

**GETTING TO THE ROOT OF
THE PROBLEM:
UNDERSTANDING AND CHANGING
CANADIAN MILITARY CULTURE**

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Introduction

Canada's military faces a complex, multi-layered problem with its culture. Over the past three decades, numerous media stories,¹ external and internal reports,² class action testimonies,³ and first-person accounts⁴ have brought the problem to light. Numerous change initiatives have been undertaken, but the problem persists, as the 2021 sexual misconduct crisis demonstrated. Some of the most senior leaders who had previously called for the elimination of sexual misconduct, allegedly perpetrated by others, were themselves accused of sexual misconduct.⁵ This new watershed moment led to a call for new approaches, more accountability, and meaningful change. The Department of National Defence (DND)/Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) now recognizes culture change to be a top priority, promising to go beyond a focus on symptoms and individual behaviour. The Initiating Directive for Professional Conduct and Culture issued by the Chief of the Defence Staff and Deputy Minister states: "we have simply not achieved the cultural change required and we must embark on a fundamentally new approach to address the root causes of systemic misconduct."⁶ However, little has been said about what DND/CAF understands these root causes to be and how it plans to address them.

This recent shift in rhetoric is an opportunity to examine the root causes underlying the military's culture problem. Drawing on critical theories and empirical evidence, we identify six intersecting root causes that shape military culture in ways that enable discrimination and hostility towards certain groups. These root causes are patriarchy, colonialism, white supremacy, heteronormativity, ableism, and classism. In this paper, we demonstrate how the military and its culture are a product of these root causes. Thus, to achieve transformative change, the military needs to identify and dismantle the longstanding *impact* of these root causes on its culture as well as reconcile its own role in contributing to their *perpetuation and ongoing reproduction*. We argue that the military should play an active role in dismantling enduring systems of power and privilege within and beyond its institutional boundaries. The stakes are high,

especially in view of the military's central place in the nation. Achieving meaningful culture change in the military will have positive ripple effects across Canada's social and political landscape.

Theoretical Approach

How each of us makes sense of the world depends on our explicit and implicit theoretical assumptions. Rather than a neutral tool of analysis, it has been argued that “theory is always for someone and for some purpose.”⁷ As such, it is helpful to distinguish between mainstream approaches which take a “problem-solving” stance, and critical perspectives which seek to challenge the status quo and envision transformative change. When addressing a systemic problem that requires fundamental change, it is most useful to apply critical perspectives.

Critical theories highlight how various systems of power and privilege operate in society and within institutions. These systems produce inequalities and enable oppressive behaviours between individuals and groups. To glean what is at the root of power disparity and inequality in the CAF, we draw on intersectional feminist scholarship,⁸ de-colonial and critical race theory,⁹ queer theory,¹⁰ critical disability studies,¹¹ and critical political economy.¹² We use these critical theories to develop an anti-oppression framework that can provide pathways towards military culture change.¹³ While distinct in their focus on particular systems of power and privilege, these critical theories examine how power relations are historically and socially constructed, and operate at individual, interpersonal, institutional, and societal levels.¹⁴ Dynamics and patterns of power and privilege are reinforced over time to advantage those in the dominant group, while oppressing those who become positioned at the margins of society.¹⁵

The same root causes that give rise to inequitable global and national social orders also contribute to the military's problematic culture. Through the process of turning ordinary citizens into military members, the CAF embeds patriarchal, colonial, white supremacist,

heteronormative, ableist, and classist paradigms that exist in wider society into its own unique systems, structures, norms, and culture.¹⁶ Largely unwritten yet commonly held notions of who constitutes an ideal military member tend to centre cisgender, heterosexual, Anglophone, white, able-bodied men of settler colonial heritage.¹⁷ In this way, the military is a product of, as well as an agent in the reproduction of, the very root causes that lie at the foundation of its culture problem.

