization with the interviews, the first two authors independently and inductively coded four transcripts. Our aim was to inductively develop labels by adhering faithfully to informants’ terms relating to the three research questions. We refrained from coding the data based on existing theory and terminology, as we wanted to prevent “imposing our preordained understandings on their [the participants’] experiences” (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013, 16).

Subsequently, we compared, discussed, and refined the labels and in the end agreed on a set of 22 labels. (For instance: “elements of the training that are recollected by the participants” and “actions that are done differently after the training.”) After this step, the first and second author applied the established 22 labels to the whole data set by charting the data in a framework with the 22 labels in the horizontal axis and the 22 participants on the vertical axis. The first and second author both coded half of the remaining transcripts. The final combined framework contains a summary (or a short quote) of the content under that label with a reference to the transcript in order to be able to retrieve the original source quickly.

Through this framework, we were able to see the full range of data across the labels (vertically) and across participants (horizontally). For instance, we were able to see what kind of elements of the training were easily recollected by the participants by viewing the chart vertically under that label and we were able to view the coherence between the development objectives a participant had chosen for him- or herself during the training and the kind of impact they indicated the training had on their own way of teaching.

Subsequently, we focused on themes by interpreting the framework and looking at connections among participants and labels. We discussed possible explanations for deviant cases, thus nuancing our findings (Gale et al. 2013).

**The role of the researchers**

The first author, who conducted half of the interviews, is also a trainer and one of the developers of the course. Given this double function, the research may be labeled as action inquiry or action research where knowledge is “created for and in action” (Ellis and Kiely 2000, 83). In order to prevent bias, the second author conducted the second half of the interviews. To foster a self-reflective process, including challenging one’s theories and
assumptions, the first and second author regularly met for peer-debriefing sessions about the findings, to uncover taken-for-granted biases, perspectives and assumptions on the researcher’s part (Lincoln and Guba 1985). The second author works within the context of health care ethics support (i.e. training and research) and has no previous experience with the military and can therefore be considered as an outsider to the military context and the train-the-trainer course. During the interviews, both researchers asked the participants how they experienced the interview and whether it would have made a difference if the interview had been conducted by a researcher in another position (either a trainer involved in the training or an outsider to the military context). The participants stated that they felt that they had already established a relationship of trust with the first author (e.g. knowing each other and working together for nine days during the training.) They also stated that talking with an «insider, someone who understands the military culture and the cultural and moral dilemmas» is easier than working with an «outsider.» On the other hand, several participants also indicated that:

> if I really did not have a good feeling about the military ethics course, I would be more likely to tell a stranger [the second author] than someone who is involved in it him- or herself. If I was being really critical, it would be easier to deal with an outsider

Besides this, it was easier for the second author to adopt a “naïve attitude” when following up on and “delving more deeply” into the shared background. Some aspects were considered self-evident, but were in fact specific to the military context and the training. During the data analysis, reflection on the themes was stimulated by interaction with the research group (i.e. the other authors).

**Findings**

In this section, we will first present the participants’ evaluation of the training. Secondly, we focus on the participants’ perception of the development of their moral competence. Thirdly, we present the experiences of the participants regarding the impact of the training on their own teaching.

**How do participants evaluate the training?**

First, we address the importance participants attach to practical elements of the train-the-trainer course (e.g. cases experienced by colleagues, film fragments) and the theoretical elements of the train-the-trainer course. Next, we focus on elements that are related to attitude development and, finally, we highlight two group dynamic elements that
were experienced as a challenge by the participants during the training. These elements nevertheless resulted in opportunities for the participants to learn.

**Case examples, film fragments and theory**

During the course, participants were asked to present personal moral dilemmas. The participants were impressed by the dilemmas of their colleagues. Almost all participants indicated that they clearly remembered the examples of the presented moral dilemmas and the group discussion about those examples:

Examples that were often mentioned were mission-related moral dilemmas experienced by colleagues in Afghanistan.

*The Chai Boys* in Afghanistan [...] how would I respond if I had to deal with people [Afghan (police) officials who sexually abuse young boys] like these?

