ANTICIPATING FUTURE CULTURE STRUGGLES OVER CONTESTED MILITARY IDENTITIES

ALAN C. OKROS



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Transforming Military Cultures (TMC) Network
Mount Saint Vincent University
Centre for Social Innovation and
Community Engagement in Military Affairs
166 Bedford Highway, Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3M 2J6, Canada www.msvu.ca/tmc
tmc@msvu.ca

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Introduction

Decades of failure to effectively incorporate women and diverse individuals into the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) has resulted in calls for substantive changes and a body of critical academic work on the central issues. Expanding on Raewyn Connell's foundational work, the literature on militarized masculinities highlights the problematic standardization of specific masculine behaviours associated with white male heterosexuality and normalized performances of these behaviours within militaries that stand to privilege most men over women and subordinate some men to others. Sandra Whitworth notes that, in the CAF, masculine behaviours are founded in relation to general principles of "violence and aggression, institutional unity and hierarchy."

Ending harmful behaviours requires addressing hegemonic systems: the dominance of cultural practices which work to maintain a particular form of constructed social order. Chief Professional Conduct and Culture (CPCC) recently identified four key facets of military culture to be addressed: the concept of service before self; the practices used to build teams; the enactment of controlling leadership; and the construction of military identity. This article examines the fourth issue: why military identity remains contested. I start by considering how CAF members might respond to changes to the dominant identity and then weave together disparate topics related to evolving military roles and broader social changes to suggest where and how the next round of contested military identity may play out.

Change Initiatives and Predictable Pushback

Echoing the call from scholars, the CPCC shift in CAF identity is from a singular ideal hero warrior to recognizing multiple ways to demonstrate military identity. This initiative acknowledges that the warrior image is rooted in an outdated hero archetype which emphasizes combat/kinetic functions performed by those who are strong, stoic, and physically resilient (along with being white, male,

and cisgender). The intent is to expand and enable all individuals to: incorporate their own identity into their professional one; give greater emphasis to character than task completion; and, encourage individuals to be emotionally flexible. Subsequent internal 'debates' have been taking place with attitudes ranging from 'about time' to 'fine for you to have purple hair and a nose ring, just don't look to me to do the same' to expressed concerns about 'slippery slopes' and unintended consequences.

The key issue here is the need to attend to the operation of hegemonic systems. Based on chairing the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Senator Murray Sinclair stated:

...if you remove all the racists...in government, policing, justice and health—you will still have a problem. Because you will have a system that is functioning based upon policies, priorities and decisions that direct how things are to be done, that come from a time when racism was very blatant. ⁵

The explanation of why the problem remains starts with the intentional processes used to convert the civilian into the soldier. This involves enacting elements of sociologist Erving Goffman's total institution with the use of de-individualization and social isolation to dislocate the individual from previous social influences and focus them solely on the identity and practices endorsed by the institution.6 Those familiar with entry level recruit training recognize that new enrollees quickly learn three tactics to deal with the demands placed on them: pay attention to the person in charge; when in doubt, do what everybody else is doing; and, make friends - in other words, the importance placed on obedience to authority, normative conformity, and group loyalty. These become accentuated through the conduct and narratives of instructors and, subsequently, Unit leaders who emulate the preferred identity and behaviours. Seniors leading by example to demonstrate 'what right looks like' often draw on historical examples and engage in (often distorted) myth making.

It is through these types of daily practices that previous legacies including inherent biases and awarded privileges are perpetuated.

As articulated by Nancy Taber, a contributing factor is the presentation of 'boss texts' that construct specific narratives around the military as a way of life. In assessing the 2003 publication of Duty with Honour, she stated: "The CF boss texts perpetuate the idea that military members must act and think within very narrowly defined ideological codes and textual representations, supporting ruling relations that work to exclude competing ideas and anyone who does not fit the military's dominant narrative." The component of Duty with Honour presenting the military ethos was recently updated with the publication of Trusted to Serve. Taber commented that this update is intended to answer the question "Who is an ideal military member?"12 She observed several changes between Duty with Honour and Trusted to Serve, however, concluded that "it remains to be seen how the ethos is incorporated throughout the organization; how personnel perceive, enact and informally teach the ethos; and, therefore, how effective Trusted to Serve, as a boss text, is at engaging the organization as a whole in cultural change." 13

As reflected in Taber's comment, the construction of military identity most often occurs through informal social exchanges within small groups. Vanessa Brown illustrated that a key element of hegemonic systems is the construction and policing of social hierarchies which serve to award status and power within the group and signal to individuals acceptable group norms around behaviours and projecting one's identity.¹⁴ The nature of this social policing is explained by Victoria Signal-Tait:

