TRAUMA AND MILITARY CULTURES: TRANSFORMATION THROUGH COMMUNITY

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TMC
TRANSFORMING MILITARY CULTURES

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Introduction

This paper explores the overlapping discourses of trauma and culture in the Canadian military context. It examines trauma-informed methods in culture change efforts, particularly as they relate to targeted supports for historically underrepresented groups and unpacking the warrior ideal. I apply intersectional feminist and critical race theory to draw connections between concepts from anti-oppressive theory and the military context, illustrating how acts of "othering" can result in responses typically associated with posttraumatic stress disorder. Thus, trauma and its related symptomology are important considerations when examining military culture change, due to the pervasiveness of violent, stressful, and discriminatory events in military contexts. I begin by briefly reviewing literature on trauma and trauma-informed practice as it relates to military contexts, as well as literature on military and organizational cultures. Then, I explore connections between concepts such as the warrior ideal, double consciousness, and space invaders. Ultimately, the research demonstrated here suggests that an effective framework for military culture change is one that is systems focused in addition to being human centered.

Expanding Understandings of Trauma

When investigating trauma in relation to military contexts it is necessary to acknowledge how trauma can encapsulate interpersonal harm as well as structural violence. Research indicates that trauma may result from such processes as violence, abuse, and neglect.[1] However, more recently the research also indicates that trauma is often caused by structural oppression such as sexism, racism, homophobia, ableism, poverty, and colonialism.[2] These growing fields of research illustrate that consistent and single experiences alike can trigger psychological disorders where persistent systems of harm or instances of domination are unable to be processed and thus can trigger a set of symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or complex-post traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD).[3] It follows that trauma can occur as the result

of enacting violence, experiencing violence, ambient or environmental oppression and consistent discrimination, or a chronically stressful experience.

Discussions of culture change tend to circulate around the question of why military members are resistant. I argue that trauma can serve as a valuable "way-in" for those working on transforming military cultures. Members who have undergone significant psychological stress may not wish to be further othered by such initiatives, or they may feel as though they have gone through great trials to get where they are, internalizing a sense of inferiority. For example, in my equity work I have witnessed many individuals targeted by equity initiatives wanting to distance themselves from discourse on culture change, because they are tired of being singled out and wish to avoid further harm. The sociological and feminist research on trauma caused by oppression can act as a powerful lesson in these situations. If we regard military members' hesitation to engage with anti-oppression from a trauma-informed lens, we might more effectively witness how often such individuals have spent years trying to escape being cast as the "other", sometimes as a survival strategy born out of C-PTSD/PTSD, as a means of aligning more closely with the ideal warrior in order to avoid harassment.[4] While instances of harassment against straight white males exists, statistics clearly indicate that rates of assault are higher for those furthest from the warrior ideal, such as women, 2SLGBTQIA+, and racialized military members. As H. Christian Breede and Karen D. Davis have noted "[T]he assumptions embedded within the warrior paradigm have provided powerful motivators for the historical exclusion of women from combat and LGBTQ persons from the military."[5] Feminist researchers working in the military context commonly hear of women who have worked tirelessly to present as though they are genderless, in order to not draw attention to themselves or be othered.[6] Similarly, research examining the lived experience of both racialized and 2SLGBTQIA+ military members has shown that many diminish their individual subjectivities in order to fit in with the warrior ideal, and thus align with their CAF colleagues.[7] These instances stray from the assimilation

of white, cis, straight, male CAF members because the marginalization of women, racialized, and 2SLGBTQIA+ military members is compounded socially. In other words, certain groups are marginalized both within and outside of the institution – and while white, cis, straight men certainly face subjugation in the CAF, the unique circumstance of those who enter the institution from a standpoint of being dually othered must not be overlooked. These experiences of othering, and the processes which accompany them, can create emotional barriers for those who subsequently become centered in or associated with culture change efforts.