The participants retained not only mission dilemmas, but also dilemmas in the workplace in the Netherlands:

What affected me was [...] that she believed that she felt she had to behave like a man, so that she could not in fact be herself.

Furthermore, the film fragments shown by the trainers kept a number of participants preoccupied for quite a while, particularly the clips from the movie *Attack on Darfur*:

[...] a UN commander has to decide whether or not to go back to a village. If not, the village would have fallen in the hands of the Janjaweed [...] “if it had been me, what would I have done?”

[...] what would I have done? On the one hand, there are the journalists who want to return and, on the other hand, there is the matter of your safety and that of your group.

Striking examples include film fragments that appear realistic to the participants in the sense that they can imagine themselves being confronted with the moral dilemma being depicted. This sometimes also evoked an emotional response. The involvement and interest in such examples seem to ensure that the participants are also truly willing to analyze dilemmas and to reflect on the values that are under threat for the purpose of ultimately forming an

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In Afghanistan, *Chai boys* are young boys who serve tea but are sometimes also exposed to sexual violence. Confrontation with this practice (which is also referred to as *bacha bazi*) is often experienced as a moral dilemma by Dutch military personnel deployed to Afghanistan (Schut and van Baarle 2017).
opinion on such moral dilemmas. A number of participants did this not only during the course, but continued to do so after it had finished.

The theoretical parts of the training were mentioned far less by the participants as being important. These parts included: different normative theories (utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics), the concept of integrity, theories of power (Michel Foucault), and law and ethics:

Not during the lectures, no, I really had to make quite an effort then [...] 

I gained more from the practical examples than from the theory. I am also unable to recall the theory.

However, for some participants, particularly those who had already been teaching ethics themselves, these more theoretical parts were indeed interesting and useful:

I think that I now have a different perception of decision-making in ethical processes. You can then understand why someone does something from an ethical point of view. I am much more aware of this, even when watching talk shows on TV, I assess why they are saying what they are saying and where that originates from.

The theory of Foucault is what I remember almost daily. The fact that power is everywhere, I have researched this further and read more about it. That fact that our entire society is permeated by it and depends on it.

Case examples and film fragments are considered important by the participants to assist them in fostering their moral competence. The majority of the participants cannot recall or describe the theoretical parts of the training, these parts of the training are mentioned far less by the participants.

**Elements contributing to attitude development**

Nearly all participants explicitly mentioned that working with the Socratic attitude contributed to their development. The Socratic attitude as it is presented in the train-the-trainer course includes: taking time; adopting a listening attitude, especially active or empathic listening; asking (critical) questions; suspending one’s judgment; and examining underlying values without immediately focusing on solutions (Nelson 1950; Heckmann 1981; Knezic et al. 2010). By practicing this Socratic attitude in exercises (both in plenary sessions as well as in smaller groups), the participants gained more awareness of their own values, as well as of those of others. The listening exercises, in which participants worked in pairs and in which only questions could be asked, were perceived as especially meaningful:
During the walk [in pairs], I learned to have deeper conversations with, and not argue with, my walking partner, to suspend my judgement, but also to delve more deeply and really ask about what makes you see this the way you do.

Practicing the Socratic attitude during the course made it easier for participants to recognize dilemmas, and to see which of their values or those of others were actually under threat by listening to each other. In addition, it made it easier to get to the essence of dilemmas during dilemma training:

Taking a more detailed look at yourself and assuming that critical attitude [...] in the discussions we had with each other, enabled me to analyze what my values are and what I need to be able to work on my development objectives.

Continuing to ask questions, that makes you think, which is essential to get to the heart of the matter.

Several participants pointed out that the Socratic attitude does not fit well with the military culture:

I believe that this is in direct contrast to how people in the military communicate with each other (laughs), in other words instantly forming opinions.

The participants enjoyed working on their development objectives. The time provided for reflection feedback from other participants was seen as helpful:

I enjoyed developing something specific [a development objective], which I believe I have difficulty with.

It really was during the discussions we had with each other that I was able to analyze what my values are and what I need for working on my development objectives.