Theories of hegemonic masculinity emphasize that although gender norms are socially constructed, gender performances will be judged against a standard or ideal of masculinity that has become hegemonic within a given sociohistorical moment. Accordingly, someone in a body coded as male may not meet masculine ideals; they may fail to meet these socially constructed standards, or they may disregard them of their own volition. Likewise, someone in a body coded as female may not perform in ways that are considered feminine, or they may fail in their attempt to live up to the standards of idealized masculinity in the case of military service.¹⁵

An additional facet of military hegemonic systems pertains to practices that preserve a 'tight' culture rather than authorizing a looser culture. The CPCC initiatives are a clear move towards the latter. Tight cultures put an emphasis on homogeneity, normative conformity, social cohesion, role obligations, the common good, and a reliance on history, customs, and traditions, thus focus on a past to inform the present. Conversely, loose cultures authorize individual choice, flexible norms based on values rather than rules, personal responsibility rather than imposed obligations, and expectations that societies and social norms will evolve, hence an orientation to the future as something to be created rather than a past to be preserved. A good example of tight culture is the Royal Military College tradition of cadets memorizing the names of the 'Old Eighteen' and the badging ceremony in which members of the 'Old Brigade' who entered RMC 50 years earlier formally engage with new cadets. The messaging conveyed clearly serves to connect newcomers to the not to be forgotten past. The fact that the first women will not enter the Old Brigade until 2030 is illustrative of the time lags in updating military ceremonies and customs.

These factors combine to produce leaders concerned over the potential consequences of adapting military identity. A central issue pertains to combat motivation and building cohesive, effective teams that will succeed under arduous conditions. Reservations that

CAF identity may erode teams and motivation are predictable if leaders are not enabled to envision alternate identities or equipped with the tools to be able to do so. The focus on teams explains the emphasis given to small group cohesion and the personal judgements that occur in policing social hierarchies: individuals assess whether their peers will be able to 'cut it' when the moment arises and if they will have their buddy's back. As illustrated in Brown and Signal-Tait's work, the challenge is that many military members are using gendered and racialized stereotypes to erroneously judge others.

Thus, facets of professional (hegemonic) systems and daily practices can intertwine to create the conditions under which the dominant identity is reproduced. Further, changes continually occur regarding the types of missions assigned to the military, equipment, doctrine, tactics, and training. These are integrated in Duty with Honour in a framework which reflects how changes in the profession's jurisdiction can require updates to identity, responsibility, expertise and, potentially, the values incorporated in the military ethos. The ethos component was updated in Trusted to Serve, however, there are emerging issues related to jurisdiction, responsibility, and expertise which may result in new 'debates' over military identity.

The Force of Last Resort

Andrew Abbott identifies that professions work to preserve a monopoly over their unique jurisdiction while avoiding straying into that of others. The received CAF worldview is that the military should generally be allowed to focus on its core business and not be tasked with extraneous activities. Military members see the CAF as the force of last resort which should only be committed to combat when all other options have been exhausted and not assigned tasks which are outside of their core role. The tendency for local governments to call on the CAF in response to domestic circumstances is not new, however, yet again has CAF members worried about the misuse of military capabilities resulting in the 'this is not what we do, this is not who we are' debates. This is a predictable response: the CAF has a

long history of telling itself stories which work to rebut the resilient view of many Canadians of soldiers in blue berets armed with teddy bears doing random acts of kindness.²³

While CAF members hope the current defence policy update will provide clear articulation of what the CAF is to do and to be, the 'desperate search for certainty' is likely to remain unanswered. Many in uniform resist Peter Feaver's observation that the 'people' have the right to choose what kind of military they want – and have the right to be wrong. The 'mess discussions' over the government not understanding the purpose of the armed forces are likely to continue as the CAF is tasked with responding to more natural disasters and serious pandemics. While the work performed by CAF members in the middle of COVID was of importance to those assisted, changing bedsheets in care homes challenges the heroic warrior as doing work the 'average civvy' could do and erodes the military exceptionalism of being capable of achieving extraordinary feats that others could never accomplish.

