THE CASE FOR CHANGE: REIMAGINING RESEARCH TO TRANSFORM MILITARY CULTURE

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Introduction

Military culture change has been identified by the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces (DND/CAF) as a key priority[1]—and is also recognized as such by the Canadian public and many in the military and Veteran community.[2] Culture change is required to ensure equity and fairness and to encourage recruitment and retention. Culture change is needed to reduce and effectively respond to psychological and physical harm resulting from sex-, gender-, sexuality-, and race-based discrimination, harassment, and violence. Culture change matters because every Canadian who signs up for military service deserves to feel respected and included.

We believe that all of us—individual researchers, the various organizations that comprise the defence research community, and especially the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research (CIMVHR)—have a responsibility to think about what kind of research is needed to support military culture change. This will require changes to taken-for-granted practices that have supported the status quo and have been left unchallenged, or have even contributed to, the problematic aspects of military culture—including those rooted in sexism, heteronormativity, colonialism, white privilege, and ableism. We argue that in supporting culture change, the research community itself must be willing to reflect on how *it too* might have to change.

Researchers working in military and Veteran health are committed to the quality of their research and, for most, this means conducting "objective research." Yet, in striving to meet this ideal, we risk remaining disconnected from key stakeholders, including those who will be impacted by our research. Whose interests does a conventional understanding of objectivity in research serve, and whose truth determines what is objective? Critical scholars argue that research is never 100 percent objective. Rather, researchers need to reflect on their positionality and on how their research questions and methods may perpetuate the status quo by privileging certain populations and reinforcing existing power relations.[3] Research not only reflects but

potentially reproduces the dominant culture[4,5]—including the dominant military culture—if it does not set out to explicitly challenge it.[6]

Collectively, we all impact defence-related culture through our research—by reproducing historic biases and blind spots that contribute to the problematic aspects of the culture *or* by actively helping to dismantle them.[7,8,9] This becomes most evident when we look at how Canadian research on the health and wellbeing of military members and Veterans has centered the experiences of white cisgender heterosexual men, leading to huge gaps in knowledge about the experiences of military and Veteran women and other non-dominant groups.[10] In the past, we have often used phrases such as "Veteran," "soldier," "military member," or "military spouse" in a way that seemed neutral but in fact was built around the historic white cisgender heterosexual military man and his presumed female civilian spouse. We have too often erased differences and therefore made invisible the experiences of those who do not fit the historically constructed norm.[7,8,9]

Conduct Inclusive Research: Make Diversity Matter

It is not necessary to study culture change per se to contribute to culture change. Regardless of the focus of our research, we can and must all ask ourselves: How can our research become more inclusive? How can it ensure experiences and voices that have been silenced or marginalized are heard? What will make our research both rigorous and powerfully relevant to culture change?

Our response needs to be about more than "add and stir."[11] Diversity is about us as individuals, and our unique traits, qualities, and characteristics—including our sex, gender, sexuality, and racial or ethnic background.[12] Diversity focuses on representation of individuals. Inclusion is about valuing the experiences and insights that diversity brings.[13] In addition to diversity among those who participate in our research, the research community itself needs to become more diverse *and* inclusive. Without diversity among us, our ability to achieve

meaningful inclusion in our research will remain limited. Different bodies can be included to increase diversity, but if the conditions are not set to facilitate impactful contributions, change will be limited, or at best sluggish, with little power to sustain culture change. **We need true systemic change to happen for meaningful inclusion of diverse peoples and to ensure equity.** We already know this statement to be true for DND/CAF, for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), and for Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC)—and it is true for the defence research community as well. Inclusive research is research that can produce and support culture change across the research ecosystem. Inclusive research requires more than adding diverse researchers and participants, it requires systemic change within the research community and its practices.

Mainstream Best Practices and Establish Quality Assurance

Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA Plus) is a vital tool for understanding the inequities that result from "intersections of different social locations, power relations, and experiences."[13 (p.2)] GBA Plus is powered by critical theories, including intersectional theory which was first proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her analysis of the distortion and erasure of the experience of Black women in sex discrimination cases.[14] Intersectional theory has particular relevance to culture change and the role of research as it seeks social justice through transformation and coalition building among different groups. Furthermore, it underscores the importance of considering one's own positionality, including social position, role, and power.[13 (p.3)] There is limited evidence to date that intersectional approaches are institutionalized in military and Veteran research in ways that could ensure meaningful processes to negotiate with impacted communities the most appropriate research questions, research designs, and communication strategies.[7]

As most of us are aware, the first essential step to make research more inclusive and supportive of culture change within the military is to adopt tools like GBA Plus or to follow Sex- and Gender-Equity in Research (SAGER) guidelines.[7,15,16,17] SAGER are international guidelines for academic research and peer review. These guidelines state, for

example, that that research should be designed and reported in ways that can reveal potential sex-related and/or gender-related differences.[17] In 2020, CIMVHR[18] and VAC[19] committed to adopting SAGER guidelines, and Defence Research and Development Canada (DRDC) has recognized the potential for integrating the SAGER guidelines with GBA Plus. Despite the recent adoption of SAGER guidelines, and increasingly of GBA Plus, there is a lack of researcher training, subject matter expertise, capacity building, and most importantly, little to no quality assurance, accountability, or proper oversight. Too often, for example, we face barriers to implementing these guidelines beyond superficial, often dichotomous, identity markers. This represents a failed opportunity for deeper learning about practices of racialization and gendering.[20] Additional systemic barriers to equity, diversity, and inclusion exist across the Canadian research ecosystem. These include practices of performativity and tokenism, when inclusion in research is performed in a perfunctory or symbolic manner.[21] These are community challenges, and they require community solutions and leadership to overcome. These are areas in which CIMVHR could do more to educate and monitor, and in doing so could positively contribute to culture change in the defence research community.