Root causes of the military's culture problem

The following discussion of root causes is not exhaustive, but aims to highlight key systems of power that have direct implications for the organization of social relations within the military. Patriarchy, colonialism, white supremacy, heteronormativity, ableism, and classism give rise to the social construction of idealized and valued characteristics based on intersecting factors such as sex, gender, sexuality, relationship status, parental status, race, ethnicity, skin colour, Indigeneity, income, socioeconomic class, education, language, ability, age, region, and life experience. These factors manifest in the organization of social relations within the military, and furthermore intersect with the military's own unique ways of organizing people based on military-specific factors such as element, occupation, trade, rank, unit, deployment history, and universality of service. We define each root cause in turn and explain how it impacts the experiences of diverse military personnel.

Patriarchy

Patriarchy is a system of hierarchical social organization that establishes and perpetuates men's social, economic, and political power, privilege, and leadership.¹⁸ Under patriarchy, characteristics associated with masculinity are privileged and hierarchically positioned in opposition to characteristics associated with femininity.¹⁹ Sexism is the key ideology of patriarchy, ascribing to women characteristics such as weakness, deference, pacifism, and nurturing, and to men characteristics such as toughness, violence,

strength, and rationality. Militaries are key patriarchal institutions. Their internal organization reflects the masculine biases and male power found in broader society.²⁰ At the same time, men's dominance in positions of power and privilege within militaries supports patriarchal forms of domination in broader society.²¹

The CAF, like other militaries, was built and designed with service *men* in mind—specifically, cisgender, heterosexual, Anglophone, white, able-bodied men. The institution has a long history of assuming male norms, privileging masculinity, and discriminating against *women*. For most of the military's history, women were not permitted to serve in the same way as men. They were selectively included, and often constructed as the “other” within military culture. Thus, the entire military environment has been designed for (white, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied) male service members married to female civilian spouses, creating systemic barriers for military women and others who fall outside this norm.²² Bathrooms, accommodations, equipment, uniforms, materiel, and medical care norms have been based on the average man's height, weight, strength, shape, and physiology. The same is true for military personnel policies which were originally, and largely still are today, designed to support men's needs, career paths, and leadership styles.²³ In the military, patriarchy presents in the maintenance of male-dominant spaces; men's overrepresentation in most occupations, trades, and positions of esteem; and the predominance of men in roles associated with operations (particularly combat operations) and the combat warrior.²⁴ Women were excluded from the combat arms until 1989, when a Canadian Human Rights Tribunal decision ordered the military to lift the ban in the face of resistance from its senior leadership.²⁵ Even as women have been permitted to serve in the combat arms for over three decades now, the masculine warrior ideal remains a cornerstone of CAF culture and is often touted as necessary for operational effectiveness.²⁶ The military's reproduction of patriarchal relations within its own policies and practices continues to shape military culture today.

Colonialism

Colonialism entails the direct control and exploitation by a colonial power of the people of another country or nation. It is predicated on violence that aims to displace and dispossess people, exploit their labour, and appropriate their land, resources, and knowledge.²⁷ The relationship between colonizer and colonized is fundamentally unequal. Colonialism is premised on “a deeply held belief in the need to and the right to dominate others for their own good, others who are expected to be grateful.”²⁸ Canada is built on settler colonialism, a distinct form of colonialism that enforces large scale assimilation and erasure of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis culture and peoples.²⁹ As Hayden King explains, colonialism extracts the labour of the colonized, but settler colonialism goes further in that it “attempts to liquidate all remnants of the previous (Indigenous) societies to legitimize its permanent presence.”³⁰

The CAF is both a product and an instrument of the white settler colonial state. As the key instrument for the state’s monopoly over legitimate violence, the military is inextricably intertwined with the state’s colonial legacy. Furthermore, the military is built on, and centers, white settler histories and culture. Most military historical references (written, visual, and symbolic) tend to amplify white settler bodies, exploits, successes, and legacies over those of diverse military members from Indigenous, Black, and People of Colour communities. The implicit (and sometimes explicit) centering of white settler men, mostly of British descent, demonstrates and normalizes the colonial roots of military culture.³¹ Colonialism manifests in the CAF through systemic and structural barriers leading to the low representation of Indigenous and other racialized communities-across elements, occupations, and trades as well as rank.³² Colonialism also manifests in the CAF through racist behaviours, white supremacist attitudes, and in verbal, physical, and sexual violence targeting Indigenous, Black, and People of Colour military members.³³