PTSD and C-PTSD in Military Contexts

Laura Brown extends definitions of trauma beyond traditional and clinical notions of events abnormal to the "range of human experience," by emphasizing how dominant conceptions of human experience are often limited to the straight, white, upper-class, male.[8] Brown discusses the role of trauma caused by systemic oppression, and while she acknowledges that such structures may not be directly violent in the physical realm (although many often are indirectly), they do produce "violence to the soul and spirit."[9] Similarly, Richard Linklater defines trauma as "a person's reaction or response to an injury."[10] Thus PTSD and C-PTSD could be defined as a person's or community's ongoing response to such forms of violence or injury. It is critical to note that not every individual who experiences a traumatic event, or repeated traumatic events, will develop PTSD or C-PTSD. As Morgan Bimm and Margeaux Feldman state,

> What distinguishes those living with trauma (diagnosed or undiagnosed) from those who have experienced a traumatic event are the presence of three hallmark symptoms: hyperarousal (the persistent expectation of danger), intrusion (flashbacks), and constriction (numbing out).[11]

The above symptoms are markers of PTSD, whereas C-PTSD is a relatively recent concept birthed out of an acknowledgement that not all traumas we experience are "one and done," C-PTSD (yet to be

included in the DSM-5 as its own disorder) is differentiated through its resulting from repeated, consistent traumatic events over a longer period, sometimes described as complex trauma. Subsequently, C-PTSD involves a wider set of symptoms including negative self-concept, interpersonal disturbances, and affect dysregulation.[12] Each of the symptoms discussed as a result of PTSD and C-PTSD could be significantly triggered in military members by the language and messaging of culture change. For those who culture change efforts seek to support, the language could produce flashbacks, interpersonal challenges, and evoke feelings of negative self-concept, and they may deal with threatening feelings through dissociation or a division of one's personality.[13] For military members adapting to culture change efforts, similar feelings are heightened, as well as a sense of danger and a desire to resist altogether due to intense emotional responses.

Furthermore, as discussed by other authors in this special issue, there are aspects of military culture that show up in places far out of reach of those higher in command, including practices and values that are inherited from previous generations and reproduced without much critical attention. In her life history research with women in the military, Nancy Taber has found that there are consistent reminders for women that they are different from men, and that often women themselves prefer to associate with men, going as far as to describe other women as too "catty" in interviews.[14] Further, this research highlights how women in the military consistently experience moments of discomfort, to the point where an individual's ability to make sense of such an environment could be significantly impacted. For example, whenever she advocated for herself and her role as a mother, one woman was told she was "making a woman thing" out of a separate issue.[15] Upon joining her unit, one participant recalled being told, "You better not get pregnant while you're here."[16] Immediately positioning her and her body as deviant and establishing her role as other within the supposedly cohesive unit. Likewise, Tammy George's exploration of the experiences of racialized soldiers in the Canadian military revealed similar results for members who consistently felt othered or hyper-visible based on their race.[17]

According to George's interviews, soldiers deviating from cultural norms within the CAF are "reminded that they are not part of the norm and are encouraged to conform to ensure operational effectiveness."[18]

In developing a framework for military culture change, it is important to understand membership within a historically marginalized group does not free one from the effects of socialization in an oppressive social reality. The research above indicates that many military members undergo a process of othering and harmful assimilation to adapt to a masculine, heteronormative, and white warrior ideal, often resulting in dissociation. The trauma of assimilation can cause individuals to internalize an image of themselves and others through the dominant group's eyes, through the development of a double consciousness. Thus, it will not only be the dominant or institutionally powerful groups who are called upon to grow through culture change efforts, as women, racialized, and 2SLGBTQIA+ members will also be asked to shift their thinking in one way or another.

Space Invaders, Double Consciousness, and Dissociation

Double consciousness is a theory exploring how oppressed groups view themselves through the eyes of an oppressive dominant culture.[19] According to this theory, the colonizer or colonizing group creates the "other" in their own image, as a means of feeling superior. As Frantz Fanon said, "It is the racist who creates the inferiorized."[20] He extends on this below:

> All colonized people – in other words, people in whom an inferiority complex has taken root, whose local cultural originality has been committed to the grave – position themselves in relation to the civilizing language: i.e., the metropolitan culture. The more the colonized has assimilated the cultural values of the metropolis, the more he will have escaped the bush. The more he rejects his blackness and the bush, the whiter he will become. In the colonial army, and particularly in the regiments of Sengalese soldiers,

the "native" officers are mainly interpreters. They serve to convey to their fellow soldiers the master's orders, and they themselves enjoy a certain status.[21]

If we extend the concept of double consciousness to the realm of military culture, we might envision how processes of othering are inherent to an institution that privileges universality, uniformity, and the warrior ideal.[22] Thus, I argue that the ethos of military culture, which strives to ensure operational effectiveness through strict adherence to the warrior ideal, can indirectly lead to the development of double consciousness in military members. This splitting of the consciousness takes place through a process much alike the one Fanon theorizes, where individuals are asked to subjugate aspects of their subjectivity to be a "successful" military member. For women, racialized, and 2SLGBTQIA+ members, the subjugation goes beyond personality traits and into the realm of core pillars comprising their subjectivity (e.g., gender, race).