Yet, working on personal development objectives and strengthening one’s moral competence was also perceived as a difficult task. We asked the participants during the intake interview whether they were prepared to do so. This also served to prepare the participants. The one participant with whom we could not conduct an intake interview had some difficulty with this. He had anticipated that we would be dealing only with theory and indicated during the course itself that he preferred not to reflect on his own moral competence in a group setting:

I have experienced too much one-sidedness [i.e. reflection on own moral competence and not so much on theory]. If this had not been the case for a few participants at the time, I would have expected more differentiation, instead of including the entire group in lengthy conversations.
This participant was not the only one who found this aspect difficult to deal with, even though the other participants were prepared for it during the intake:

The course is not one that I would have selected on the basis of my own interests. So, I found it quite difficult to be open and to reflect on my own views.

Yet, the reflection on one’s moral competence, selecting personal development objectives and working on them, did lead to certain insights:

It did provide me with more insight into myself and showed me why I deal with things the way I do.

Being critical, yes, I find that difficult but necessary, as it makes me think about what I do. I am often a poor listener, but I am able to substantiate matters very well, in a very dominant style [...] People are then reluctant to ask me my reasons for saying or thinking what I do. But they do during the course, and I am more than happy with it.

In conclusion, elements contributing to attitude development work with the Socratic attitude, specifically through the listening exercises, and reflecting on one’s moral competency, by working on personal development objectives, which includes receiving feedback from other participants.

Group dynamics

The groups were quite diverse, as far as rank, branch of the armed services, age, and civilian or military status were concerned. A number of participants found diversity to be an obstacle. The various branches of the armed forces can be very different and it seemed the participants had certain perceptions of what a real soldier is. Combat experience, more specifically, Afghanistan experience, is valued highly in the groups. This potentially creates a power imbalance between insiders (those with deployment experience) and outsiders (those without deployment experience) amongst the participants:

There were a few people there from the soft sector of the Navy in particular, people not in combat positions, who think very differently about certain decisions that maybe for soldiers [...] are easier to do. But if things fit in with your ROEs [Rules of Engagement] and you have your orders, then it is military obedience, that is part of it. The diversity of people participating in the course, who are thus part of this organization, introduces very different points of view (including not obeying your orders), which I find very difficult to accept.
What I found difficult was the diversity of the people in the group during the train-the-trainer course. They are all so different from each other; why are they there [...] there’s also such a range of personalities. The course did not always have the depth that it should have had.

However, it seems that it was precisely this diversity that caused many participants to gain insights into the values of others, particularly those of other soldiers. Not all soldiers are the same. It is possible that in fact the diversity makes it easier to present a different view during the course, to have an opinion that is different from the rest, and to feel less pressured to conform to the group. Later in the interview the participant who made the second statement above also indicated that:

That we see as “normal” things that 80 percent of the people who were there did not see as “normal” [...] that was an eye-opener for me. During the course, I noticed that I was thinking, well, why are we making such an issue of this subject? This is the world of grown-ups, and that is what they call Afghanistan and there are a whole bunch of things happening there that we, from our Western perspective, would like to see changed. Maybe it is impossible to understand it if you have never been involved in it. This could be risky, as it is possible to start seeing things as “normal” when they are not at all “normal” for other people [...] If you do not keep an eye on that, there is a risk of standards blurring [...] and if that happens, when do you then see something as abnormal?

More than half of the participants mentioned the topic of safety within the group, even though we did not explicitly address it. Participants saw safety within the group as a difficult, but important topic. The notion of safety seemed to have various meanings. Such as:

We have very specific casuistry and you cannot talk about everything.

What I remember is the moment that I was not sure [...] whether I wanted to be open about my own experience in the group. You cannot know what will happen, whether people will condemn you and such [...] I found myself in a hierarchical situation [...] because I still depended on her for my job appraisal. I was not going to tell her what I thought of her, but I had to restrain myself towards her [...] There were quite a number of people from the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee [Military Police] in my group and I think that this had an impact on people when talking about their dilemmas in confidence. If their story involved a criminal offense, they will have thought twice before proceeding. You can win people’s trust, people can change their perception, trust can be won. That is why I am happy participants are allowed to attend the course in civilian dress. I think this certainly influenced people from units such as the marines or the Commando Corps, as they generally have the idea that Marechaussee personnel are [...] evil (laughs).
The fear of condemnation by other participants when revealing personal issues, and the hierarchical lines linking the participants in the group, had an impact on the extent to which participants felt free to talk to each other about their personal moral dilemmas.