Inclusive research requires a redesign of defence-related research, beginning with stock-taking and analysis of research that has been conducted so far. What questions have been asked, how have they been investigated, and who has and has not been meaningfully included? That is, whose experience has shaped research knowledge?[7] We need to build on existing best practices, learn from challenges, and develop strategic ways to leverage expertise and fill knowledge gaps. Research can also advance military culture change by seeking to understand and monitor how military members are impacted by culture. Quantitative approaches can be valuable and are often relied upon to measure military culture and culture change.[22] However, in ensuring meaningful inclusion of all voices, it is imperative to continuously push methodological boundaries to address those areas that traditional methods have not been able to address.[23] This includes methodologies with the power to reveal understanding of lived experiences which are both unique and shared across inter-

sectional identities, and across time and space. We need method-ologies that can help us understand how institutional ideology creates and reinforces social relations of power.[23] Storytelling, encouraged by Indigenous research methods, is one such approach.[24] Institutional ethnography, autoethnography, narrative analysis,[23] transdisciplinarity, feminist, anti-oppressive, and participatory action research are additional examples of methodological approaches with potential to generate new insights and contribute to change.[3] Giving voice to lived experience is often required to help those within the dominant culture and in decision making positions—those without the relevant lived experience—to understand, feel, and act on what is needed for culture change in terms of resources, funding, and policies and programming. In this sense, the goal is not to measure the impact or effectiveness of existing programs and policy, but to determine how they can be shaped, re-conceptualized, and re-imagined to provide a more inclusive experience for all.

Reconsider Research Cultures and Relationships to Make them Inclusive

Research ecosystems are comprised of individuals at all levels and across many organizations—research leaders, research participants, students, trainees, faculty, administrators, research funding agencies, and policymakers.[21] The defence research ecosystem also includes stakeholder communities working with or within government departments and agencies, including DND/CAF, VAC, the RCMP, and CIMVHR. We need to reconsider research relationships and shift from the assumption that knowledge is created by researchers to re-defining knowledge as a process of co-creation and co-production among researchers, impacted communities, and knowledge users.[25,26,27] Inclusive research seeks the meaningful engagement of and, potentially, co-partnership with as many people with lived experience as possible. Study participants do not only provide data, but can be engaged and partnered with at each phase of a research process.[3] The latest version of the *Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* reiterates existing best practices for participatory research which include the co-design, co-development,

and co-authorship of research findings.[27] The Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR) is in the process of developing a framework and action plan to advance the practice of knowledge mobilization (2023), building on the integrated knowledge translation process it has applied since 2012.[28] CIMVHR has established numerous funding and research partnerships,[29] DRDC has entered into an inter-agency collaborative agreement with the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC),[30] and DND has established the Mobilizing Insights in National Defence and Security (MINDS)[31] program to solicit external contributions to defence challenges. These are important examples of initiatives to bridge gaps in knowledge development strategy; however, there is no formal strategy or action plan for knowledge mobilization and inclusion that engages all who conduct and are impacted by defence research. Moving forward, we need to consider the development of an institutional and community-wide paradigm for military and Veteran research that is inclusive, holistic, and integrates GBA Plus in meaningful ways. Research should consider, without exception, trauma-informed and "nothing about us, without us" approaches. Such approaches are already commonplace for civilian research involving members of the disability community,[32] medical patients,[33] and Indigenous people[31,34] and should be extended to military and Veteran research as well.[35]

Culture is dynamic and will continue to present opportunities and challenges for people and organizations, within the defence sector and beyond. We believe that each one of us can make a difference by bringing critical awareness about ourselves and our work to the research process. Research and research relationships can be reconceptualized to create knowledge that contributes to culture change. We can work to maintain the integrity of research as valid knowledge while at the same time making research a driving piece of the change process and amplifying the voices of those who participate. This is about building competency not expertise. People should not be afraid to make mistakes or ask questions. As researchers, we ourselves keep learning from our mistakes, our experiences, and from our academic and community collaborators. Our collective effort to apply the tools available from the inception of research to its translation

into policy and programming will help us produce more inclusive research. **Inclusive research can provide a robust foundation for culture change; however, in doing so, we suggest that it is time to critically review the depth and scope of what is required to conduct inclusive research.** Everyone reading this article can help with the changes needed—researchers, government practitioners, service providers, as well as military members, Veterans, and their families—by demanding more of researchers. We all have a role to play in research that supports military culture change.

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