White Supremacy

White supremacy and racism are closely tied to colonialism as a historical force and global social structure. White supremacy is a system of advantage and inequality based on race. Race is not a biological category but a sociopolitical construct used to justify hierarchical divisions between population groups.³⁴ Racialization is “the *process* of turning physical differences into social markers, and typically, enforcing them in a regime of oppression that gives race its significance.”³⁵ White supremacy operates structurally to privilege those perceived to be “white” over diverse “others”, shaping individual, interpersonal, institutional, and societal contexts.³⁶

As a white settler colonial institution, the military has historically reproduced white privilege and the marginalization of racialized “others.” Racial and ethnic minorities, such as Chinese, Japanese, Black, and Indigenous Canadians had to fight for the right to equal participation in the Canadian military, especially in the context of the two World Wars.³⁷ They also had to fight for equal recognition after their service ended, reflecting both military and broader societal racism. Currently, racialized Canadians are encouraged to join but must find ways to negotiate the military as an institutional “space of whiteness and dominance.”³⁸ While diversity is officially welcomed in the CAF, military members and veterans struggle to have racism acknowledged as a source of trauma contributing to occupational and operational injuries and illness.³⁹ Ruben Coward, a former member of the Royal Canadian Air Force notes: “Complex PTSD is not only caused by war. Racism is a war that (Black, Indigenous and people of colour) are fighting.”⁴⁰ While the military has committed to addressing anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism, institutional and cultural practices still reproduce white supremacy and the oppression and marginalization of racialized military members.⁴¹ The dominant approach focused on increasing racial diversity is not sufficient to address the systemic embeddedness of white supremacy within military culture.

Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity refers to the normalization, idealization, and, often, enforcement of heterosexual relationships and social orders. Together with patriarchy, heteronormativity supports the dominance of men over women by regulating notions of masculinity and femininity. Heterosexual masculinity occupies a valued, dominant, and powerful position in relation to a subordinated, passive, and controlled femininity.⁴² What Judith Butler calls ‘the heterosexual matrix’ describes how people’s behaviours, beliefs, and life choices are policed and constrained to a narrow set of heteronormative expectations and roles that appear normal or natural.⁴³ Government and workplace policies often assume a heteronormative family unit made up of a heterosexual couple with children, centered around the man as breadwinner. Heteronormativity also permeates military policies and practices which assume as a norm the military man partnered with a civilian woman.⁴⁴

Heteronormativity gives rise to related forms of oppression such as homophobia, which “includes prejudice, discrimination, harassment, and acts of violence brought on by [...] fear and hatred” towards 2SLGBTQI+ people.⁴⁵ Heteronormativity is also the basis for biphobia, the fear and hatred towards bisexual people, and transphobia, the fear and hatred towards transgender people. Heteronormativity is built into the historic design of the CAF, as are patriarchy and sexism. From the late 1950s to the early 1990s, the Government of Canada engaged in a concerted campaign to “purge” lesbian and gay service members from the military and other federal workplaces.⁴⁶ In 1992, Michelle Douglas’ lawsuit ended the ban against lesbian, gay, and transgender military personnel, but non-heterosexual and gender diverse members continue to experience discrimination.⁴⁷ Successive reports and class actions (LGBT Purge and Heyder-Beattie class actions) have exposed the military’s discriminatory structures and practices as well as a ‘hostile’ culture for women and 2SLGBTQI+ members.⁴⁸

Ableism refers to “a system that places value on people’s bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normality, intelligence, excellence, desirability, and productivity.”⁴⁹ As critical disability scholar Talila A. Lewis shows, ability cannot be understood separately from other socially constructed systems such as patriarchy, colonialism, or classism. Ableism is a system of oppression that constitutes who is considered valuable and worthy in society and within institutions, based on characteristics such as a “person’s language, appearance, religion and/or their ability to satisfactorily [re]produce, excel and ‘behave’.”⁵⁰ Consequently, Lewis argues that you do not have to identify as disabled to experience ableism, though persons living with visible and invisible disabilities often do.