Backlash to Gender Equality

Work on Canada's National Action Plan for Women, Peace and Security has recognized that those advancing gender equality are increasingly under attack. Judicial and legislative actions in several countries that have eroded hard-won equality rights and women in public life in Canada and elsewhere are being subject to increased hate and threats. The CAF is not immune to these trends. 28

One explanation is that patriarchy is the most powerful hegemonic system, constantly operating to preserve the power and status of those privileged. Kimberlé Crenshaw illustrated that patriarchy and structural racism create the conditions of social struggle where work to advance equality rights is never done; it is constantly at risk of being eroded. ²⁹ As illustration, Canada has had 55+ years of formal activity to advance gender equality, including in the CAF – but the Arbour Report indicates there remains much to be done. ³⁰ The concept of social struggle against patriarchy suggests that those

influencing military identity have to be constantly vigilant as the pressures to revert to the dominantly masculinist form will continue to resurface.

These forces help explain the contrasting responses of those 'about time' versus the 'slippery slope' sub-groups in the CAF. Those with concerns may use external narratives to justify the status quo and argue changes are not warranted or wise. Conversely, those who see valued advances as being under attack will increase their efforts to confront systems of oppression. Generational analyses indicate that young women in North America are increasingly impatient with the pace of social changes with a perceived need for significant advances and heightened vigilance to monitor erosions.³¹

The Rise of Prevention

The next thread comes from evolutions in UN and NATO approaches to military tasks. As per UNSCR 1325, the professional view has been that the role of the military is to provide protection; however, the emerging issue is the expansion to prevention. The 2017 Vancouver Principles require the military to not just deal with encounters with child soldiers but to prevent their recruitment. This is also now included in NATO direction on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV): "NATO planners will identify objectives, tasks and related assessment tools to prevent and respond to CRSV." Similar consideration of prevention roles are emerging under the NATO human security themes of Children and Armed Conflict and Cultural Property Protection and will come under another NATO human security issue of combatting trafficking in human beings.

Back to the professional framework, a shift in the military role to prevention will require updating assigned responsibilities, required expertise, and constructed identity. The latter will, again, lead to internal debates as to who 'we' are, what 'we' are expected to do and what 'we' value and ultimately, changes to the military worldview. This worldview directly frames 'sense making': especially how information is collected, analyzed, and acted on.

More broadly, the expansion of potential military roles or military contributions to integrated 'whole of mission' approaches to addressing prevention will have several consequences. As the military will not be the lead actor, this will require the CAF to work closely with, and often subordinate to, others who have the lead. Further, while ensuring physical protection can draw on expertise that is associated with the combat warrior role, prevention requires new knowledge and skills to effectively engage with civil society organizations and local communities. Thus, increased emphasis on prevention has the potential to disrupt the broadly constructed identity as well as the internal social hierarchies of who is the most important for mission success.

Al and Cyber

A topic of increased attention in the military is the exploitation of artificial intelligence (by own and hostile forces). Evolutions in this domain are also likely to cause disruptions to collective identity and internal hierarchies. In a 2022 workshop organized by the Transforming Military Cultures network, Australian sociologist Samantha Crompvoets stimulated a discussion by observing that AI, cyber, and robotics are changing not only how the military conducts activities but what activities are being conducted and by whom, with disruption to the ideal military identity. This starts with 'cyber warriors' and remote UAV operators – who clearly do not have to meet common military fitness standards. This issue has been identified as problematic for the CAF when held against the current universality of service policy. Again, changes in what work needs to be done can lead to amendments to who does these tasks, the nature of the work environment and, ultimately, the image of the military member who performs this work. The internal jokes over remote drone operators wearing flight suits are one example of contested military identities.

The issue of drone operators is of importance for two other reasons and especially for those who are actively engaged in the 'kill chain.'

One narrative had been that drone operators are well removed from

the battle zone and physical risk, hence not seen as 'real combatants.' These narratives have implications on the social hierarchies of relative importance and also extend to how individuals are seen by others. For instance, some drone operators are at high risk of mental health issues but were not initially acknowledged as such by the military medical system. The degree to which a military member's identity and employment match the prototype ideal, the more likely they are to be given institutional and peer support when in need.

An extension for all working with autonomous systems pertains to the moral and ethical consequences of actions taken. Articulated professional values, constructed identity, and internalized responsibilities merge to inform not just 'who I am/what I do' but 'how I am to do it.' Just War Theory and the Laws of Armed Conflict provide the principle-based moral foundations for military decision making regarding the application of lethal force. Other than the fact that flight suits have pockets in the right places for drone operators, the practices of the total institution consistently remind the military member of who they are and the values to be given emphasis when making complex moral judgements. Returning to Gofman's total institution, the assumption is that wearing the uniform connects the individual to their profession.