Group dynamic elements, diversity, and safety within the group are perceived to have influence on the course. They are sometimes regarded as complicated and difficult elements but they are also considered important for the course.

How do participants perceive the development of their moral competence?

In this section, we present five main findings with regard to the impact of the training on the moral competence of the participants after the training.

**Reflecting on personal dilemmas**

Some participants mentioned that the new vocabulary helps them to rethink moral dilemmas they experienced in the past, while others more easily recognize moral dilemmas in their personal lives. They argued that it is now easier for them to discuss these experiences and indicate the values that were under threat and why they made certain decisions:

*I gained a better grasp of why I made certain choices. I also enjoyed it. I was able to put my own decisions into words.*

*In part due to the train-the-trainer course, I believe I would now react differently to certain situations. I would have opted more for my own values. Certainly. I was very much surprised at that time. It really was a culture shock. I would be more likely to defend my own values knowing what I now know.*

*I was uncomfortable with abuse in the mission area. People were taking this somewhat lightly, but I now think that I would rather have said something like “I am uncomfortable with this, please do not do that.”*

**Recognizing dilemmas sooner and describing better why they are uncomfortable in a certain situation**

Participants reported that, due to the training, they perceive and recognize the moral dimension of a situation faster and more easily:

*It seems as if a door has been opened, as I am much more aware than before of certain issues and what they can do to people.*
The participants also indicated that they have become aware of the extent to which they are aware of ethics in their daily lives. While ethics was initially associated with the «usual suspects» of military ethics, such as intense life-or-death dilemmas during missions, participants are now better at recognizing the moral dimensions of other situations, not just in their daily professional practice, but also in their personal lives (just to mention some diverse examples: whether to have their child baptized, bullying, failing students, etc.):

I have become more aware of ethics and how much we in fact encounter ethics every day.

If you think about it often enough, you begin to recognize situations in which certain aspects clash with each other and how to deal with them to avoid fallout for yourself at a later date.

I have also gained more insight into myself, why I deal with things the way I do.

In addition to recognizing the moral dimension of their work, the ability of the participants to put this into words had also improved:

I am better able to put my gut feeling into words. I think that I already had a good idea of what is good or bad, thanks to my training and upbringing, but I am now better able to identify why something is good or bad.

I am more aware of when a dilemma is occurring and I will more consciously step up to defend values.

The participants said they have gained more insight into the values that are under threat when confronting moral dilemmas. They also mentioned that they can now put moral dilemmas into words, meaning that they can name their own values that are at stake and express why they are uncomfortable in a certain situation.

**Ability to empathize, recognize, and understand values of others**

Participants also indicated that they are able to understand the (divergent) values of others, allowing them to better empathize with others, to listen, and to gain insight into which of the other person’s values are being threatened. This insight also enables the participants to better identify the problem or the difference of opinion:

I now also better understand that people can have certain dilemmas that are not only related to our profession, but are also personal. That you have to make certain decisions that you actually do not support personally.
I was not very receptive to it the training, but the most important lesson I learned was experiencing the differences between people [...] I was forced to face facts.

It is sometimes difficult to empathize in practical situations.

**Ability to address the moral dimension of situations (including those regarding superiors) and to act upon own judgements**

The above-mentioned insights and vocabulary with regard to recognizing and addressing the moral values that are at stake in moral dilemmas make it easier to address comparable situations (even with superiors). The majority of the participants indicated that they are more likely to address situations with which they were uncomfortable and also mentioned examples of doing so:

I can set limits for myself [...] that certain jokes are inappropriate.

My mind now produces warning signals. The course did embed something in me. It's not like I assess everything in that way every day, but I do think of the lessons when tensions come to the surface.

I have noticed that I can now open a discussion and that I can indicate the consequences. Did you consider this or that? I used to accept that we only did things a certain way because there was no other way.

