

## Understanding Military Culture Through the Lens of Lived Experience: State of Knowledge, Innovative Methods, and Future Research

Dr. Isabelle Richer<sup>1,2</sup>

Dr. Angela Febbraro<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Victoria Tait-Signal<sup>3</sup>

Justin Wright M.A.<sup>1</sup>

1Director General Military Personnel Research and Analysis

2Chief Professional Conduct and Culture

3Defence Research and Development Canada, Toronto Research Centre  
CANADA

[Isabelle.richer@forces.gc.ca](mailto:Isabelle.richer@forces.gc.ca)  
[victoria.signal@ecm.forces.gc.ca](mailto:victoria.signal@ecm.forces.gc.ca)

[angela.febbraro@forces.gc.ca](mailto:angela.febbraro@forces.gc.ca)  
[justin@wright@forcec.gc.ca](mailto:justin@wright@forcec.gc.ca)

### **ABSTRACT**

**Introduction:** *In recent years, news media, independent external reviews, parliamentary reporting, and scientific research have highlighted harmful impacts of military cultures with particular focus on the persistent and systemic occurrence of discrimination, harassment, sexual misconduct, racism, sexism, employment inequity, and abuse of power in the workplace. This paper will present the state of knowledge on Canadian Defence Team (DT) members' lived experience and critically analyse the approaches and methodologies that have been used to examine misconduct, lived experience and organizational culture in the Defence context. Finally, the paper will propose critical and innovative conceptual frameworks and methodologies to better understand military culture and culture change through the lens of members' lived experience.*

**Methods:** *Based on a recent synthesis, this paper will present the state of knowledge on DT members' lived experience of systemic misconduct, critically review methodological approaches used to explore and examine lived experience, and describe conceptual frameworks to better understand military culture through the lens of lived experience. Future research needs and innovative methodologies will also be discussed. The paper will address the importance of adopting cultural perspectives, research methodologies, philosophical paradigms, and ways of knowing that are uniquely innovative to support a more robust understanding of the complexities of military cultures and sub-cultural dynamics. For instance, flexible and emergent research designs using multi-methodological, inter-disciplinary, and multi-theoretical approaches are described as counter-hegemonic forms of inquiry respecting the complexity underlying socio-cultural dynamics, oppressive systems, and lived experience of marginalized individuals. Similarly, critical and anti-oppressive approaches including intersectional analyses and critical race, feminist, anti-colonial, and queer theories hold potential to alternatively shape research approaches focusing on lived experience and Defence cultures.*

**Conclusion:** *The discussion will focus on the potential of innovative critical approaches and frameworks of lived experience to enrich and expand our understanding of Defence cultures and sub-cultural dynamics, systemic issues, and culture change.*

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, media coverage, external reviews, and scientific research have highlighted harmful impacts of military cultures with particular focus on the persistent and systemic occurrence of discrimination, harassment, sexual misconduct, racism, sexism, linguisticism, employment inequity, and abuse of power in the workplace. Socio-cultural conditions within the Department of National Defence (DND) and Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), for instance, have contributed to unsafe working conditions, particularly for equity deserving, marginalized and minority groups within DND/CAF. Additionally, experts argue that the lack of diversity and the unhealthy cultures in military organizations have negatively impacted operational effectiveness and readiness.

As a response to these systemic issues, a new organization, the Chief, Professional Conduct and Culture (CPCC) was established with the mandate to lead and synchronize Canadian organizational culture change and related initiatives with a view toward the elimination of systemic misconduct. There is a recognized and growing imperative to better understand military cultures and sub-cultural dynamics, and to monitor culture change. In the past 20 years, most studies examining Defence cultures and systemic misconduct have adopted Western, positivist<sup>1</sup>, quantitative approaches, and, to a lesser extent, qualitative inquiry. Research has also focused on individual-level factors without critical examination of the social and institutional dimensions and relationships that influence cultural practices and conduct. Alternative and innovative approaches are needed to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of underlying systemic issues within Defence cultures and to monitor culture change.

