

Culturogenic Harm: Unintended Impacts of Military Acculturation on Mission Capacity, Team Cohesion, Retention and Member Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

NATO military organizations and researchers have identified the need for an improved understanding of the complexities of military cultures and practices, including contributors to systemic misconduct and opportunities for culture change. “Exit interviews” provided an opportunity to capture the lived experience of personnel from their recruitment and early training, through to the circumstances of their transition out of service, to shed light on how the complex system of military acculturation both supports mission effectiveness and lays the groundwork for unwanted outcomes such as systemic misconduct. Qualitative interviews were conducted with seventy-five medically releasing Canadian military personnel and Veterans and with twenty-seven health and transition support managers to assemble a master dataset of 102 interviews, reflecting diverse experiences across multiple service settings. A critical masculinities lens was used to conduct a narrative analysis that identified a number of intersecting themes, woven into a recurring “Mission First” cultural narrative that was present in the accounts of personnel and health and transition support staff. Interviewees described a military acculturation process that established a career-long, gendered, “performance culture” in which belonging, identity and worth are contingent on ongoing ability to perform and on the suppression of personal needs. This cultural narrative produces a climate of meaning, purpose and intense bonds: the military family. Interviews showed that acculturation also reliably produced intense feelings of insecurity, lost identity and thwarted belonging. The culture of emotional control and performance that supports the mission established a competitive hierarchy that normalized compulsive dominance displays, and tolerated violent exclusion or denigration of members judged “unfit”. When these sources of culturogenic harm remain unrecognized, leaders and policy makers may propose remedies that are directed to proximal or individual factors, leaving cultural contextual factors unaddressed. Implications for cultural change initiatives are discussed with recommendations regarding fostering a more aspirational and high functioning service culture that both meets mission goals and reflects the values of the society it serves.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

For modern militaries, skilled personnel drive mission success. Understanding how personnel are impacted by a gendered organizational culture can reveal what does or does not work, highlight challenges and opportunities, and generate strategic intelligence for change initiatives. NATO military organizations and researchers have identified the need for an improved understanding of the complexities of military cultures and practices, including systemic structures and practices that negatively impact operational capacity, organizational credibility and legitimacy, and that harm members through systemic misconduct (NATO,

2022). Researchers have pointed to “military masculine culture” as an important contributor to the ethos in which systemic misconduct and undesirable outcomes occur (Brooks, 2010; Shields et al., 2017). Yet despite documented harms and decades of efforts to foster change, there is general acknowledgement, both within and outside the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), that progress has been slow and new approaches are required (Eichler 2020, Brown et al., 2021).

1.1 Military Masculinities

It has been broadly recognized, historically, that military training leverages masculine norms as a means of preparing recruits of any sex or gender for service. As a powerful agent of socialization, the military routinely takes people from different cultures and backgrounds and leverages masculine associated norms in a strategic, “secondary socialization” process to inculcate expected values, attitudes, and behaviours (Kleykamp et al., 2021; Arkin & Dobrofsky, 1978, p.159). New recruits describe themselves as emerging from their early training being more confident, capable, and reliable and with a strong sense of loyalty to the group, comparing themselves favorably or in superior terms to their civilian peers and former civilian selves (Shields, 2016).

Traits and behaviours traditionally associated with the masculine, such as strength, physical fitness, toughness, stoicism, aggressiveness, and competitiveness, are amplified into a hyper-masculine militarized masculinity in order to prepare members for difficult service under adverse conditions, and ultimately to overcome or kill an identified enemy (Brooks, 2010; Fox & Pease, 2012; Shields, 2016). This emphasis on militarized masculinities in training underscores the historically adaptive and functional nature of these norms in supporting mission goals. For example, masculine gender precepts that aid in the confrontation and suppression of aspects of human experience including fear, pain, horror, disgust, grief and fatigue, and that amplify aggression, may be adaptive in that they help the soldier function in battle (Fowler, 2010).

Successful military acculturation provides the recruit with a new, elevated, and preferred military identity, and a set of standards against which to measure themselves and others. This militarized masculinity is not a monolithic concept and is therefore often referred to in the plural as “masculinities” - there are many local variations found in different military branches and trades (Shields et al., 2017). However, the various models act as cultural ideals, in more or less overt ways, against which personnel negotiate their and each other’s status. The standard is “hegemonic” in that it serves to demarcate those who are at the top of the status hierarchy from those below, and although the majority will never live up to the ideals, most are acutely aware of their status relative to the norms (Duncanson, 2015).

These military masculinities (as with other masculinities) derive their power to motivate by invoking both masculine ideals and the spectre of an opposite “other” disdained identity that awaits those who cannot live up to military masculine ideals, or whose status becomes suspect (Butler, 2006; Shields, 2017). This “abject identity” is defined by all of the traits excluded and expelled from the hegemonic identity and is often defined by “what hegemony is not”, in a manner exclusionary of and in many cases denigrating towards women and attributes labelled feminine (Johnson, 2021; Shields, 2017). From early training and throughout a military career, members who cannot keep up to the hegemonic norms, or who exhibit sensitivity to harsh conditions are subjected to a variety of shaming, often gendered, insults, and may be denied, or stripped of membership in the group (Fox & Pease 2012; Shields 2017).