Instead of an initial (strong) moral intuition or an uneasy gut feeling, the respondents can now put into words a potential difference of opinion, making it possible for them to begin a more constructive discussion and to take action when they recognize a moral dilemma and are able to identify the values that are under threat. A number of participants provided recent examples from their own daily practice in which they seemed to get into conflict with their superior, yet continued to adhere to their values and acted accordingly:

So, actually, on the basis of the same interests [...] he thought that it was OK, while I thought that we should not do it, based on my values regarding safety. Although my initial reaction was to dig in my heels, we began a discussion with each other and we ultimately decided not to proceed. Even though my value was being threatened, I was able to defend it without causing a conflict with my superior.

Being able to recognize moral dilemmas and identifying moral values, does not necessary lead to prioritizing personal moral values. In certain situations, participants can also consciously step back from holding on to their personal values, thereby prioritizing other values:
I draw a line at criminal offenses, rules, but otherwise [...] I can step back fairly easily [i.e. obeying orders].

In a number of cases, reflection on specific situations creates room for thought about the question of whether certain rules within the organization were actually adequate rules. By reflecting on these rules, and by discussing them, rules (and policy) are ultimately changed:

Before I attended the Military Ethics train-the-trainer course, I thought that when the law and regulations are as such, then we should act accordingly. Although it may have troubled me somewhat, we had to do it. After the train-the-trainer course, I thought: what we are doing here is actually just too ridiculous, I had that growing awareness of the rules actually contradicting integrity and honesty. Within the organization, and for my superiors, it was also a big step to really acknowledge this and to act upon it.

Some participants experience tension between the culture and characteristics of the military organization on the one hand and moral competence on the other. Within the armed forces, it is common to think within a framework of legality, hierarchy, standards, regulations, and obligations. In this specific context, group bonding, loyalty, uniformity, and hierarchy can make it challenging to act upon one’s moral judgment and foster the moral competence of one’s colleagues during ethics training:

Loyalty and honesty are strong values that are very important to me, but they sometimes clash. To what extent do you go along with someone you are loyal to, your superior or commander, for example, when you are also thinking what we are doing now is wrong?

Participants also indicated feeling alone within the defense culture. At some defense institutions, the number of colleagues who have taken the train-the-trainer course or another form of ethics training is still small:

There are still only a few people who have been involved in ethics training at any level and I find that really unfortunate. The people who have completed a course are your sparring partners, but to then promote ethics further, something else needs to be done. I think that this would have a very positive impact on our customers, the passengers in this case, but also internally on relationships at work.

**Awareness that fostering moral competence requires constant attention**

Most participants indicated that they are aware that working on their development objectives and on moral competence requires constant attention. Once the participants return to their workplace and their day-to-day routine, they must actively devote attention to it:
Once you have completed the military ethics train-the-trainer course, you are completely hyper. You start to assess everything, everywhere, don’t you, for conflicting values and values under pressure. And then the summer vacation begins […] I am simply a line manager, the work is never finished. But I had formulated an action point at the end of the course, which remained here on the whiteboard for a long time. It was about improving the implementation of ethical dilemmas in the final exercise. I considered that question for about four months in the sense of how are we going to give shape to that […] I asked the trainees to think in advance about a value that is important to them individually, to write that value on a card, and to put that card in an envelope. We spent nine weeks outdoors and did four exercises, one of which was very demanding. The evaluation of each of the exercises entailed the question: what was the value that you noted down and had that value been threatened?

Participants are aware that they still have a long road ahead of them. You do not become morally competent overnight:

The Socratic attitude has taken root, but I am still learning, as I find simply conducting conversations a difficult thing.

I feel that I am at the beginning and that I am developing my moral competence as time progresses. You could say it is an initial qualification that I obtained, which I now have to develop further through experience, by acting, by committing errors. It is an area that requires attention again and again. At school, there are several people who have completed the train-the-trainer course and we talk about such things informally. There is an annual refresher day, maybe that is also a good time to talk about certain matters with others. The subject needs my continuous attention.

