

How an Anti-Oppression Framework Can Transform Military Cultures: Learning from the Canadian Context

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ABSTRACT

This paper applies an anti-oppression framework to examine the possibilities and limitations of ongoing culture change efforts in the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). *We draw on an anti-oppression framework to demonstrate how naming and addressing the legacy of patriarchy, colonialism, white supremacy, heteronormativity, and ableism—as root causes shaping the CAF’s culture—is key for transformative change. In doing so, this paper provides a critique of ongoing attempts to evolve culture, through the warrior ideal and other tenets underlining CAF culture. As our discussion shows, any debate of the warrior ideal needs to explicitly engage with its male, masculinist, heteronormative, white, colonial, and ableist foundations. Otherwise, we risk reproducing rather than transforming the existing military culture, especially in the current geopolitical context. An anti-oppression framework can help transform military culture by shifting focus from an evolution of existing cultural pillars to a deeper engagement with the root causes that have shaped the military institution and created norms and standards centred around the ideal warrior. Without explicitly naming these structures and ideals, as well as dismantling the power linked to them, military culture change efforts in Canada will yield limited results.*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Military culture change is currently a key effort across the 5-Eyes countries. As militaries are shifting their demographics to draw on underrepresented populations to compensate for personnel shortages and respond to societal pressures for greater diversity and inclusion, they are grappling with how and whether to engage in organizational culture change. This paper offers a Canadian perspective, examining the limitations and possibilities of Canadian military culture change efforts, and laying out the promise of an anti-oppression framework to advance the transformation of the current military culture.

In April 2022, we established a collaborative network, Transforming Military Cultures (TMC), funded by Department of National Defence (DND) Mobilizing Insights into National Defence and Security (MINDS), and serve as its co-directors. Transforming Military Cultures is a network of Canadian and international academic researchers, defence scientists, military members, veterans, and people with relevant lived experience who are collaborating to challenge, reimagine, and transform the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) culture into one that embraces inclusivity and difference. The Network employs an anti-oppression framework in drawing on diverse critical perspectives and international lessons learned. Our activities aim to determine the root causes of the problematic military culture and provide practical insights to help transform CAF culture into one that serves the needs of Canada and Canadians.

In this paper, we argue that an anti-oppression framework should be central to military culture change efforts going forward. An anti-oppression framework demonstrates how addressing the legacy of the root causes of patriarchy, colonialism, white supremacy, heteronormativity, and ableism—as they have shaped the CAF’s culture—is key for transformative change (Eichler & Brown, in press). If militaries such as the CAF continue to present strategies for social change in ways that only focus on individuals, “a few bad apples,” and “buy-in,” the organization will be unable to address the nuanced ways in which discrimination occurs for

its most marginalized members, who are impacted by larger systems of power. Similarly, *evolution* of the culture, the latest approach to culture change put forward by DND/CAF, does not go far enough in addressing the root causes of the problem.

In what follows, we detail the Canadian context with respect to key media events, class action lawsuits, and external reports that highlight the problematic nature of CAF culture. We describe how DND/CAF publicly position and address culture change, with a particular focus on Chief, Professional Conduct and Culture (CPCC), the organization responsible for culture change. We explain our anti-oppression approach and apply it to the cultural pillars approach to culture evolution, demonstrating how the military's current approach does not go far enough in addressing the root causes of the problem. Thinking about the CAF's cultural pillars through an anti-oppression framework means intentionally engaging with how power operates at various levels of the CAF and acknowledging that structural systems of power have a bearing on how discrimination plays out at an individual level. An anti-oppression framework allows us to see how power is being reconfigured and consolidated rather than challenged in ongoing military culture change efforts.