In this way the norms serve as a benchmark against which an individual’s belonging and inclusion in the military family is given or withheld by the military reference group (Kleykamp, 2021). Belonging cannot be asserted by the individual – it is affirmed by the reference group, making it contingent and perpetually insecure. This precarious and impermanent nature of military identity and belonging serves the mission by motivating individuals to continually step forward into the most difficult or dangerous jobs in order to maintain status and belonging (Shields et al., 2018).

Although constructed and reinforced through social interactions, internalization of these military values can have profound impacts on the internal world of individuals by limiting the range of discourses military

personnel have access to in constructing their meanings (Michaels, 2011; George, 2020). Specific discourses set the boundaries within which members can negotiate what it means to be “good,” “effective,” or “dutiful” within the military context (George, 2020, p.47). For example, Ashforth and Kreiner (2002) found that internalized values affected whether individuals experienced a sense of pride or shame in relation to their work. Thus, even highly established members of the military are not free of these dominant norms and narratives, or free to rewrite them independently, at their convenience. In this way military masculine norms are “domesticating”, in that they enforce conformity and compliance to the group, “gate-keeping” in that they determine belonging and demarcate the “in” versus “out” group, and “hegemonic”, in that they determine status within the group and in hierarchies of masculinity and gender generally (Duncanson, 2015).

Beyond the gates of the institution, these norms and the valorization of individuals, often male, who reflect these norms, are adopted and amplified by civilian society through media and popular entertainment - often reinforcing a dichotomous “hero or zero” discourse. In that context these stories inform the anticipatory socialization - imagined future selves - of individuals joining the military as new recruits, particularly for the all-volunteer militaries typical of many western countries. This “advance notice” of military culture sets recruit’s expectations long before they become recruits, and prepares them for the, oft mythologized, hard treatment of basic military training.

The “hard treatment” and hostile reception that civilian behaviours (that conflict with military behaviours) are met with reflects the attempts of the dominant military host to ensure that its culture is influenced as little as possible by the incoming civilian culture (Berry, 1990). It is important, however, to recognize that it is not only the recruits who are contacting a different culture - military individuals also do so each time they interact with new recruits (Berry, 1997). This conflicted ritual passage of basic training creates a relational process in which the recruit and military trainer performatively co-construct and reify the hegemony of the military host culture.

This suggests that, contrary to the trend to conceptualize militaries as exceptional, insular, or separate from civilian society, the cultural boundaries between military and civil society are porous and intertwined. Hegemony is always negotiated in relationship, the civilian “other” providing the first relational template for the co-construction of discourses of dominance and superiority that are foundational to the traditional military identity. The elite requires a non-elite referent to be meaningful. In this way, military norms are intimately woven into the fabric of gendered norms for society at large. Militaries reflect their societies, and societies reflect their militaries in an iterative and unending co-constructed discourse of gender and status between military and civilian worlds.

1.2 The need for change: Why cultural evolution?

Alongside desired outcomes of militarized masculinity norms, scholars have linked high compliance with masculine norms with a variety of negative social, behavioural and health outcomes, many of which plague modern militaries today. For example, masculine norms that idealize self-reliance and the suppression of pain have been linked to inhibited help seeking and stigmatization of health care usage (Baker et al., 2014; Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010, p. 45). A “suck it up, and soldier on” mentality creates an expectation of endurance but also may culminate in mental health or physical problems becoming chronic or critical before help is sought (Shields et al., 2018). Likewise, conforming to hyper-masculine ideals may prevent a constructive response to trauma when the necessary access and integration of emotional responses is suppressed (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2014).

In relationships, high conformity to masculine gender roles is a well-documented risk factor for domestic or interpersonal violence, an issue of concern to the Canadian Forces (Reidy et al., 2014; Robb-Jackson & Campbell, 2022). At an organizational level, the conflation of performance with restrictive masculinity results in what scholars call a “masculinity contest culture” that requires members of all genders to continuously prove their conformity to masculine norms (Berdahl et al., 2018). These attempts to ‘measure up’ can

interfere with group cohesion, mentorship and learning, reduce decision quality, marginalize and harm others and ultimately interfere with mission objectives (Brooks, 2010; Shields, 2017).

In each of these areas, the problem is not the masculine attributes per se, but the enforced rigidity of expression, and the experience of “falling short” of the hegemonic ideal. The fall from grace into the abject identity of “weak, broken or unfit”, may drive compulsive efforts to prove oneself sufficient, often to the detriment of self and community (Shields, 2107; Vandello & Bosson, 2013). This reveals an inherent flaw for identities negotiated on the basis of creating a relationally inferior “other”, relative to a privileged form of masculinity; they will always be precarious and unstable, and will drive performative displays of dominance to reassert status (Butler, 2006; Duncanson, 2015). Not surprisingly then, men who experience distress about living up to masculine ideals have been found to be more likely to act out in stereotypical masculine ways (e.g., aggression, risk taking, hyper-sexuality, drinking) to confirm their masculinity to themselves and/or to others (O’Neill, 2008). A truism often noted in early feminist literature bears attending to: patriarchy and sexism are not fetters worn by females alone; they severely limit human possibility for males as well (Crotty, 2011, p 152).