In the military context, ableism can be explicit or implicit. Explicit examples relate to bona fide occupational requirements,⁵¹ Universality of Service requirements,⁵² and required fitness tests.⁵³ These policies restrict access to the military based on a socially defined category of ability and fitness. Ableist discourses in the military are rooted in the construction of a particular military body—that of the male, white, cisgender, heteronormative, able-bodied masculine warrior.⁵⁴ Implicit ableism can include sex, gender, race, age, and class-based assumptions about a military member’s fitness and suitability for a given trade, occupation, task, or role.⁵⁵ In the military, ableist ideas about physical and mental fitness also manifest in the stigma around illness and injury. The service member who exhibits health challenges after a deployment or suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder can be subject to ableist discourses around mental health, fitness, and recovery.⁵⁶ While valued military members are expected to adhere to ableist standards of fitness, ableism constructs a hierarchy around whose injury and illness is most valued, elevating combat- and deployment-related trauma over other workplace trauma including military sexual trauma.⁵⁷

Classism

Classism is part of capitalism, an economic system built on the exploitation of people's labour by those who own the means of production. While tied to the economy, classism permeates social, cultural, and political spheres.⁵⁸ Classism refers to the institutional and individual prejudice and discrimination against those with lower socioeconomic status within an economic system such as capitalism.⁵⁹ Exploitation of people's labour and discrimination on the basis of class are compounded by intersecting forms of marginalization and oppression based on race, sex, gender, ability, and sexuality.⁶⁰ For example, while both men and women face class-based exploitation in Canada, women also experience a gender pay gap, which is wider for women who are racialized, Indigenous, or live with disabilities.⁶¹

Class divisions manifest in a variety of ways in the military context. Historically, the officer class came from wealthier family backgrounds and positions of social privilege, while non-commissioned members tended to be comprised of people from lower socioeconomic classes.⁶² These classed traditions continue to impact the culture of British and Commonwealth militaries.⁶³ In the CAF, class divisions include social, economic, and cultural distinctions between officers and non-commissioned members, regular and reserve force members, military college graduates and military members educated at civilian universities and colleges or those entering military service directly from secondary school.⁶⁴ Classism is also evident in the recruitment and use of military members' labour. Lack of economic opportunity and lower socioeconomic status are factors in the decision to join the military.⁶⁵ At the same time, service members enter dangerous conditions to advance the defence and security ambitions of the state without enjoying the same labour rights as public servants or other Canadian workers.⁶⁶ Intersecting with the sex, gender, as well as relationship and parental status of a military member, class distinctions impact the ability of individuals and families to manage the demands of military life.⁶⁷ As more racialized Canadians, including permanent residents, join the military, race-based classism will likely be amplified within the institution.

Implications

Militaries are bureaucratic, traditionalist, and conservative institutions. They place high value on history, rituals, and customs as these have worked in support of military operations in the past.⁶⁸ Due to these institutional characteristics, the military tends to be slow to change its culture at pace with society and is reluctant to determine which facets of military culture no longer serve it. Thus, the military can resist organizational change, perceiving new approaches, values, or demographics as threatening to cohesion and operational effectiveness.⁶⁹ An anti-oppression framework examining root causes and their intersections provides an underpinning theory to understand the military's culture problem and points to three requirements for transformative change.

First, the CAF's history has led to the implicit privileging of particular men and masculinities and the "othering" of men, women, and gender diverse people who do not fit the male, Anglophone, white, heterosexual, cisgender, masculine warrior ideal. The first step towards culture change is to recognize the continuing impact of the root causes discussed above on the design of the Canadian military, and the way they still pervade many aspects of the institution and its culture today. When we confront the root of the problem, we can understand why short-term superficial initiatives based on numerical targets or policing the behaviours of individual members are not sufficient to bring about transformative institutional change. It will take a concerted effort on the part of the institution to systemically and comprehensively undo the legacy of historical inequalities and "othering" that manifest in and through institutionalized patriarchy, colonialism, white supremacy, heteronormativity, ableism, and classism. Thus, culture change in the military is far more complex than has generally been assumed. Identifying the root causes of inequality is key to understanding the problem and what kind of change must occur across all aspects of military life.