To extend, a more critical shift has been that the information domain has become a battle space on its own. The net result is that the fight is often now over the narrative not territory. Shifts in military roles and in who engages in which battles serves to displace the supremacy of those who use kinetic actions to take and hold ground. It is plausible to predict that evolutions regarding AI, cyber, and robotics will not just alter military tactics but lead to ongoing cultural scuffles over roles, social standing and, ultimately, professional identity.

Implications

This article is based on the recognition that patriarchal hegemonic systems work to preserve the status quo and that these systems are

deeply embedded in not only policies but daily practices. This is not accidental or merely a side consequence of military functioning: as a centuries-old profession, the CAF engages in intentional processes which are specifically designed to inculcate novices into the espoused professional identity, values, and worldview and then sustain these characteristics over the course of military service. The mechanisms enacted to do so include rites of passage such as course graduations, promotion or change of command ceremonies and formal parades; ritualized actions such as saluting, scripted language for exchanges between subordinates and seniors, and the conduct of mess dinners; constructed narratives such as Taber's described boss texts and ideological codes as well as those conveyed in formal training and informal oral histories; enforced social ordering which start with ranks and the use of military discipline and surfaces in daily exchanges in which individuals place themselves in relation to others; and the pervasive use of symbolism in artwork, customs, traditions, regalia, and the naming of roads, buildings, and other infrastructure. As indicated with the reference to tight cultures, each of these facets is based on the concept of conveying a past that must be preserved.

As stated in the introduction, the daily communication of these professional functions serves to continuously remind each person of not just the role and purpose of the armed forces but of the way in which the prototype ideal member is to be constructed and performed and, to each, of their status within the institution and in relation to all others. In doing so, identity and self-image emerge as central to professional belonging. It is for this reason that efforts to shift identity attract the attention of CAF members and often evoke significant debate. The presentation of the rationales for the predictable pushback illustrated why some see it as their professional duty to express concerns when they perceive that such shifts may put mission success at risk.

Through the actions of collectives such as the officer or noncommissioned corps or of individuals, CAF members are encouraged to have agency in how their profession functions and how their actions align with espoused values, beliefs, and expectations. Culture,

writ large, is the embodiment of an array of components which continuously interact to retain valued characteristics and repel what can be seen as dangerous changes. This is the reasoning behind Peter Drucker's observation that culture eats strategy for breakfast. What is of greater importance is that when the strategy is to change culture: culture will eat that strategy for lunch, dinner, and midnight snack.

A central point offered is that sociologist Morris Janowitz was right: the military does not exist in a social vacuum but is constantly buffeted by external changes which influence the profession, including shared and individual identity. The emerging issues discussed are presented to illustrate that there will always be multiple internal and external forces at play which can influence military culture. Each of the topics described have or are likely to provoke internal discussions pertaining to central aspects of identity: who are we, and who am I, in this social environment? As such, the constructed identity will often be under negotiation: by the profession with government and society; by military leadership with subordinates; and, amongst military members at the small group level.

The CPCC initiatives to shift aspects of military culture are seen as intended to contribute to negotiations in all three domains. While top-down initiatives can serve as one influence on identity, these can be received as background noise which is drowned out by daily exchanges stimulated by other factors of importance to how military members see themselves and each other. Having multiple factors at play informs Taber's observation that it will take time to determine what effects Trusted to Serve will have; the same goes for proposed CPCCs initiatives.

Organizational change initiatives will likely shift where and how subgroup tensions over identity, social hierarchies, and allocated privilege will become visible to senior leadership. When 'disturbed' by external forces or internal initiatives, narratives will be constructed to counter the changes and preserve key characteristics of the

dominant identity.⁴⁰ Those working to shift culture would be wise to monitor these informal spaces and especially the narratives that are likely to emerge.⁴¹

Finally, those seeking to influence identity and culture must recognize the permeability of professional boundaries and the implications of evolutions in broader society. Applying critical analyses to understand these social dynamics and to monitor evolving tensions is of importance; doing so with future-focused assessments of social evolutions, especially, amongst young Canadians and, especially, of their views of the CAF can avoid EPSs (easily predicted surprises).