These unintended outcomes can impact militaries’ credibility, legitimacy and operational effectiveness. Duncanson (2015) notes that the dominance of a combat-oriented masculinity, associated with toughness, dominance and force, has material effects on a military force’s ability to adapt their response to local variables. When only one way of being a competent soldier is valorised, so too are “tough” military solutions to problems that might arguably be solved more effectively in other ways (Duncanson, 2015, p. 9). If this is true, it is highly problematic for militaries today. Increasingly, a post, cold war paradigm for military intervention is evolving which defines security in ways that go beyond the idea of a state “using force to ensure its survival in a hostile world”, moving instead towards a view of “human security” that stresses the importance of individuals “feeling secure not just from physical violence but from the structural violence of poverty and inequality” (Duncanson, 2016, p. 20).

With the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda set out in UN Security Council Resolution 1325, militaries have been challenged to “retool” to engage in the human security tasks of improving women’s social, political, economic, and legal conditions, and to address the disproportionate impact of crises and conflict on women and girls (Kirby & Sheppard, 2016). The idea that western militaries have a contribution to make in improving social conditions elsewhere is reflected in the Canadian government’s assertion that the armed forces should “carry Canadian values to the world; these being: peace, tolerance, security, stability; and a respect for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law” (Carter, undated).

The shift to improve social conditions has driven an increased emphasis in training and operations towards stabilization, peacebuilding, and cooperation with influences on how militaries work to end conflict, protect civilians, and provide humanitarian aid and disaster response domestically and internationally (Tait, 2020). These shifted operational ends require that militaries expand beyond traditional competencies in the “just and necessary use of violence” (Cockburn & Hubic, 2002, p. 116). They must also be equipped with traits and capabilities that have been traditionally regarded as feminine, such as establishing partnerships, consensus, cultural awareness and sensitivity to respond to sexual violence – ends forged through recognition of similarity, interdependence, empathy, and respect (Duncanson, 2016).

Against this backdrop, Canadian public attention has become focused on inquiries into sexual misconduct in the military, and recent judicial reviews have called out the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) for an underlying sexualized culture “hostile” towards females and LGBTQ members, and contributive to more serious incidents of sexual harassment and assault (Deschamps, 2015). This raises difficult questions about the credibility and capability of a military to “improve women’s social, political, economic, and legal conditions” abroad when it struggles to protect the interests of women and minorities within its own ranks. In a similar vein, Razack (2004) argues that the rationale of intervening in foreign states to bring peace and stability to the vulnerable, perpetuates systemic racism. The “powerful and seductive story of the West bringing human

rights and democracy to non-western countries” (Razack, 2004, p. 47) allows us to forget the contribution of western colonialism and capitalism in destabilizing and impoverishing many of these regions in the first place.

These critiques of the legitimacy and credibility of militaries as means of achieving and protecting human security have resulted in intense pressure for cultural reform of the military and to create a more representative and inclusive force (Deschamps, 2015; Arbour, 2022). In response, the Canadian Armed Forces Diversity Strategy, set a bold agenda for improving issues of representation, cultural sensitivity, and discrimination in the forces (George, 2020, p.43). It defines diversity as “respect for and appreciation of differences in ethnicity, language, gender, age, national origin, disabilities, sexual orientation, education and religion. It is about understanding each other and moving beyond simple tolerance to embracing, celebrating, and integrating the rich dimension of diversity within each individual” (Chief of Defence Staff, 2016, p.1).

Researchers and policy makers have recognized that “military masculine culture” is an important contributor to the ethos in which these harms occur, and in the associated loss of credibility and legitimacy (Razack, 2004; Shields et al., 2017). Yet, despite documentation of harms and decades of efforts to foster change, there is general acknowledgement, both within and outside the CAF, that progress has been slow and new approaches are required (Eichler, 2020).

1.3 The current study

This research project aims to enhance our understanding of military culture by examining the end-of-career reflections of recently released or soon to be released ill and injured military personnel. The data formed part of a formal program evaluation of the military-to-civilian transition program, “Shaping Purpose”. This part of the evaluation sought to document, in personnel’s own words, the culture and context of their service and transition needs, and provided an opportunity to interview a broad cross section of ill and injured Veterans and releasing personnel, from across military branches, trades, ranks, ages, experience, and linguistic, racial and ethnic backgrounds. Despite their differences, they shared one unifying intersectional aspect of personal experience - disability - which is included in the Canadian Armed Forces statement on respect for diversity. Their collective stories were analyzed to shed light on how this aspect of experience, often experienced as marginalizing, is negotiated within the military culture. The focus of our critical analysis, therefore, was on the consequential cultural and organizational narratives and practices through which personnel give meaning to, and cope with, their military experiences. We theorized that these narratives do not happen in isolation but borrow from and reflect the same set of available discourses and meaning structures of the formal and informal culture through which other intersectional identities and experiences are negotiated. The Research Ethics Committees of the University of British Columbia, and the Horizon Health Network of New Brunswick, both reviewed and granted ethical approval for the study.