## **2.0 ANALYSIS**

### **2.1 Critical analysis**

We applied a critical lens to the existent research process and methodologies currently used to examine DND/CAF cultures and misconduct. The analysis was centred on the context of research methodology and methods that are being used, including their claims to objectivity and generalizability, their attendant epistemologies, and their appropriateness for addressing or “doing justice” to address socio-cultural issues in military cultures (Teo, 2018, 2022).

## **3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **3.1 Research on military cultures and systemic misconduct**

A significant body of internal and external research has been conducted to identify symptoms and related impacts of institutional and systemic issues, and, to a lesser extent, to understand the influences of DND/CAF cultures and sub-cultures on misconduct (Davis & Blais, 2019; Davis & Squires, 2019). Globally, research efforts have focused on individual-level factors, often by means of aggregated, individual survey responses, including behaviours, attitudes, perceptions, and experiences, with relatively limited attention to the critical underlying power structures, intersecting facets, including social systems and institutional and systemic structures, that shape members’ experiences, and unveil the dimensions of DND/CAF cultures (Davis, 2022).

Studies examining the lived experiences of minority or equity seeking groups within the DND/CAF context have focused on gender and to a lesser extent on visible minority status (race, ethnicity), Indigeneity, and disability, while age, religion, class, education, official language, gender identity and expression (especially the perspectives of transgendered and non-binary persons), and geography have received little or no attention

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<sup>1</sup> Positivist research assumes that the researcher and the research can be objective and neutral (Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

(Febbraro et al., 2022). Nevertheless, recent research reveals that racialized and Indigenous DND/CAF members are still experiencing various forms of systemic barriers, racism, harassment and discrimination (Wright et al., 2021). Further, most of the research on racism and discrimination has focused on individual-level factors and experiences, and very little is known about the reciprocal relationship between these experiences and institutional structures and practices, systemic racism, and the socio-cultural dynamics that foster systems of oppression and misconduct (Wright et al., 2021). Also, while most research has examined systemic misconduct in silos of identity factors, various forms of misconduct can stem from similar cultural conditions and have impact based on intersecting facets of identity and experience (Minister of National Defence advisory panel on systemic racism and discrimination, 2022). This reinforces the need for research to identify and critically examine holistically the complex dimensions and relationships that shape and influence socio-cultural and institutional practices in DND/CAF leading to systemic issues (Davis, 2022).

Adding to this complexity, impacts and experience can vary across time and space. The Canadian Defence Team (DT) includes members from various components, elements, occupations, and trades across a range of functions (e.g., early training to operational deployment) and civilian employees. Thus, DND/CAF organizational cultures and sub-cultures may be influenced by various imperatives and contexts, resulting in different manifestations and impacts across different sub-groups. In this respect, researchers have identified sub-cultural dynamics that influence military members' socialization and the interaction between culture and power dynamics, particularly power imbalances and intersecting facets of identity, as key cultural dimensions that require further study (Davis & Squires, 2019; Davis, 2022). Finally, very little existing research has focused on the experiences of Defence civilians, as the dynamics between military personnel and civilian employees as well as their experience of misconduct has been mostly overlooked (Goldenberg & Febbraro, 2015).

### **3.2 Research methodologies**

Most research methodologies that have been employed to study systemic misconduct among military members have adopted “ways of knowing” centred on traditional mainstream Western (colonial) approaches rooted in positivism, and to a lesser degree, constructivist meaning-making, qualitative approaches. These methodologies have produced a breadth of knowledge on the symptoms or surface manifestations of individual experiences of systemic misconduct but are limited in their ability to access socio-cultural, institutional, and systemic-level information needed to explain the complex dynamics underlying such experiences.

Recent reviews on the state of knowledge of DND/CAF member conduct, measurement, and the lived experience of members highlight the significant focus and over-reliance on quantitative measures and metrics relative to qualitative methodologies. A review of current and recent surveys and personnel-related performance measurement framework (PMF) key indicators (KPI) identified more than 452 items and scales and 688 indicators measuring conduct and organizational culture, which highlights the extent of quantitative research focusing on conduct and culture (Hachey, 2022). In contrast, a recent synthesis of lived experience research in the Defence Team context found a total of 37 internal reports published in the past 20 years that featured in-depth qualitative content of first-person accounts of experience relevant to the CPC mandate, mostly gathered through individual interviews and focus groups, and analysed using qualitative approaches such as thematic analysis or grounded theory.<sup>2</sup> These reports have reflected broad themes such as gender and systemic issues, barriers to inclusion and diversity, ethnocultural bias, and ableism (Febbraro et al., 2022).