Second, advancing culture change requires naming the CAF's historic and ongoing role in reproducing the inequalities linked to root causes such as patriarchy, colonialism, white supremacy, heteronormativity, ableism, and classism. So far, there has been reluctance to explicitly acknowledge how the military is implicated in these systems of power and privilege. The report from the Minister of National Defence Advisory Panel on Systemic Racism and Discrimination provides a step in the right direction by recognizing the systemic nature of racism within which the military operates. The report states:

Racism in Canada is not a glitch in the system; it is the system. Colonialism and intersecting systems such as patriarchy, heteronormativity and ableism constitute the root causes of inequality within Canada. Throughout Canada's history, the existence of systemic and cultural racism has been enshrined in regulations, norms, and standard practices.⁷⁰

Yet, the report does not go so far as to recognize that the military itself reproduces white supremacy and other systemic forms of discrimination and oppression, institutionally and within broader society. The explicit naming of the military's role in systems of power is needed to move towards meaningful change and accountability.

Third, recognizing the CAF's role as an active agent in reproducing systemic and structural root causes of inequality also means that the CAF and its individual members are capable of finding alternative pathways for positive organizational change. Military members can learn through the exposure to critical theories and the application of an anti-oppression framework to identify, and challenge, the institutional practices that reproduce systems of power and privilege. Moreover, the military can facilitate and champion the dismantling of the root causes of inequality and oppression in broader society. As Vanessa Brown's research demonstrates, military members can be 'forces for good'.⁷¹ They can identify and deconstruct masculinist and oppressive institutional norms and social hierarchies, and work to 're-gender' the soldierly identity. Military members can construct

professionalism around principles of inclusion, recognition, redistribution of power, equality, empathy, and compassion. These qualities are not antithetical to military effectiveness—they amplify mission success by ensuring each member has equitable conditions to succeed. Military members can draw on gender and cultural perspectives, including critical feminist and de-colonial concepts, to examine and work to address inequalities within the military and in broader society.⁷² With an underlying theory of the root causes of the military's culture problem, the institution and its members can become central actors in advancing transformative change.

Recommendations

Ongoing examination of the root causes that have shaped the military as an institution is key to identifying the problem to be solved. Applying an anti-oppression framework that builds on a set of critical theories including intersectional feminist, de-colonial, critical race, queer, critical disability, and critical political economy theories to advance culture change efforts is not an easy task, but a necessary one if DND/CAF wants to move the yardstick on culture change. The military's culture requires not evolution or enhancement,⁷³ as is currently being suggested, but transformative change. This change entails continuous and collective learning through an application of critical theory. It requires asking crucial questions such as: How is the CAF reproducing systems of power and privilege at this particular moment in time? What can the CAF do to challenge these systems within its own institution and within broader society? To begin this journey, we recommend the following actions. DND/CAF should:

- consider the utility of an anti-oppression framework for culture change.
- clearly identify and name the root causes of problematic components of its institutional culture.
- approach culture change in a holistic way, connecting the dots between various intersecting forms of oppression and marginalization related to patriarchy, colonialism, white supremacy, heteronormativity, ableism, and classism.

- integrate critical theories and an anti-oppression framework into professional military education and training and into all institutional systems, structures, processes, and procedures (just as should be done with Gender-based Analysis Plus).⁷⁴
- be politically empowered to stop languishing in a reactive mode—responding only to external pressures to change—and see itself as an agent of transformative change, leading to broader institutional and societal shifts.

Addressing the root causes of the military's problematic culture is challenging and does not lend itself to 'quick fix' solutions. While difficult, a root cause-oriented approach holds more promise than past approaches focused on symptoms, individual behaviour, and numerical targets. Such an approach considers the deep impact of the systems and structures within which military members are embedded, socialized, and work daily. Addressing root causes also holds more promise than the continued assumption that legal changes, such as changes to the military justice system, will adequately address problems around sexual misconduct and other harmful behaviours. Also, while important, it is not sufficient for the military to become more diverse in its make-up. In order to achieve meaningful inclusion, the military must address the inequities and injustices stemming from patriarchy, settler colonialism, white supremacy, heteronormativity, ableism, and classism within its own institution and beyond. It is time for DND/CAF to get to the root of the problem with its institutional culture. In so doing, the military has the potential to become an active agent of institutional and broader societal transformative change.

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