Exploring the phenomenon of both the warrior ideal and double consciousness through the lens of trauma-informed practice offers new insights into root causes of problematic military culture. Contemporary trauma-informed practice acknowledges that the conditions of historical, ideological, cultural, and institutional oppression often result in an internalized sense of inferiority in groups that are positioned as the other.[23] This internalized inferiority splits one's understanding of the self, described by Fanon as traveling across a distance, far away from oneself, ultimately casting an objective gaze over the self. Similar processes of internalized oppression are discussed in different fields, such as Nita Mary McKinley's research on objectified body consciousness in women, whereby they internalize an understanding of themselves as an object of men's desire through socialization in a patriarchal culture.[24] Considering George's framing of the experiences of racialized military members, we are reminded that an individual's understanding of the world around them is shaped by the discourses to which they have access.[25] In other words, our subjectivity is negotiated in relation to the varying, but often-limited, meanings and practices of communities or cultures of which we are a part. Thus, double consciousness is a

process that can result in a false sense of inferiority in marginalized groups caused by a conscious splitting of the self, which may ultimately lead to the development of trauma symptoms.

Recent psychological studies on dissociation and culture have indicated that double consciousness is not exclusively a result of racial difference but can be borne out of "being a foreigner in a relatively inflexible host cultural environment." [26] While the connection between double consciousness and dissociation requires more study, this research indicates that a relationship exists, and that the bond is more nuanced for racialized individuals. Thus, for a framework of military culture change to avoid further othering those communities historically harmed, it must be designed to interrogate the underlying assumptions, beliefs, and values which seek to produce "others." Importantly, this could have meaningful impact on the vision of a Canadian military. Processes of othering are often believed to be a necessary step in preparing members to enact forms of violence expected from our military. If the CAF were to acknowledge how the process of othering is a microcosm of larger social structures that were developed as part of a colonial project, they might begin by viewing double consciousness as a systemic issue that requires accountability throughout the entire organization. As Bimm and Feldman state, "[t]rauma-informed approaches shift the focus away from the individual and onto the collective." [27] This assertion builds on critical research which emphasizes the "systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community" as key avenues towards healing. [28] Thus, developing an effective framework for military culture change will require a close investigation of the systems of attachment and meaning that link the individual with their community within military organizations.

Naming the problem: Ambient Trauma in the Canadian Military

In discussing organizational cultures, Edgar Schein identifies three main aspects of a culture requiring examination: artefacts, beliefs and values, and underlying assumptions. [29]

Discussing Schein's three aspects, Leonard Wong and Stephen Gerras write:

> While artifacts are the observable clues of a culture, an organization's values reveal more of the motivations and rationale of the organizational culture. Of course, an organization's stated values may not match its demonstrated values. In order to determine the values and beliefs that an organization actually puts into use (as opposed to merely espousing), it is necessary to look deeper into the next level of cultural analysis. Beneath an organization's beliefs and values is the third level of an organizational culture – the underlying basic assumptions...This underlying consensus of unseen and usually unconscious assumptions affects the perceptions, thought processes, and behaviors of an organization.[30]

The analysis here is based on Schein's description of organizational culture as it effectively highlights how culture change requires a critical examination of the underlying basic assumptions that inform an institutional culture as well as overt and subtle consequences. For instance, in the context of the CAF, an underlying assumption of the current organizational culture is that increased diversity of membership will lead to incremental culture change. However, Al Okros argues culture change efforts must first examine "how diversity will be constructed and how the experiences of those in underrepresented groups will be understood."[31] Furthering this line of reasoning, I ask: if a foundational cultural assumption of the CAF is that uniformity will enhance operational effectiveness, what happens to marginalized military members on a socio-emotional level when they are purposefully brought into the institution to meet a diversity quota, and then positioned as space invaders? Nirmal Puwar explores the phenomenon of space invaders and found that their inclusion within historically exclusionary sites comes at a cost, as they often face heightened scrutiny for errors which "are less likely to be noted in others, and if they are noted they are less likely to be amplified. Disproportional surveillance finds errors in those who are not absolutely perfect."[32] Due to the hyper-visibility attached to being othered, Puwar describes how space invaders are overly scrutinized,