Moreover, there are no institutionalized processes to ensure that research approaches and methods are culturally appropriate for specific minority and marginalized DT members participating in research. There is also no formal process for developing partnerships and meaningful collaborations with the impacted communities. As such, there is a need to explore alternative, innovative cultural perspectives, research

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<sup>2</sup> These internal reports include only those documents that were not controlled at source in the CANDID Database system. A more comprehensive review of all relevant and unclassified research will be conducted and documented in a future report.

methodologies, philosophical paradigms, and ways of knowing that go beyond mainstream individualistic, positivist approaches to support a more comprehensive understanding of the systemic and institutionalized complexities of DND/CAF cultures and sub-cultural dynamics, and to ensure culturally appropriate research practices.

### **3.2.1 Anti-oppressive approaches and transformational research principles**

Anti-oppressive research principles take seriously the history and interests imbricated in modern research practices. Critical research approaches, including feminist research, post-colonial research and queer theory each offer a unique lens that can help to illuminate biases and inequalities embedded in modern western organizations. Many of these approaches apply deconstructive methodologies to the systems of power contained within society that are generally held to be “normal” or “natural.” By questioning Eurocentric norms around value-neutrality, rationality and universality, anti-oppressive research methods contain an inbuilt liberatory potential for researchers seeking to transform the status quo.

Intersectionality was originally developed by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) to remedy single-axis categories of race and gender, which failed to capture the complexity of the systems, both formal and informal, that disenfranchised Black women.<sup>3</sup> In Crenshaw’s analysis, Black women did not share the same lived experiences with Black men, nor did their experiences coincide with those of white women. Crenshaw illustrated that the lived experiences of Black women could not be reduced to either race or gender, but formed a unique, multidimensional identity (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139). More recent scholarship suggests that intersectionality can be understood as “dynamic and in changing, mutually constituted relationships with each other, from which they cannot be disentangled” (Walby, 2007, as cited in Ferree, 2009, p. 87). At present, this approach is applied to policy by the Canadian government through the Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA Plus) program administered by Women and Gender Equality Canada. This program has been adopted by the DND/CAF to ensure that both institutional and operational policy does not produce discriminatory outcomes.

Most methods used to study systemic misconduct among DT members and DND/CAF organizational cultures include survey research, focus groups, and in-depth interviews. While these methods have provided varying degrees of insight into the experiences of DT members and organizational cultures, non-traditional and alternative methodologies and paradigms are needed in order to access institutional and systemic dynamics underlying socio-cultural issues more fully, as well as to include research participants as an integral part of the research design and process (Gwyther & Possamai-Inesedy, 2009). These innovative approaches challenge traditional mainstream methodologies by focusing on different ways of knowing and sharing experience, which may reveal new knowledge and deepen our understanding of complex issues such as socio-cultural dynamics and systemic misconduct (Gwyther & Possamai-Inesedy, 2009). Many of these approaches challenge the traditional hierarchical researcher-participant relationship, and advocate instead for an egalitarian relationship in which the researcher and participant are collaborators in a constructive process of collective and self-reflective inquiry (Gwyther & Possamai-Inesedy, 2009). Often, the focal aim of such inquiry is to bring about social and cultural transformation in the interests of marginalized communities – that is, to challenge and transform inequitable institutional structures and power arrangements, and to bring the margins to the centre.

Internal studies that have used intersectional research approaches have yielded significant insights into the lived experience of DND/CAF members and civilians. In a study on the recruitment and inclusion of visible minority members, Wright and Fonseca (2016) highlight the perceptions of visible minority women. Their findings illustrate that for some participants, being a visible minority woman presents a unique challenge. A participant commented,

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<sup>3</sup> Crenshaw developed this using knowledge gleaned from the activism of women of colour during the 1970s and 1980s in both the United States and United Kingdom (see Ferree, 2009, p. 86).