2.0 METHODS

Interviews were conducted with 75 military personnel and Veterans who were receiving health services related to physical illness or injuries, mental health and operational stress injuries. Participants self-identified as either currently employed and waiting for release, or recently released within the past two years. A broad representation of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) was included: both male and female (with none identifying as trans or non-binary); English and French-speaking; from recruit to 36 years of service; Commissioned Members and Non-Commissioned Members; all branches of the services; and with both deployed and non-deployed personnel (124 hours of interviews). The participants in the study ranged in age from 24 to 55. Those who had deployed had served in wartime or peacekeeping missions in Afghanistan, Iraq, or Bosnia, or aboard ships in various regions. Many of the participants had served on multiple missions or deployments.

In order to supplement information provided by these participants, twenty-seven interviews were conducted with health and transition support personnel. Interviews were completed with four Nurse Case Managers

from CAF Health Services, with fourteen CAF transition support staff, six Case Managers from Veterans Affairs Canada, and three Case Managers from the Manulife Service Income Security Insurance Plan (SISIP) Vocational Rehabilitation program (30 hours of interview). Combining these data sources resulted in a master dataset of 102 interviews reflecting a broad cross section of experiences of Veterans and case managers across multiple settings. In total, 154 hours of interviews were analysed.

Interviews were recorded in digitalised MP4-format and loaded onto ATLAS.ti for analysis. Using a method developed by Hauptmann (2007), interview audio waveforms were direct coded and labelled using the audio 'quotation' function of the QDA software. Direct analysis of digital audio data allows researchers to work directly with the raw data and maintain fidelity to the original stories – a key aspect of qualitative validity or trustworthiness (Levitt et al., 2017). Analysis used these coded audio segments and only quotes used as theme exemplars were transcribed.

The analysis was approached inductively and without imposing explicit theories on the data. However, in keeping with a critical approach, the research was entered with ideas about what concepts to investigate and participants accounts were scrutinized for “the voice of an inherited tradition and a prevailing culture” (Crotty, 2011, p.159). The evaluation team divided the case manager and participant interviews into two data sets for initial narrative theme identification to increase theme validity. Open and axial coding were used to capture unanticipated categories and identify emerging themes and to identified the “story line” or major narrative findings grounded in the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). After independent initial theme identification across thirteen case manager and twenty-seven participant interviews, the evaluation team met to discuss the emerging themes and reach agreement on an initial coding of the data. To ensure that the analysis maintained fidelity to the interviews, the initial themes were presented to participants in order to ensure that the themes aligned with their experiences. The rest of the dataset was then coded to reach saturation and identify any significant anomalies.

3.0 NARRATIVE THEMES

To allow the reader to assess the fidelity of our analytic process, we have provided direct quotes to document the main themes and ground the findings in the data (Levitt et al., 2017). As confidentiality was promised to all interviewees, identifying details have been removed. Turning to the case data, analysis suggests the presence of multiple intersecting themes, woven into a recurring “Mission First” cultural narrative that showed up in the accounts of ill and injured personnel. The component themes that emerged from the data are as follows:

- 3.1 Performance Culture: Belonging must be earned
- 3.2 Precarious Belonging: Mission and team before self
- 3.3 Culturogenic Harm: Disrupted recovery environments

3.1 Performance Culture: Belonging must be earned

Consistent with prior research, participants described a military culture that focused on being strong, aggressive and in control, denigrated cautiousness and needing help, and stressed the importance of working together as a cohesive unit rather than addressing individual soldiers' needs (Braswell & Kushner, 2012; Bryan et al., 2012; Denneson et al., 2015). Case managers and participants spoke at length about how, throughout the military career, personnel are acculturated into a military system that links belonging and status to current performance, shifts identity from self to group (i.e., to consider ‘we/us’ to be more important than ‘I/me’), and inculcates values of selfless sacrifice for the group in preparation for combat or other difficult service.

When asked about their entrance into the military, participants often reflected with pride upon a changed identity and self-concept. One participant summed up the process of going through the Basic Infantry Qualification (BIQ) course. *“They strip you right down, right away, of everything personal. They get everybody down to the same level and then start building you up, making you into what they want you to be.*

They're really pretty good at getting you to forget your own home life culture and just focus on the military culture. Living the culture and loving the culture".

Another participant noted how past achievements in civilian contexts didn't matter; it only mattered what you did now. "I got to basic and they didn't care who I was or what I'd done before. We were all equally worthless. You all have to prove yourself. What you do now is what we're going to judge you on".

Many participants talked about what they had endured in recruit training in order "to prove yourself" and be granted admission into the military family. Interviewees spoke about learning to push themselves to carry on despite fatigue or pain, and to endure without complaint. "Soldier on, suck it up, support the cause, if you're weak somebody else has to carry your pack. Stamp your feet and ignore the pain".