Endnotes

- ¹ The Arbour Report (Louise Arbour, Report of the Independent External Comprehensive Review of the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces, Borden Ladner Gervais, 2022) is only the latest in a string that date back to at least the 1967-71 Royal Commission on the Status of Women and extend to Brooke Claxton's fight in 1946-48 with the senior officers of the day to overcome inherited British classism to allow noncommissioned members to be commissioned and attend Military College.
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- ³ Claire Duncanson, "Hegemonic Masculinity and the Possibility of Change in Gender Relations," Men and Masculinities 18 (2015): 231–48; Maya Eichler, "Militarized Masculinities in International Relations," Brown Journal of World Affairs 21 (2014): 81-93; Cynthia Enloe, Maneuvers The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives (University of California Press, 2000).
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- ⁵ Padraig Moran, "Sen. Murray Sinclair Urges Canadians to Reckon with Systemic Racism," Social Sharing CBC News, January 27 2021, https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/the-current-for-jan-27-2021-1.5888592/sen-murray-sinclair-urges-canadians-to-reckon-with-systemic-racism-1.5888597.
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- ⁷ Chief of the Defence Staff, Leadership in the Canadian Forces: Conceptual Foundations (Canadian Forces Leadership Institute, 2004), 51-56.
- ⁸ An example is the Australian 'digger' identity from the Gallipoli Campaign. The constructed digger emphasizes endurance, courage, ingenuity, good humour, and egalitarian mateship. Sheffield commented: Historians have critiqued this 'Anzac Legend': the supposedly egalitarian nature of the Australian Imperial Force has been exaggerated, while larrikinism shaded into racism and criminality (https://www.historyextra.com/period/first-world-war/the-myths-of-the-battle-of-gallipoli/).
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- ¹⁰ Taber, "The Profession of Arms," 34.
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- ¹² Nancy Taber, "Trusted to Serve: Rethinking the CAF Ethos for Culture Change," Canadian Military Journal 22, no. 3 (2022): 13.
- ¹³ Taber, "Trusted to Serve," 18.
- ¹⁴ Vanessa Brown, "Situating Feminist Progress in Professional Military Education," Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice 41, no. 2 (2020): 26-41.
- ¹⁵ Victoria Tait, "Regendering the Canadian Armed Forces," Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice 41, no. 2 (2020): 13.

- ¹⁶ Vanessa Brown and Al Okros, "Dancing Around Gender: Changing Identity in Canada's Post-Deschamps Military" in Culture and the Soldier: Identities, Values, and Norms in Military Engagements, ed. H. Christian Breede (UBC Press, 2019), 32-56; Al Okros, "Rethinking 'Diversity' and 'Security'," Commonwealth & Comparative Politics 47, no. 4 (2009): 346-373.
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- ¹⁸The literature demonstrates the key is task not social cohesion; see Robert MacCoun, Elizabeth Kier and Aaron Belkin, "Does Social Cohesion Determine Motivation in Combat?" Armed Forces & Society 32, no. 4 (2006): 646-654.
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- Douglas L. Bland, Issues in Defence Management (Kingston, ON: School of Policy Studies, Queen's University, 1998), since the mid-60s; the response to 'what do you want us to do?' is 'be flexible'; 'what is our budget?' is 'a dollar less than the bare minimum'; and 'who do you want us to be' is 'friendly'.
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- ³² Prevention, participation, protection, relief and recovery.
- ³³ North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), NATO Policy on Preventing and Responding to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence, May 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_184570.htm.

³⁴Samuel P. Huntington, The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1957). Huntington described the ideal soldier as conservative in the classical sense; that the 'military mind' emphasizes the "permanence, irrationality, weakness, and evil in human nature"; is more focused on vice than virtue; suspect of human cooperation and skeptical of change hence prefers the status quo. His summary was that the military is "pessimistic" and "historically inclined...It is, in brief, realistic, and conservative."

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https://www.cbc.ca/news/opinion/universality-of-service-1.4363985; John P. Southen, Balancing University of Service with Critical Skill Retention, Service paper: Joint Command and Staff Program, Canadian Forces College, 2020.

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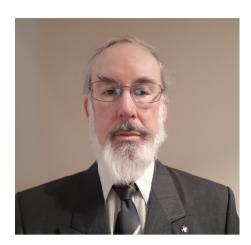
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⁴⁰ Jennifer Louise Petriglieri, "Under Threat: Responses to and the Consequences of Threats to Individuals' Identities," Academy of Management Review 36, no. 4 (2011): 641-662.

⁴¹ As an illustration, during my time involved in the late 1980s with the planned research for the Combat Related Employment of Women (CREW) trials, the narrative that emerged in many quarters was that all men could leap a tall building in a single bound; no woman could climb a flight of stairs.

Author Bio



Alan C. Okros

Alan Okros is a full professor in the Royal Military College Department of Defence Studies and has been supporting Chief Professional Conduct and Culture initiatives.