“Dress regulations, for example, are written for white women and men. Regs don’t take into account differences in ethnicity. They only issue beige nylons, for example. Who makes these decisions? I’ve actually been jacked up for this stuff – no understanding that the current Reg’s don’t apply equally to everyone. Overall experience has been good, but there’s still some ignorance on the little things.”

(Wright & Fonseca, 2016, p. 20)<sup>4</sup>

Similar studies in the academic literature have also noted the importance of understanding intersectional identities when transforming military culture. In a study on the lived experience of racialized Canadian servicewomen, George (2020) highlights the inability of current diversity and inclusion programming to address underlying structures of white male supremacy in the DND/CAF. George’s study illustrates the complex and inextricably connected assumptions around gender and race that have informed her participants’ experiences with CAF service.

Studies informed by intersectional theory are of central importance to future research on the experiences of CAF members. As demonstrated, researchers could not have reflected the complexities of the lived experiences of diverse CAF members using discrete identity categories. Furthermore, these anecdotes highlight structural inequalities within the organization, chiefly, the gendered, ableist and racialized assumptions that underwrite CAF military culture.

### **3.3 Challenging the status quo: innovative and alternative methodologies**

Flexible and emergent design approaches using multi-methodological, inter-disciplinary, and multi-theoretical research, such as “bricolage research,” (Kincheloe, 2001, 2005) are described as counter-hegemonic forms of inquiry respecting the complexity of the meaning-making process by allowing contextual contingencies to inform which data collection and analytical methods to use (Rogers, 2012). These methodologies facilitate the adaptation of methods to the complexity of the research process and have the potential to add richness and expand our understanding of DND/CAF sub-cultural dynamics and systemic issues (Taber, 2010).

Transformational research, by its means and focus, contributes to social justice. Such research recognizes social inequities and is centered on knowledge based in lived experience of marginalized individuals leading to meaningful changes (Mertens, 2012). Within this framework, the researcher-participant relationship is central and must be invested by transparency and mutual trust. Researchers must explicitly position themselves to reflect the best interests and points of view of marginalized individuals (participants) to fully discern, understand, and articulate their world views, perspectives, and experience. Transformational research requires that researchers constantly challenge their own assumptions and biases, as well as the status quo, to re-balance and remove the power asymmetries between individuals involved in the research process.

Indigenous research and methodologies constitute a distinct paradigm involving a set of beliefs, values, and principles that ensure that research processes and practices are based on Indigenous worldviews, perspectives, values, ways of knowing/learning, and lived experiences. Indigenous methodologies also involve different philosophical and theoretical tools as well as ethical practices for research with Indigenous peoples (Kovach, 2009). More knowledge is needed regarding how applications of Indigenous methodologies might contribute to related research processes within DND/CAF – in particular, to better understand socio-cultural issues related to colonization, and to enhance research practice when conducting, or collaborating on, research with Indigenous DT members.

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<sup>4</sup> Although the issue of nylons has been resolved since the publication of this study, the existence of discriminatory clothing practices as late as 2016 highlights the significant lag between the aspirations of CAF diversity mandates, and the lived realities of CAF members.

Similarly, critical approaches including critical race, feminist, and queer theories hold potential to alternatively shape our approaches to research focusing on institutional and social relationships, by interrogating and subverting existing racist, sexist, and heteronormative biases underlying such relationships (Davis, 2022).

### **3.4 Exploring military culture through the lens of lived experience**

Febbraro, Tait-Signal, and Laferrière (2022) formulated a provisional definition of lived experience as it relates to the objectives of CPCC. It is important to mention that this definition of lived experience refers to a subset of a larger construct and encompasses DT members' experiences as they relate to research on systemic misconduct and barriers to diversity and inclusion in organizational culture(s).

“Lived experience is defined as first-person accounts of the experience of individual Defence Team members in relation to systemic misconduct and barriers of all forms, including institutional assumptions, practices, systems, policies, or processes, that represent cultural impediments to diversity and inclusion, that have importance and meaning to the individual, and that are identified primarily through qualitative methodologies. Lived experience has the potential to illuminate contextualized and holistic understandings of Defence Team culture, to disrupt cultural barriers to diversity and inclusion, and ultimately, to effect culture change.”