Physical tests were coupled with verbal taunts such as being called "larvae", or "maggots". This was deemed necessary to separate those who could "take it" and were fit enough for service, from those who couldn't be relied on; those who would follow the order, from those who would "whine and complain". This often precipitated a crisis point where a personal decision was made to carry on and concentrate on getting through "no matter what they threw at you." "I think everyone broke at some point and you asked yourself, why am I doing this? Do I really want this? A bunch of guys dropped out, which is fine. You don't want anybody there who doesn't want to be there".

Those who had the tenacity required to pass the tests spoke of their intense pride, and a new sense of purpose and belonging. "When I left basic training, my fitness had increased. My level of confidence had increased. My belief in my abilities had increased. I felt proud that I was serving a higher purpose. Your fundamental expectations changed, your ideology about doing things for the greater good".

For those who achieved admission, the process cemented close bonds and intense loyalty to the mission and the military family. "Right from the get go, I was finally in a family, the feeling you have when you're with your people. It's something that civilians can't comprehend... A million times greater than a normal friendship because your best friend may not lay down his life for you".

This level of trust and loyalty was reciprocal in nature. For somebody to have your back, you had to have theirs. "I was a breacher for my section, I would blow locks, kicks doors, and guys would go piling in the room. My take on it was, I'm a big guy, I fill the door, if there's any bad guys in the room, they'll shoot me first, and my guys will know, and it'll save their lives".

The cultural emphasis on performance, and putting mission and team before self, supported group cohesion and a commitment to stepping forward into hardship. A case manager noted how it supports the mission goals by tying status and belonging to a willingness to take on the hardest tasks. "The military is a family and yet it's also a hierarchy. There's jostling for position and everyone isn't valid unless they're at the sharp end of the stick. That mentality helps motivate people to do the hardest work".

The idea of close family bonds and self-sacrifice for each other did not preclude this sometimes violent "jostling for position". One member talked about the explicit understanding of "Big Boys Rules" in the barracks, where settling scores with physical fights was expected and sometimes celebrated by leadership. "It was treated as men being men - normal. As long as you turned up for morning physical training it didn't matter how you looked". Thus, loyalty, self-sacrifice, and brutality towards each other co-exist as part of the formal and informal cultural norms of the military family.

3.2 Precarious Belonging: Mission and team before self

The centrality of performance testing in military culture, and its link to ongoing acceptance and to status is a key feature of the Mission First cultural narrative. While past performance is valued, maintaining place and status in the military family relies on ongoing performance. Belonging or legitimacy based on prior service

cannot be claimed, it must be granted by the group. Participants spoke of the need to prove one's right to belong as a career-long process. *"After Basic Infantry Qualification I was pretty proud. You excel at all these courses and you get to where you want to go and then you have to prove yourself all over again. You get ground back down and then built back up, time after time, throughout your career"*.

This contingent nature of belonging sets the stage for a complicated set of contextual and cultural challenges for those who faced injury or illness. First, loyalty to the team kept personnel from coming forward with injuries because they didn't want to increase workload for their peers who were required to fill the gap. A case manager explained that some personnel delay seeking help, *"because they don't want to let the team down"*. A military participant reflected over the link between his military training and his own delayed help-seeking. *"It's funny, the mentality in the military when you first join is who cares if you get injured, just keep going. So, you put that mentality into people, then when they do get injured, instead of getting the help they need up front, they deny it"*.

A second cultural incentive for members to *"suck it up and carry on"* that emerged was that admitting to injury or illness might affect their career opportunities. A case manager noted that *"very few military people will be really honest with their doctor"* about their injuries for fear of being temporarily pulled off of duties or even released from service. Speaking of his own experiences after he was side-lined by his operational stress injury, one military participant recounted, *"The minute you say you have issues and you can't sleep, they're going to give you a medical chit which reduces your work. So, you lose all training. If there are classes, you don't get to go"*.

Both denial and fear of lost opportunities disincentivizes help-seeking, contributing to poor mental health outcomes as problems are exacerbated by delay. One of the case managers explained, *"Most of our long-term physical (cases) have a mental health component as well, I would say over 90%. This is what happens: those who join the military, want to be in the military – so they don't want to get out typically... then all of a sudden they have an accident and develop a back problem or a knee problem... first thing, they try to hide their problem, because then they won't get to deploy – or they won't get opportunities – and then their pain gets to be so much that they can't do their job properly – or they need to go on sick leave, and because it's such a high operational tempo, they start to have problems with their co-workers, then their supervisors, and mental health problems just develop – and yes, self-medication is totally in there too"*.

Stigma and a negative impact on reputation emerged as a third significant cultural incentive to avoid disclosing injury, whether physical or mental health. Those who sought care were seen as having transgressed a fundamental group value by asserting individual needs over group needs. They put *"Me First"* instead of *"Mission First,"* and the consequences could be severe. *"Nobody ever wanted to go down the medical hole, because as soon as you go down that hole, you know they'll look at you, like "oh you're one of those guys". They were all labelled, and I was guilty of it too because I learned it, they were the sick, lame and lazy"*.