2.0 UNDERSTANDING THE CANADIAN CONTEXT

A growing body of evidence in the form of news reports, external and internal reviews, and class actions point to the CAF's ongoing complex multi-layered problem with racism, sexism, patriarchy, colonialism, racism, ableism, and homophobia. For instance, in 1998, a series of articles in *Maclean's* (O'Hara, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c) detailed incidents of sexual harassment and sexual assault, with a culture of "unbridled promiscuity, where harassment is common, heavy drinking is a way of life" (O'Hara, 1998a, para. 3). Almost two decades later, similar findings were published (O'Hara, 2014), detailing the continued harassment and assault of women, often in the name of "esprit de corps" (Mercier & Castonguay, 2014). An external review report (Deschamps, 2015) documented that the CAF's sexualized culture resulted in the sexual harassment and assault of women and LGBTQ¹ members of the CAF, which was also reflected in a Statistics Canada survey (Cotter, 2016). Class action lawsuits were filed claiming discrimination based on sexual orientation in an "LGBT Purge"; sexual assault, sexual harassment, and discrimination based on gender or sexual orientation, known as Heyder-Beattie; and, systemic racial discrimination and harassment. The LGBT Purge and Heyder-Beattie class actions were settled in 2018 and 2019 respectively (St. Louis, 2018; Fothergill, 2019), with apologies from the government for survivors of the LGBT purge in 2019 and sexual misconduct in 2021. The racism class action was in its final settlement stages (Stewart McKelvey, 2022) at the time of writing this paper.

In 2015, the CAF launched Operation HONOUR in response to the Deschamps Report (Deschamps, 2015). The focus of Operation HONOUR was on developing policies, programs, education, training, measurements, and victim support in response to sexual harassment and assault (Canada, 2016). By creating a formal military operation through which to eliminate sexual misconduct, Operation HONOUR framed the issue as about individual behaviour that could simply be ordered to stop, in the name of operational effectiveness (Vance, 2016). Operation HONOUR was discontinued in 2021 amid the most recent military sexual misconduct crisis spurred by allegations of sexual misconduct against CDS Vance, a champion of Operation HONOUR, and subsequently a series of other senior male military leaders (Burke & Brewster 2021; Pugliese, 2021). Another external review was ordered, finding that the CAF had ongoing systemic problems with a "toxic and sexist culture" (Arbour, 2022). A Minister's advisory panel report (2022) highlighted systemic racism and colonialism in DND/CAF.

A variety of change initiatives have been undertaken over the past decades, but they have tended to focus only on shaping individual behaviours or on addressing symptoms, as opposed to dealing with root causes of marginalization and oppression. In response to growing public pressure, the political and military leadership have recognized and identified culture change as a top priority. What was once seen to be a series of isolated,

¹ The terms LGBTQ and LGBT are those used in the report and class action.

anecdotal, and disconnected incidents is now recognized as a deeply-rooted organizational problem that requires a cultural overhaul across the CAF.

3.0 CURRENT CULTURE CHANGE INITIATIVES

In Spring 2021, CPCC was established within DND/CAF to bring under one umbrella all internal culture change activities and act as a centre of expertise on culture and conduct. The Initiating Directive (ID) of CPCC promised “a fundamentally new approach to address the root causes of systemic misconduct” (GoC, 2021). The ID acknowledged the limitations of past approaches that focused on symptoms and ordered members to behave differently. One of the tasks of CPCC is to lead “institutional efforts to develop a professional conduct and culture framework that holistically tackles all types of discrimination, harmful behaviour, biases and system barriers” (GoC, 2022a). From October 2021 to March 2022, CPCC engaged in a culture consultation process, led by CPCC and the consulting firm McKinsey (GoC, 2022b). Based on these consultations, CPCC developed a framework consisting of four pillars that define Defence Team culture: service before self, warrior identity, leadership, and teamwork. These 4 pillars are described as having both strengths and limitations or “supportive mindsets” and “limiting mindsets” (GoC 2022c).

