

Understanding Anti-Oppression as a Framework for Military Culture Change

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What is oppression?

- Oppression is discrimination operating at a systemic level, backed by historical, ideological, cultural, and institutional power (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).
- Some examples of oppression are sexism & patriarchy, white supremacy & colonialism, homophobia & heteronormativity, ableism, and classism.

Why anti-oppression?

- Anti-oppression acknowledges the social significance of difference as it relates to power and privilege, illuminating a path forward through solidarity across difference.

What is intersectionality?

- Intersectionality is a theory of anti-oppression which illustrates how different forms of oppression operate simultaneously, often in compounded ways.
- Failures to identify those in the intersections of systems of oppression renders them invisible and unaffected by attempts at social transformation.

Why apply an anti-oppression framework to military culture change?

Anti-oppression should be applied to military culture because social structures which exist outside of the institution also affect individuals within it.

Within military organizations, institutional, cultural, historical and ideological power imbalances disadvantage certain groups, while privileging others.

As an institution that emphasizes hierarchy and power, the military must acknowledge and mitigate harm caused by power imbalances.

How does oppression show up in military contexts?

White supremacy & colonialism

- Racialized 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” (George, 2000, p. 126).

Homophobia & heteronormativity

- “Ignoring sexuality or gender or taking a neutral or ‘blind’ approach and focusing solely on performance fails to harness the full potential of diverse perspectives” in military practice (Lopour & Deshpande, 2020, p. 63).
- Members are asked to sacrifice self to service and keep their identity to themselves, without the institution seeing the value of an individual’s unique contribution.

Sexism & patriarchy

- Women in military are often othered, their personal lives assumed to be grounded in traditionally feminine roles and placed at odds with military roles, both through unspoken and spoken cultural norms, i.e., “you better not get pregnant while you’re here” (Taber, 2011, p. 340).
- Military and veteran women face sex- and gender- specific barriers in accessing resources because support systems are based on the male norm and are not tailored to women’s specific needs (Eichler, 2022).

What can you do?

- Reflect on your own worldview in order to disrupt unconscious bias and ideas rooted in systems of oppression (e.g., false narratives of meritocracy or equity by design which don’t account for institutional oppression).
- Address inequities head-on, using positions where you hold privilege as an opportunity to disrupt harmful practices, put pressure on the organization to address root causes.
- Act as an ally to movements aimed at culture change, work to address systems of harm.

References

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