And indeed, the precarious nature of belonging was echoed by members across branch and trade. *"We all worked together – we went through stuff. I was trusted to have their backs and they had mine. Then the second there's something wrong with you – nobody wants to associate with you. You're a Sick Bay Ranger, MIR commando. You could have an eyeball hanging out but you're lumped in the same category as the freeloaders, the cowards and the malingerers"*.

One Expert Stakeholder shared how the stigma played out in some of her cases. *"They're definitely the butt of jokes – they call them "chit riders" – especially in the combat trades. They've been going through that kind of stuff for probably at least a year before they see me – they're pretty disgruntled, frustrated, upset, they're often done by the time they come and see us"*.

This link between culture, inhibited help seeking and stigma has been explored by numerous researchers. Frank, Zamorski and Colman (2018) noted that health related stigma was more common for military personnel than civilian populations, for both physical and mental injuries, speculating that aspects of military

culture might contribute to those differences. Military acculturation contributes to personnel's sense of shame or disgrace when they experience injury or illness, stress or trauma and, in turn, this stigma significantly inhibits help-seeking behaviour. Other researchers have noted that the need to maintain the appearance of stoic competence makes it more difficult for individuals to admit they have problems, seek professional help, or have faith in the efficacy of treatment (Britt et al., 2020; Brooks, 2010). The resulting "code of silent stoicism" isolates military personnel during times of distress and, paradoxically, may perpetuate the cultural norm that "real" military personnel neither ask for nor need help.

3.3 Culturogenic Harm: Disrupted recovery environments

As a prized cultural value, the stoic suppression of injury or illness is an expectation internalized through training and normalized by the group culture. Leaders raised up through the same culture, therefore, could also reinforce the cultural norm of stoic service, ensuring that others would hesitate to step forward. One of the participants talked about his unit leadership: *"The unit I was at used to demean anybody that was sick. I work in a very high security zone – so outside the zone, it's all, 'oh we support mental health', but the minute you got into that zone, it was very, very negative – a lot of bullying, a lot of belittling... the Chain of Command would always refer to them as 'cry-babies, they're whiners, they don't get what they want, so they're using the system'... that was senior ranks saying that, in front of everybody. So, anybody who was ill and injured, they want to go get help, but they wait until the last minute when they're broken"*.

Another participant shared his own experience, "I'd see someone I know at Tim Hortons and I'd wave to them and they'd kind of look away because they can't associate with me because I'm on my way out because I have PTSD, because I'm weak. One of my last days I was called out by my Sergeant Major in front of my squadron, calling me a malingerer, a piece of shit, that I'm in it for the money. Talking to me like that in front of 120 guys. When I tried to respond, he told me to call him 'Sir' and started to 'come on board me'".

A number of military participants identified leadership conflicts and a sense of betrayal as among the most difficult aspects of their end of service and transition adjustment. "It's reasonable to believe that the PTSD was triggered by the nonsense administration that I had to deal with upon my return that did not give me the space and time to heal as a natural process. You go to Afghanistan, you shoot someone, you pick up body parts. But when we came back, we were treated like shit. I was transferred and my new Sergeant made me report to his office every half hour and stand at attention. Eventually I snapped. I snapped upon my return, not because of the war. I tried to raise flags but I was unknown there. No answer from the CO. I lost four of my friends to suicide and I was next. I was fearless of that too. I was just in so much pain and I wanted it to stop.

Another participant related, "They say that PTSD can be caused by a betrayal of the belief system, and I held some pretty strong beliefs about the system that may have been incorrect. Coming back and working for a bully, being completely devalued by a system that I had fought for and had given my best years to and given my sweat equity to, that certainly contributed to my PTSD".

These experiences were also referenced by several of the Expert Stakeholders. "We see a lot of people being released for mental health reasons. And these mental health reasons are not from fighting the Taliban. A lot of these are from perceived abusive Chains of Command, abusive supervisors. If you talk to the Chain of Command, you'll get a completely different story. They'll say, we're just directing people to do their jobs and this is just a weak individual".

Whether due to a desire to support the team, fear of loss of opportunity or reputation, or fear of stigma and public humiliation, the cultural delegitimization of injury or illness emerged as a recurring theme through the narratives of the participants and was echoed by the case managers. The link between selfless sacrifice, performance, and acceptance in the military family influenced the behaviour of interviewees who were ill or injured, in ways that had long term consequences. One case manager noted that, "Their dedication to their unit can backfire on them in the end".

Case managers' observations revealed a paradox that service members who were the most tenacious, a quality prized in service, and who complied most closely or for the longest with the stoic imperative, paid a high price for their compliance and loyalty. "We see people who have ignored their mental health to the point that their family has broken up, there are financial impacts. So now it's not one issue, it's multiple concerns and it's hard to start focusing on recovery when you don't know where to start".