We argue that this focus on mindsets brings the problem of culture change back to the individual and away from institutional and systemic root causes, as evidenced by the following quotation: “Mindsets are directly tied to behaviours, and it is only by evolving the mindsets that underpin our culture that we can ensure a sustainable and irreversible change in behaviour” (GoC, 2022c). CPCC is also increasingly replacing the language of *change* with the language of *evolution* (GoC, 2022c) and *enhancement* (GoC, 2022a). The implication is that a radical transformation of the military’s culture is not needed but rather that it is sufficient to adjust it by evolving it—by enhancing existing strengths and reducing existing limitations. Such an approach is deeply problematic as it continues to rely on binary thinking of good versus bad, and what was once thought to be a problem of a few individual bad apples has now shifted to a few limiting mindsets that need to be amended.

4.0 AN ANTI-OPPRESSION FRAMEWORK

An anti-oppression framework draws on several theories and approaches that engage with social and institutional inequities that are societally constructed. In North America, the theories and concepts of anti-oppression were developed and grew out of social justice movements of the 1960s (Collins, 1993; Crenshaw, 1989). An anti-oppression framework focuses on challenging structural power imbalances by addressing the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, Indigeneity, ability, and other dimensions of identity at individual, symbolic, and structural levels (Collins, 1993). Intersectionality as a concept of power structures has been largely absent in studies of military personnel and military sociology, which are often concerned with stratification and hierarchies within military organizations (Henry, 2017). Rather than focusing on the practices of racialization and gendering as they are produced institutionally and lived out on a daily basis (Henry 2017; Ito 1984; Roy 1978; Walker 1989; Ware 2012), literature on war and soldiering has more often dealt with markers of identity such as race, gender, and sexuality as characteristics, attributes, and/or separate entities. Minimal scholarship has centered on the lived experience of service members within the Canadian multicultural context; as such, there is a lack of holistic understanding of how key interlocking facets of the current military culture—sexism, misogyny, racism, colonial legacies, heteronormativity, and ableism—set the conditions for a wide range of harmful behaviours. For instance, it is necessary not only to understand the differential experiences of racialized women, but to name and tackle key facets of military culture that lead to marginalization, shunning, and other forms of social policing which are enacted by the dominant group to force 'others' to fit the prototype ideal—or quit. As Samantha Cromptvoets (2021) has argued in the Australian case, instead of focusing on “culture as the default organisational problem diagnosis and solution” we ought to instead examine “how power operates formally and informally in organisational networks” (71). We argue there is a need to focus on culture and power. If the CAF continues to try to change individuals

rather than tackling the cultural system, the organization will constantly end up reproducing the prototype ideal and the awarding of power and privilege to the chosen few.

Furthermore, an anti-oppression framework that is trauma-informed allows us to see how sexual misconduct is connected to other forms of harmful conduct and to the structural foundations of culture rooted in systems of oppression and marginalization, as well as to trace the underlying issues conveyed in reports such as the Deschamps Report (2015), the findings of Statistics Canada (Cotter 2016, 2019, Maxwell, 2019), the Minister’s Panel Report on systemic racism and discrimination (Department of National Defence 2022), and more. Experiences of sexual assault and/or harassment are not separate from cases of racism but embedded in larger structures of power that constitute one another and enable these forms of violence to exist within the CAF.

5.0 AN ANTI-OPPRESSION LENS ON THE *EVOLUTION* OF THE WARRIOR

An anti-oppression framework demonstrates how addressing the legacy of the root causes of patriarchy, colonialism, white supremacy, heteronormativity, and ableism—as they have shaped the CAF’s culture—is key for transformative change. In this section, we examine one of the four pillars of the military’s current approach to culture—the proposed evolution of the warrior identity—but also discuss the other three pillars (service before self, leadership, and teamwork) as they relate and intersect with the warrior identity. We discuss the following: root causes; the norms and standards that continue to privilege a specific warrior ideal of military membership; and, the hierarchy of service and injury with a related reproduction of harm that values masculinized combat over feminized support.