The participants also frequently mentioned that it was important to anchor the learning effect, as there was a risk of it simply drifting away:

I fear that if you ask me again a year from now, I will still have that feeling, but that it will have faded into the background a little. Not entirely, but that shared thinking, et cetera, that anchoring of information, it almost makes you think of peer supervision and the like.

Participants argue that their moral competence still requires attention after completing the course; they emphasize the importance of peer supervision after the training.

Impact of the course on participants’ own teaching of military ethics

In this section, we show how, according to the participants, the training has impacted their practice as ethics trainers or instructors. The majority of the participants were still to begin training and teaching military ethics in their own daily practice. The subject of the training
and teaching practice of the participants consequently surfaced frequently in the interviews. We present three main findings.

**Attitude of the ethics trainer: questioning, group dynamics and the role of emotions**

Participants state that they have changed their view on teaching and training military ethics. Rather than using PowerPoint Presentations they now aim to engage in dialogue with their students:

*I am even more certain that this is about coaching and educating, and not about conventional teaching.*

They are also more aware of the significance of maintaining a listening attitude. The exercises in the Socratic attitude are said to provide the participants with guidance in their own classes. This is specifically the case for the questioning attitude:

*I am better able to be more thorough in my questioning.*

*It is important for people to reach a conclusion themselves instead of my having to suggest it to them.*

*The Socratic dialogue and the listening exercises really benefited me a lot, not just for my classes, but also for the coaching of the groups, the students.*

Apart from this listening attitude, as trainers, the participants are also more aware of the importance of group dynamic elements, and the role emotions may play during ethics training:

*I see the importance of the insights into group dynamics when teaching my own courses.*

*I no longer avoid emotions.*

**Self-confidence**

The participants indicated that the course provides them with more self-confidence to give ethics training themselves. Every participant seems to have derived those aspects from the course that are most important to him or her as far as preparing their own teaching was concerned:

*I have more knowledge, am more self-assured when teaching.*
The participants also indicated that they consider the practical examples of the other participants’ dilemmas useful for their own classes:

> I find the experiences of other students that I can still remember [...] particularly the practical experiences, really useful.

Situations with a moral dimension that arise in the classes are also recognized; a number of participants indicated being able to address those too:

> And nor do I avoid difficult situations or topics as I have various methods available to me that enable me to deal with issues without immediately ending up in a situation in which I act as the superior who dictates things, not in a setting like that.

### Dealing with resistance

The participants indicated that ethics is a challenging topic to teach in a military context. It is intangible and has a “tree-hugger” or soft image within the organization. During their ethics training they experience a lot of resistance in the group on the topic of military ethics:

> It remains a challenging topic because it is intangible. And what I continue to find tricky is that ethics training always represents a barrier to the standard soldier. It is not cool, but boring, there they are again, you always start at minus 2. That is what I find annoying about ethics, it is not a sexy topic that people are happy to have on their schedule. That is what I find to be the challenge in the case of ethics. We are all tough soldiers [...] Ethics is of course a tree-hugger topic, it’s wishy-washy, it’s not cool, it doesn’t give you a kick, you have to chat about values, gee man, I will do that at home... that’s the sort of talk you get, but just by drawing attention to it [i.e. ethics], you can be more proactive and prevent having to look back with regret and it enables you to prevent things like the blurring of standards.

With my Navy background, I now have to try to teach something to a group of marines who already think that I am really weird and who want to keep everything within the group as much as possible. It’s a very strong cover-up culture and everything that makes you think or could give rise to a difference of opinion is just tree-hugger material. But that is precisely the group where there were two incidents [...] For me, it’s the group I can least get to grips with, and to which I devote the most effort to finding the right way of creating awareness among group members.

The participants indicated that after the training they teach courses with more self-confidence. Participants reported making use of examples of their colleagues’ dilemmas and are applying the Socratic attitude. They do experience ethics as a challenging topic in a military context. Ethics is considered intangible or even boring by their students, and
trainers are aware that fostering moral competence may be a challenge within the context of a military organization in which group bonding, loyalty, uniformity and hierarchy are important.

Discussion

We posed three research questions in this article. First, with regard to the content of the training: how do participants evaluate the training? Second, how do participants perceive the development of their moral competence? And third, how do participants see the impact of the training on their own teaching?