Despite case managers trying to intervene, the cultural imperatives proved too compelling for many service members. A case manager spoke about the dilemma, noting, "The difference between the people who get medical treatment quickly and the ones that ignore it and carry on for years before treatment, is significant. Those that ignore their issues and delay treatment in the end are often the ones who we see getting assessed as more complex cases at transition".

For some, the sense of betrayal after their injury, combined with the need to fight for benefits after release, resulted in an inability to move forward and determination to make the system pay. A decorated, thirty-year Veteran talked about his release from the military after injuries, and his lingering feelings of betrayal. "What I feel is a whole lot of anger. What am I now? Trash. If I was a Veteran, the military would take care of me. What I am is trash. It's been a bitter ending to a sweet journey. I may not be employable but I have a full-time job – fighting them".

Increasing evidence suggests that individuals' experiences in coping with traumatic and other stressful experiences may be shaped not only by the circumstances and context at the time of an incident but also by the climate and context of the work environment within which the individuals attempt to cope and make meaning of events weeks and months later (Bacharach & Bamberger, 2007; Greenberg & Jones, 2011). As a significant feature of the recovery environment, there is strong evidence that social connectedness is associated with a sense of belonging and better mental health, while lack of social connectedness and loneliness are associated with depression, premature mortality, poor well-being and suicide (Thompson et al., 2019). Some have proposed that being embedded in highly cohesive units makes military personnel highly responsive to evaluations and feedback from fellow unit members, making the support or rejection of peers or command even more impactful (Britt et al., 2020).

Despite evidence of the importance of social connectedness for recovery, a military ethos that stigmatizes both physical and psychological injury may inadvertently precipitate members' thwarted sense of belonging and a sense that they are a burden to their team (Frank et al., 2018; Wastler et al., 2020). These two states, along with the comfort with lethality gained from the nature of military work, make up the three essential conditions for suicidality identified in Joiner's (2005) interpersonal theory of suicide. Not surprisingly then, in studies of recently released Veterans, weak group identity was endorsed by the majority of personnel who also experienced suicidal ideation (93.3%) (Thompson et al., 2019).

In contrast, expert stake holders emphasized how the Chain of Command could also play a key role in their personnel's well-being and their adjustment to transition. "If you have a supportive community that you belong to and if you have a supportive command, all of these things assist your resilience". Units' supportive climates are thought to facilitate their members' cognitive processing in that they may be less exposed to post incident social disruption (Freudenburg, 1997), and more able to seek and receive needed assistance. Similarly, a strong supervisory support climate provides an important basis from which unit members can draw key object, energy, and social resources, and reduces stigma and barriers to care for military personnel (Jones et al., 2018).

4.0 IMPLICATIONS

Through this critical narrative analysis, we sought to better understand the context in which personnel negotiate meaning of their experiences of illness and injury and navigate recovery. We theorized that these narratives do not happen in isolation but borrow from and reflect the same set of available discourses and meaning structures through which other intersectional aspects of identity and experience are negotiated. The

focus of our analysis, therefore, was on the consequential cultural and organizational narratives and practices through which personnel give meaning to and cope with their military experiences.

When considering the identified themes, linked together over the career trajectory, the military cultural narrative of 'Mission First', with its values, expectations and challenges, emerged as a dominant theme in participants military experiences across a broad intersection of backgrounds and service types. Embedded in the acculturation process of early training, this narrative established a career long system of values in which belonging, identity and worth are contingent on ongoing ability to perform – and on avoidance of becoming identified as the unfit, 'abject' other. Upon entry, individuals are strategically immersed in a military culture that constrains the meanings they can construct around their work, identity, and sense of worth to those associated with the institutional cultural context (Michaels, 2011).

This 'Mission First' cultural narrative produces a climate of meaning and purpose and intense bonds - the military family. Despite its operational value in motivating people to step forward and complete challenging work, the performance culture of the military also translates into a number of challenges for personnel. When navigating their illness or injury under these norms, members spoke about hiding injuries or delaying help-seeking due to concern about reputation, career advancement, stigma, or fear of rejection by peers or Chain of Command. Case managers linked such delays in help-seeking to more complex military to civilian life transitions. Rather than an innocuous cultural artefact, the cultural context of these members was a significant source of conflict with peers, and a powerful, preoccupying, and overwhelming source of internal conflict and distress.

Paradoxically, strong identification with military stoic performance ideals may not only contribute to personnel's strength and bond, but also create vulnerability to shame, thwarted belonging, and lost meaning in the face of mental health or physical health challenges (Shields et al., 2018). Some have proposed that being embedded in highly cohesive units makes military personnel highly responsive to evaluations and feedback from fellow unit members (Britt et al., 2020). Certainly, the precipitous "fall from grace", loss of status and rejection by peers and Command that followed acquiring an illness or injury was bewildering for many, devastating for others. When the institutional structures, that normally ground people in their everyday life, do not provide alternative ways of maintaining legitimacy, belonging, or a way to continue to "matter", the result can include profound distress and disruption, and a sense of institutional betrayal (Ahern et al., 2015; De Rond & Lok, 2016).