5.1 Root causes: The problems with the warrior ideal are structural

One of the fundamental problems we identify with the proposed evolution of the warrior identity is that it does not name the root causes that perpetuate the celebration of the warrior ideal within military culture. These root causes include patriarchy, colonialism, white supremacy, heteronormativity, and ableism (Eichler and Brown, in press). In the cultural pillars framework, “bravery, professional excellence, and a tradition of heroism” are noted as “strengths” of the warrior identity (GoC 2022a). However, these alleged “strengths” are historically and conceptually tied to problematic notions of masculinity, coloniality, heteronormativity, and ability. The warrior ideal is rooted in patriarchy in that it privileges characteristics stereotypically associated with heteronormative able-bodied masculinity such as strength, bravery, heroism, aggression, and action defined against characteristics stereotypically associated with femininity and subordinate (racialized and queer) masculinities (Eichler 2014; Connell 1987; Higate, 2003; Taber, 2018).

Much of the impetus for culture change has centered on how women have been treated in the military. Historically, women have been only selectively included into military occupations and trades, and treated as “other” within military culture. Women were excluded from the combat arms until a 1989 Human Rights Tribunal decision forced the military to lift the ban. The military leadership at the time fought hard to keep the ban in place, arguing that women’s presence undermined unit cohesion and operational effectiveness (Canadian Human Rights Tribunal, 1989). That legacy continues to shape the institution and its culture to this day (Eichler, 2019; Davis, 2020; Taber, 2018; Winslow & Dunn, 2002).

The warrior ideal not only maintains the gender binary, but is structured by heteronormativity as well. It is important to remember that from the late 1950s and into the early 1990s, the Government of Canada conducted a concerted decades-long campaign to “purge” lesbian and gay service members from the military and other federal public service workplaces (Poulin & Gouliquer, 2012; Fodey, 2018; Kinsman & Gentile, 2010). As Lopour and Deshpande (2020) state, “Ignoring sexuality or gender or taking a neutral or ‘blind’ approach and focusing solely on performance fails to harness the full potential of diverse perspectives” (p.

63). As such, service members are asked to put service before self by keeping their identity to themselves, without the institution seeing the value of an individual's unique contribution (Grover, 2023).

The warrior ideal is also rooted in colonialism as ideas of bravery and heroism are tied to the British imperial project and the violent occupation of the territory of "Canada" by white settler men. Racial and ethnic minorities have a long history of fighting for the right to participate in the Canadian military, including Black Canadians (Ruck, 1987), Japanese and Chinese Canadians (Roy, 1987), and Indigenous Canadians (House of Commons Canada, 2019), especially in the context of the two world wars. These minorities were also not given equal recognition after their service, reflecting the systemic whiteness of the military and broader societal racism. Racialized soldiers who are viewed as deviating from white cultural norms within the CAF are "reminded that they are not part of the norm and are encouraged to conform to ensure operational effectiveness" (George, 2020, p. 126). Indigenous and racialized service members are set up for failure because they can never achieve the white, male, heteronormative standard that is constitutive of the "ideal warrior" grounded in historical and contemporary constructions of bravery, sacrifice, heroism, and domination of identified enemies.

Thus, to achieve transformational change, the military needs to identify and dismantle the longstanding impact of patriarchy, colonialism, heteronormativity, white supremacy and ableism on the warrior identity and its own role in reproducing them. However, the four pillars do not engage with these root causes but instead note *limitations* to the warrior identity (GoC, 2022c), which include that it relies on a "narrow view of the ideal warrior" (GoC, 2022c) without identifying who is excluded or marginalized by it. Similarly, another limitation is described as being "all others in service of the warrior" (GoC, 2022c) instead of identifying the privileging of the warrior itself as the problem. The third limitation is identified as being that the warrior identity "promotes toxic and aggressive behaviours" (GoC, 2022c), but without naming how these individualized behaviours are linked to structural root causes.