In our data, the participants reflect on their own moral competence as well as on what they have learned as trainers. These two levels overlap, since participants will use what they perceived as relevant during the training, both in their daily practice and also during their own ethics training and education courses. We think the close relationship between both can strengthen the impact of the training.

With regard to our first research question, we found that concrete and realistic (personal) moral dilemmas served as a motivation for participants to engage in reflection on moral issues; to try to understand which values are at stake and what would be a morally acceptable judgement. The more theoretical parts of the train-the-trainer course were hardly mentioned during the interviews. Nevertheless, the result that participants do not remember the theory as such, does not necessarily mean that participants did not grasp the importance of some of these theoretical notions when dealing with moral dilemmas or that ethical theories didn’t help to reflect on practical moral dilemmas within an ethical framework.

Participants positively evaluated the elements of the training aimed at developing attitudes. Particularly, the Socratic attitude was regarded as helpful in identifying their own moral values as well as those of others. Working on personal development objectives in relation to fostering moral competence is seen as beneficial. It presumes that participants are willing to engage in personal reflection on their moral competence. This specific form of ethics training is not primarily concerned with acting in accordance with predefined norms or virtues, but rather with examining “how we construe ourselves as active moral agents” (Knights et al. 2008, 10). Reflecting on personal moral values, values of others, and the moral dimension of a specific situation, presumes that participants are willing to engage in these reflective practices, which may not always be the case. Some participants may find it difficult and would rather not engage in these practices. Participating in a learning-based course where one has to reflect on personal experiences or experiences of colleagues may trigger uncertainty, doubt, and (unwanted) emotions.

Diversity and safety within the group, also referred to as psychological safety in organizational literature (Catino and Patriotta 2013; Edmondson 1999; Edmondson et al. 2004; Edmondson and Lei 2014; Ron et al. 2006), are experienced by the participants as
challenging, but also as beneficial to learning. Trainers must be aware of the importance of safety within groups. If there is no openness, the training will not work. Moreover, trainers should actively work on providing safety, in the sense that participants do not suffer adverse consequences of participating in the training. In future research, it would be interesting to gain more insight in how safety unfolds and builds, decreases, or is even lost in a training (Edmondson and Lei 2014, 38), and how safety is related to diversity in groups. Diversity in the group is sometimes found to be awkward, but it can also contribute to creating more insight into the diversity of values. It can lead to a “more other-centered and cognitive complex way of viewing themselves and the world in which they live” (Garcia 1994, 429).

One way to address and stimulate safety within the group is by referring to what Molewijk et al. (2017) call the inherent epistemological uncertainty within the domain of ethics itself: there seems to be no universal source of knowledge or “evidence” in order to determine the moral rightness of our actions. If participants in the group realize that dealing with ethics and ethical reflections inherently involves experiencing moral doubt and disagreement, then diversity of values and seeing things differently can perhaps be seen as both appropriate and positive (Molewijk et al. 2017). Subsequently, dealing constructively with the disagreement by using a reflective and dialogical approach to the differences and disagreements (e.g. reacting with curiosity instead of debate) again may contribute to experiencing more safety (Widdershoven and Molewijk 2010).

Many of the participants report that after the training they have a better, or different, understanding of ethics. They also mention specific aspects of our teaching methodology, such as making dilemmas explicit, the underlying values, and having a dialogue about them. We therefore conclude that this change cannot solely be put down to the fact that they are exposed to ethical issues during the training, but that the specific methodology of fostering moral competence assisted them in learning to put moral dilemmas into words and identifying conflicting values. Participants mentioned that they have attained a new moral conceptual framework, insights, and vocabulary to describe and interpret their experiences, which in turn also serve a means to act upon their interpretations and judgments.