(Febbraro, Tait-Signal, & Laferrière, 2022, p. 4)

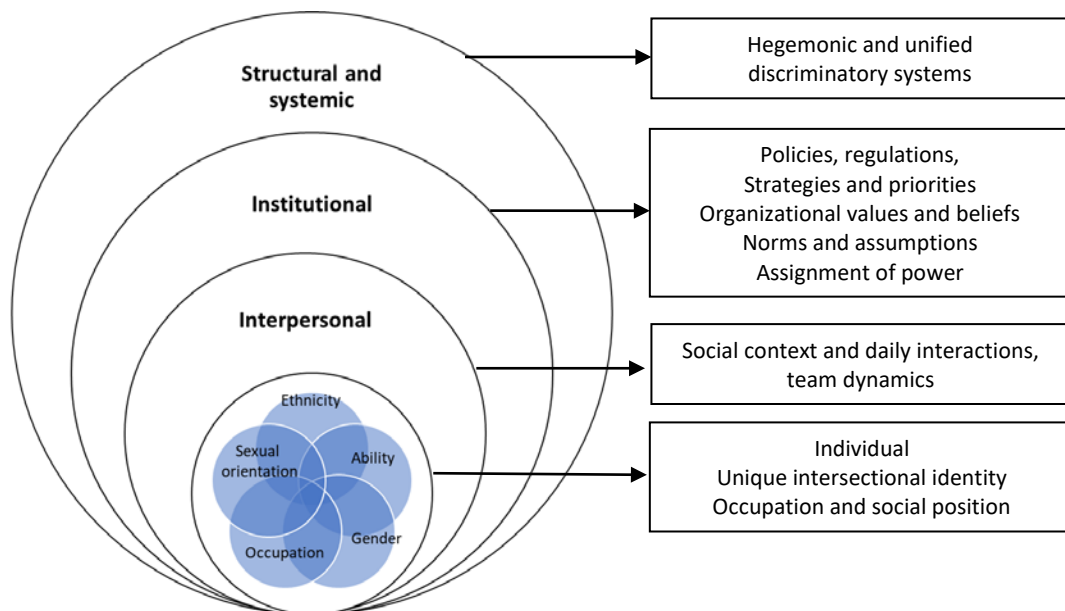
As noted above, the concept of lived experience involves *first-person accounts* of the experiences of DT members, typically gathered through in-depth interviews and focus groups (Frechette et al., 2020). However, a range of qualitative methods, such as participant observation or ethnography, life history approaches, storytelling, narrative interviews, document review, and photovoice, may also be used to illuminate lived experience within an interpretive framework, and multiple methods (“method triangulation”) may be especially fruitful (Frechette et al., 2020; see also Bertaux, 1981; Loseke, 2007). Similarly, mixed-methods research, which utilizes and integrates qualitative and quantitative methods (e.g., interviews and surveys) can shed light on lived experience (Creswell, 2015). Further, first-person narratives in response to *open-ended qualitative survey questions* can also complement and contextualize quantitative survey findings and, as such, may provide more holistic understandings of lived experience than is typically possible within a purely quantitative framework.

The concept of lived experience has been useful for empowering individual insight and knowledge in research on military institutions (Richer & Frank, 2020; Thompson et al., 2020; Waruszynski & MacEachern, 2021). From a theoretical perspective, the concept of lived experience reverberates with a sociological, interpretive approach rooted in phenomenology, which “aims to explore the lived experience of a phenomenon, representing an individual level of analysis with an understanding that social contexts are embedded within an individual’s being” (Frechette et al., 2020, p. 5). Feminist standpoint analysis is similarly focused on understanding, in context, the “day-to-day” realities of women’s lives, in contrast to de-contextualized, positivist approaches that can obscure such realities (see Harding, 2004). The concept of lived experience is thus attuned to the contextualized and embodied behaviour, perceptions, and values of individuals. Accordingly, lived experience research seeks to understand the meaning of the lived experience from the individual’s subjective perspective, rather than assuming the existence of an objective truth that is disconnected or disembodied from the individual and their social context. As such, an understanding of lived experience may also illuminate cultural *discontinuities* between individual experience and institutional assumptions and practices, and thus, may offer a more holistic understanding of cultural or systemic barriers and their impacts on individual lives. The empowering potential of lived experience research is also reflected in the view of individuals as “agents of knowledge” or “change agents,” within the context of their lives.