5.2 Norms and standards: On reproducing the warrior ideal

The proposed evolution of this warrior identity aims to "recognize that warriors should be both physically fit and emotionally adaptable" (GoC 2022c), which reproduces ableist ideas of physical fitness and a binary gendered view of physicality/emotionality. A truly inclusive design of policies and standards would mean taking seriously the diverse bodies and experiences of CAF members, instead of basing them on a male warrior ideal (Eichler, 2021a). An anti-oppression framework draws attention to the meaning and institutional power that comes with ideals like "physically fit and emotionally adaptable" in an institution that is designed to value male bodies and emotions in infrastructure and in practice.

The warrior identity cultural pillar continues to be based on male norms, through a "tradition of heroism" (GoC, 2022c) that values a specific type of "real fighter" who is a "soldier-first," best exemplified by a white cisgender straight able-bodied male combat soldier willing and able to always put the military's needs above *his* own (Taber, 2009). The most recent iteration of the CAF ethos, "Trusted to Serve" (CDS, 2022) calls for a "balanced total health and wellness approach" with members demonstrating "total commitment to the military profession" in "specific situations." Members are not expected to be warriors themselves, but to have a "fighting spirit" with "an unwavering will to succeed, [that] requires grit and the will to fight against all adversity," including with respect to culture change. However, this revised ethos must be examined in conjunction with the Universality of Service order and the soldier first principle, with the "requirement to be physically fit, employable and deployable for general operational duties" (CMP, 2018) as well as the related Minimum Operational Standards (DGMP, 2018). This order, principle, and the minimum standards limit the service of those with anything that might interfere with these foundational tenets, such as those with long-term disabilities, medical concerns, familial responsibilities, and/or religious requirements. As such, warrior identity continues to value bodies and social locations that privilege white able-bodied men (Taber, 2022).

This valuation is also apparent in the infrastructure of the CAF, in that it is an organization created by men,

for men (Eichler, 2019; George, 2016; Taber, 2018; Winslow & Dunn, 2002), with male standards determining the design of not only policies, as with Universality of Service, but of bathrooms, accommodations, equipment, uniforms, vehicles, and medical care, all based on the average man's height, weight, strength, shape, and physiology. Therefore, women's sex-specific needs, such as for menstruation, breast-health, pregnancy, and menopause have been long ignored. Military sexual trauma is often viewed as less important than combat-related PTSD, while also being medically treated the same, with little to no consideration of how military sexual trauma and related moral injury are unique (Eichler, 2021a; Eichler 2021b).

5.3 Hierarchy of service and injury, and the potential reproduction of harm: Who is the “real” soldier?

Within the military's culture there is an implicit hierarchy of service, occupation, and trade. Those activities and trades most closely associated with combat, and thus with the warrior ideal, sit at the top of the hierarchy. This is a specifically gendered hierarchy as the most feminized trades (such as clerical, administrative, and health care work) are seen primarily as support trades. The more masculinized trades, especially the combat arms, are seen as the core of the military's purpose. Thus, the privileging of operations over support is distinctly gendered. Taber (2018) argues that there are multiple ways to engage in military service, but that there remains a dominant narrative of hypermasculinity that constructs the standard for military service and those that deviate from this standard are positioned lower on the gender hierarchy. George's (2016) research on racialized soldiers' experiences in the CAF also reveals that particular racialized men are often feminized within CAF and struggle to adjust and adapt to dominant CAF culture and aspects of the warrior ideal. As the cultural pillars model identifies, the idea of “all others in service to the warrior” (GoC, 2022c) is problematic. However, the concept behind and use of the term “warrior” continues to support this “limiting mindset” (GoC, 2022c). How will operators not be privileged over support trades in the evolving military culture?