and within the CAF context research indicates that these others instinctively become viewed as a threat to the overall goals and effectiveness of the institution.[33] Thus, this trend illustrates how an emphasis on increased representation of those who have been historically "othered," without addressing foundational assumptions, beliefs, and values of an institution that directly or indirectly contradict such inclusion, fails to create meaningful change and may in fact reproduce systems of harm. Indeed, the underlying values and assumptions that are created and reinforced by a concept such as universality of service, for example, hinder those historically excluded from the institution of the military through both encouraging their assimilation and simultaneously setting limits on how far they might ascend within the organization. Puwar's research on space invaders demonstrates that race is inextricably linked to our social understandings of universality, where individuals within the civil service and who are othered based on race are less likely to be viewed as an adaptable leader.

Trauma-Informed Culture Change: Building Community Without Erasure

Based on sociological and feminist definitions of trauma discussed above, I identify the following common principles of a trauma-informed practice: an acknowledgement of trauma as being widespread and connected to social structures; an emphasis on how trauma is a systemic and community wide (not individual) issue; and, the promotion of healing through overall systems change and community accountability. Applying a trauma-informed lens to conversations surrounding military culture change, there is not a simple nor one-size-fits-all framework for addressing inequities in the CAF. However, these principles offer a way into conversations regarding member engagement with culture change efforts. Through close examination of the underlying assumptions, beliefs, values, and artefacts of Canadian military culture, researchers well versed in anti-oppressive practice can work with CAF membership to identify those aspects of the culture to maintain and other aspects requiring transformation via a trauma-informed lens. For instance,

current CAF culture effectively demonstrates the strength of a cohesive community when members feel as though they belong and are affirmed.[34] To an extent, the CAF achieves this through its emphasis on unity. In terms of recognizing our socio-emotional wellbeing as deeply intertwined—this sense of interconnectedness is incredibly valuable. However, in failing to address the foundational culture of complacency around sexism, racism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression, the CAF is reproducing such systems of harm when asking for uniformity from their members. Building a sense of community and responsibility to one another is powerful, but this must go beyond operational effectiveness and into the realm of mutual and holistic wellbeing, defined by Staci Haines as "an embodied capacity to widen our circle of care, without disappearing ourselves."[35] Importantly, this form of mutual connection is a foundation to engaging in moments of interpersonal conflict, where individuals are able to hold onto complexity, without being reactionary or needing to label people or actions as bad.[36] Generative conflict and the ability to deal with discomfort are necessary in an organization seeking to be anti-oppressive.

An underlying assumption of CAF culture is that being in the military requires emotional fortitude on the part of individual members, rather than a reliance on collective fortitude and community belonging. This assumption prioritizes the warrior ideal, which supports an individualization of strength and effectiveness through subjugating vulnerability and difference. So, moving forward the following question emerges: In the context of the CAF, what would it look like to foster a culture that witnesses and affirms the experiences of its members, seeking unit cohesion through mutuality across difference? There is a critical difference inherent to an institutional culture that asks its members to be emotionally intelligent and community minded, rather than emotionally stoic with a fighting spirit. We might see that only the first option can lead the CAF towards collective healing. This will of course require less emphasis focused directly on operational effectiveness. However, an argument could be made that the wellbeing of membership individually and collectively, supports the overall effectiveness of the organization.

The research above suggests that for members of the CAF to feel a sense of belonging, and for meaningful change to take place, members need to be supported in developing a community founded in mutuality and trust. Ultimately, the critical and anti-oppressive literature on trauma and military culture can inform culture change efforts guided by three principles: prioritization of safety, belonging, and dignity of members by addressing the role of trauma in their lives; an acknowledgement that trauma and culture change are systemic issues by emphasizing mutuality and responsibility between members; and, a commitment to follow the lead of marginalized groups in implementing anti-oppressive practice across the institution. These fundamental steps provide pathway towards true inclusion—building community without erasure—within the Canadian Armed Forces.

Endnotes

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