This newly attained moral conceptual framework can also be relevant for reduction of moral distress (Corley et al. 2005; Jameton 1992) and moral injury (Drescher et al. 2011; Litz et al. 2009). Soldiers may risk internal moral damage if they fail to deal with the moral dilemmas they encounter (Litz et al. 2009). While the relationship between fostering moral competence and moral injury is still understudied, and should be explored in greater detail, there is literature suggesting that ethics training is of assistance in treating soldiers suffering from moral damage (Bica 1999). In addition, based on our findings, we would argue that ethics training may also be helpful in preventing moral injury. Being aware of one’s personal moral values and the values of others, recognizing situations where these values are at stake, and being able to put the moral dimension of these situations into words, seem to strengthen the ability of the participants to communicate and justify to themselves and others why they choose to prioritize and act upon a specific value. The ability to be accountable for one’s
actions when faced with a moral dilemma, to consciously choose between conflicting values while knowing that some values will have to be violated, may help to avoid the feeling of having failed morally or falling in to an overwhelming feeling of guilt. Participants experience two main challenges in their daily work practices. First, the specific context of the military organization, in which group bonding, loyalty, uniformity, and hierarchy are important, can be experienced as a challenge for moral competence. This shows the importance of addressing the influence of the military organization in moral training (Van Baarle et al. 2015). The second challenge is the realization that learning objectives require continuous attention. Since it is unknown how long the effect of the training will last, it is important to organize continuing peer supervision after the training.

Within the context of a military culture, characterized by hierarchy, military discipline, and obeying orders, there may be a tendency to teach ethics as rules one simply has to comply with. Sound and well-articulated rules provide important boundaries within which military personnel are supposed to act. However, our findings show that the learning-based course we evaluated enables and empowers participants to reflect, shape, and communicate moral judgements to others, and to foster their own moral competence. Listening carefully, suspending judgment, and asking critical questions that make you and the other person think, can be regarded as skills needed in a compliance culture, where acting upon a morally sound judgement, including when a superior disagrees, requires these kind of skills.

Because our findings are based on a learning-based course, and not on a compliance-based course, we cannot draw conclusions concerning the relationship between the two. Our findings indicate that fostering moral competence and reflection can help participants to act upon rules once they understand why these rules are valuable. Therefore, we think it is probable that rules teaching and learning processes can be mutually supporting, as the first provides knowledge of the rules, and the second motivates their use in practice. Reflection on rules during the learning process creates room for thought about the question of whether the rules are adequate and whether these should be changed. Good rules are critical; they provide the framework for actions. Also, as Shannon French argues, it is likely to be more effective if soldiers are not drilled on the provisions of International War and military codes of conduct, but rather helped to “internalize appropriate warrior codes that will inspire them to act upon these rules and regulations” (French 2003, 14).
Limitations of the study

Firstly, this study is based on the evaluation of two similar courses in ethics, both in the sense that they use the same methodology (learning-based approach) and that they are given by the same training team. We encourage further research regarding the outcomes of ethics education based on different methodologies.

A second possible limitation of this study is that the participants are themselves trainers in military ethics. Being aware of the resistance they meet when teaching ethics, the participants might have been more likely to be interested in moral issues and in reflection than soldiers who take ethics courses as part of their regular training programs (i.e. the students of the participants). At the same time, our participants are also part of that context, and they teach ethics only for a couple of years. As one participant argued:

*people are 'touring', you just go and teach military ethics for some time, but if you do not want to fall into the same old song, then you need to have some background regarding this specific subject and that is exactly what this course provided me with.*

Conclusion

In this study, we analyzed the experiences of participants within a train-the-trainer course on military ethics, and clarified how they evaluate the training, how they perceive the development of their moral competence, and how they see the impact of the training on their own training practice.

What sticks (what participants remember clearly from the course) are realistic examples of moral dilemmas experienced by their colleagues. These examples served as a motivation for reflection on moral issues. Participants reported a growing awareness of their personal moral values and the values of others. To recognize another person’s moral values is an important element of moral competence. It implies being capable of empathizing with someone else, and of identifying those personal values that are at stake in certain situations. By including the other person’s values in one’s assessment, one’s view is broadened. Through concrete examples, participants show their ability to recognize the moral dimension of situations, to analyze a moral dilemma and justify a choice, and to communicate and act on this judgment. We conclude that, although challenges remain, participants regard the course as contributing to their moral competence and improving their own teaching practice.
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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Chapter 8