Lived experience research, thus, has the potential to affect individual as well as social and culture change, through the illumination and disruption of taken-for-granted cultural and other normative assumptions. Within an interpretative framework, research approaches that feature egalitarian relationships between researchers and participants are well positioned to facilitate such empowerment, to give voice to the views, perspectives, and contextualized, embodied lived experience of DT members, and to generate insight and understanding about DND/CAF culture.

In general, within an interpretive framework, lived experience research has the potential to provide deeper and broader understandings of individual experiences and perspectives of DT members, and to generate richer, more in-depth accounts of interactions than is possible with positivist approaches that assume the existence of a singular, universal, and objective truth. Similarly, lived experience research methodology forestalls issues of generalizability, as it is designed explicitly to bring to light unique, contextualized, individual perspectives and experiences (Scott, 1991). Research on lived experience, therefore, has the potential to illuminate military culture from the diverse perspectives of individual members, including those affected by systemic misconduct or barriers; to cast light on impediments to culture change; and to elucidate strategies for bringing about cultural transformation in the military context.

The Social-Ecological Model (SEM; Bronfenbrenner, 1994; see figure 1) is a robust theory-based framework that suggests that behaviours, such as misconduct, and experiences are influenced, not only by individual-level factors, but also by factors and characteristics of the social environment. An adapted SEM model can inform research on lived experience by providing a conceptual framework to critically analyse the interactive individual, social, institutional, and systemic dimensions that may influence lived experience of military members in relation to systemic misconduct, barriers to diversity and inclusion, and organizational cultures.



**Figure 1-1: Adapted from the socio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1994)**

As displayed in Figure 1-1, the first layer represents the individual dimension. As discussed earlier in the manuscript, it is critical to examine individual experience by using an intersectional approach. All facets of members' identity (e.g., ethnicity, race, Indigeneity, gender, sex, sexual orientation, age, occupation, rank, ability, language) must be examined as simultaneously interacting and affecting lived experiences in the military organization. The second layer is the interpersonal dimension or microsystem and refers to all relationships that interact directly with the individual and impact their experience, including the social context and team dynamics of units, group membership, and daily interactions with colleagues and

supervisors. The third layer is the institutional dimension or exosystem which impacts indirectly individuals through their effects on the interpersonal system. The institutional dimension refers to the systems and structures that may be taken for granted and may be discriminatory for some individuals, for instance policies, regulations, strategies, priorities, norms and assumptions, and assignments of power. Finally, the last layer represents the systemic or macrosystem, including cultural values and beliefs, ideologies, historical events, and political objectives. A recent critical analysis (Eichler, George & Taber, 2022) highlights the significant impact of hegemonic systems of oppression - such as patriarchy, racism, heteronormativity, sexism, and colonialism - that are a unified, integral part of the sociohistorical context and perpetuate discrimination and harm for some groups of military members based on their unique intersecting identity facets.

## 4.0 CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to discuss the state of knowledge on Canadian DT members' lived experience and critically analyse the approaches and methodologies that have been used to examine misconduct and organizational culture in the Defence context. The manuscript also proposes alternative, innovative, and culturally responsive frameworks and methodologies that have the potential to deepen our understanding of military cultures.

Past research on military culture and conduct has focused on positivist, quantitative approaches to research, with little attention paid to the hierarchical power relations and systems of meaning that inform and shape individual-level survey responses. To achieve culture change, it is critical to gain a deeper understanding and awareness of socio-cultural issues and their underlying root causes and mechanisms. Such an understanding is critical to challenge Defence research approaches, paradigms, methodologies, and processes. Exploring the lived experience of military members and civilian working for Defence organizations is an entry point to better understand the interaction between the individual and the social environment, as such an approach will illuminate institutional, and systemic dimensions, thus accessing critical aspects of military cultures. Defence researchers must also acknowledge their own position of power and privilege and their role in perpetuating oppression. This paper proposes a myriad innovative, alternative, counter-hegemonic and culturally appropriate research approaches and principles that will help balance over-reliance on quantitative methods and challenge the status quo.

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