Norms of masculinity inform not only understandings of who is a “real” soldier but also of how injury is perceived in military contexts. The military's gendered culture centred around the warrior ideal contributes to the construction of a “hierarchy of trauma” (Callaghan, Eichler, & Tait, in press). Injuries arising from combat exposure are situated at the top of this hierarchy, with non-combat but deployment-related trauma next down on the hierarchy, and injuries such as military sexual trauma and non-deployment-related trauma at the bottom of the hierarchy (Callaghan, Eichler, & Tait, in press). This has consequences for whose injuries are recognized as military-related and as deserving of compensation (Eichler, 2021b). Those whose injury is not combat or deployment related do not readily receive recognition, and instead face barriers to receiving compensation and care (Eichler, 2021b).

When thinking through the cultural pillars approach (GoC, 2022c), it is important to consider whose experiences are at the centre of the construction of the warrior ideal, in addition to the other cultural pillars of leadership, teamwork, and service before self. These pillars and their stated descriptions, strengths, and cultural evolution are socially constructed, but are often presented as neutral, outside of relations of power, and essential to the military structure itself. The pillars define what the “ideal” service member should embody. Our trauma informed anti-oppression framework interrogates how these pillars exclude and reproduce harm. Moreover, our framework centers on and traces how power operates—that is, it reveals the ideas, imaginings, history, and criteria embedded in the conceptualization of the cultural pillars.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The warrior ideal remains a cornerstone of CAF culture and is often touted as necessary for operational effectiveness without its implicit associations being problematized (Eichler & Brown, in press). The definition of the warrior is being expanded in current culture change efforts to include a larger set of characteristics, specifically emotional adaptability—the meaning of which remains unclear—but remains

rooted in the masculinized ideals of bravery, professional excellence, and heroism. In parallel, there is a shift in focus from the warrior to a (disembodied) “fighting spirit” (CDS, 2022). Unfortunately, these efforts to adjust the warrior identity are being undertaken without naming the root causes and foundational norms that inform the warrior ideal and construct a hierarchy of service and injury, thus reproducing harm to those who do not fit the implicit male, masculinist, able-bodied, white, and heteronormative ideal. Current *culture evolution* efforts seem to be still invested in an ideal of military membership linked to military masculinity and defined by uniformity, strength, sacrifice, and adherence to a warrior ideal (Breede & Davis, 2020; Eichler, 2014; Gregory, 2022; Kovitz, 2013; Taber, 2018, 2020). An anti-oppression framework allows us to see how power is being reproduced and consolidated by tweaking rather than fundamentally challenging and transforming key military cultural tenets like the warrior ideal.

As this paper has argued, the current evolution of warrior identity is not sufficient to address the root causes which lead to harm. If the CAF seeks to address root causes, it needs to go beyond seeing the problem as located within individuals or within limited mindsets and recognize that cultural pillars such as the warrior identity need to be more deeply problematized. This opens up the question of whether the warrior identity should remain a key pillar of military culture in the future considering how narrowly it remains defined in both military culture and societal imagination (Gregory, 2022; Breede & Davis, 2020). This is an important conversation to have in the current geopolitical situation as states globally are maintaining and reasserting the warrior ideal. What this will mean for culture change in the CAF remains to be seen, especially in the context of attempts to evolve the warrior identity.

Therefore, in closing we ask: How does an expanded or evolved warrior identity continue to contribute to problems in the military’s culture by leaving intact and unnamed the root causes of patriarchy, colonialism, white supremacy, heteronormativity, and ableism? Is it possible to think of operational effectiveness differently and not contingent on a warrior ideal? Is the warrior ideal necessary and useful in all operations? What alternative constructions of military identity are possible and needed to address the complex security challenges of the 21st century? An anti-oppression framework can help transform military culture by shifting our focus from an *evolution* of existing cultural pillars to a *deeper engagement with the root causes* that have shaped the military institution, created norms and standards centred around the ideal warrior as able-bodied male, masculinized, white, and heteronormative. Without explicitly naming these structures and ideals, and dismantling the power linked to them, military culture efforts will yield only limited results. Other countries can learn from the limitations of past and ongoing Canadian military culture change initiatives that have resisted naming the root causes of the problem, and instead consider how an anti-oppression framework may potentially be applied to culture change efforts within their own contexts.

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