This raises important questions for cultural change initiatives that seek to advance workforce diversity and inclusion. In a cultural climate in which everyone's belonging is *strategically precarious*, including those who have previously performed well, how does the organization engage effectively in the organizational directives of "embracing, celebrating, and integrating the rich dimension of diversity within each individual" (Chief of Defence Staff, 2016, p.1)?

Anthony King (2013) observed that, without adequate time and resources to train citizens for the battlefield, militaries traditionally relied on appeals to masculinity, nationalism, and ethnicity to define an outside "other" against which to unite troops and encourage them to fight as cohesive units. Whether the rejected "other" is the "civilian", the "feminine", the racialized or ethnic identity, the enemy, or as in the current analysis, the ill or injured, these discourses arguably no longer serve the complexities of modern militaries, and actively erode the public support, legitimacy, and access to the diverse human resource base required for security operations. Cultivating the diverse skillsets required for modern security operations requires a shift towards standards clearly defined by competencies, where members are no longer included or excluded based on disability, race, ethnicity, social background, sexuality, or sex. If this transition towards modified cultural norms and inclusion criteria were successful, militaries could increasingly draw from a wider and more representative pool of civilian recruits and more easily access the diverse skillsets needed to meet evolving international security needs.

Culturogenic Harm: Unintended Impacts of Military Acculturation on Mission Capacity, Team Cohesion, Retention and Member Well-Being

Duncanson (2015), noting the limitations of a military norm that defines itself on the basis of a diminished “other”, argues that evolution towards a “positive hegemony”, rests not so much in encouraging men to change their ways, as to “change the way in which they negotiate their identities in relation to others” (p. 5). Other models of masculinity already exist that balance task-required aggressiveness, strength, or emotional detachment, with access to a wider array of traits and skillsets that better support relational and organization outcomes. For example, an organizational culture change initiative for oil platform workers problematized certain stereotypical masculine traits (like recklessness, bravado, emotionlessness, and refusal to admit failure) while promoting behaviours aligned with high performance (such as taking accountability, mutual support and learning from each other), resulting in sustained improvements in productivity and safety (Ely & Meyerson, 2010).

Similarly, a longitudinal, multi-method study of fire fighter crews showed a suite of positive impacts of a modified masculine norm (O’Neill & Rothbard, 2018). Crew cultures were often characterized by suppression of emotions and a preference for rationality over emotionality. However, crews that also showed high levels of companionate care for one another and joviality (a prototypical masculine emotion that includes a climate of good-natured teasing and pranks), showed faster coordination time during emergency calls, lower accident rates on the job, better home lives and improved physical health.

Researchers of complex systems note that they often create and maintain outcomes that no part of the system wants or intends (Meadows, 2008). By reducing problems of misconduct or systemic harms to the level of the individual, there is a risk of losing sight of important contextual factors that can affect what makes healing and recovery more accessible for some than for others (De Rond & Lok, 2016). When sources of culturogenic harm remain unrecognized, leaders and policy makers may propose remedies that are directed to proximal or individual factors, leaving cultural and contextual factors unaddressed.

A thorough accounting of the harms perpetrated by men and within frameworks of military masculinity is needed. Calling attention to those harms alone, however, has not translated into a safer, more inclusive military community, nor eliminated mission and reputation damaging outcomes. A silent majority of male CAF members, who neither see themselves as part of the problem, nor as part of a solution, need to be engaged in conversations about a more aspirational masculinity - a creative visioning process that engages men and others to identify and amplify the best of what a new masculine role norm could be in the context of Canadian military goals. A shift towards a positive hegemony requires engagement and leadership from the culture keepers within the organization – those at the top of the hegemonic hierarchy who, through their existing social influence, can act as permission givers for others to follow a new blueprint of masculinity and reinforce modified norms of legitimacy, performance and inclusion.

Militaries are places of deep tradition; they are also leaders in innovation. As one of societies most powerful agents of socialization, the armed forces should, perhaps, *not* reflect the status quo of civilian society. The Canadian Armed Forces could instead aspire to lead civilian society towards greater security by defining and leveraging an aspirational masculinity that focuses people on the real requirements of mission and security, rather than on conflating performance with stereotypical images believed to equate with competence. Doing so would forge a stronger, mission supportive culture that includes a new model of a strong, high-performing, ethical, pro-social and professional military masculinity that sets an example for the broader Canadian and international community it seeks to serve and protect.

5.0 LIMITATIONS

Interviews conducted here allow us to make tentative propositions about the cultural contexts and available discourses in which Veterans make meaning, negotiate identities, and navigate health challenges. We have suggested that the ‘Mission First’ cultural discourse complicates the experiences of ill and injured military personnel and Veterans, their relationship to their peers, and the meanings given to their service. Our design and sampling approach highlighted common experiences across a wide range of Veteran backgrounds as a way to inform theory, rather than to generalize to the overall populations of Veterans. As Stake notes, the

function of qualitative research is “not necessarily to map and conquer the world but to sophisticate the beholding of it” (1995, p.43). The conclusions reflect the population interviewed and the themes that arose in this specific, yet diverse Veteran and serving member sample.

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