

Diversity and Inclusion within the Canadian Armed Forces: An Intersectional Approach

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Introduction

As the Canadian Armed Forces and Department of National Defence strive to be more inclusive and diverse, they confront perennial challenges. In the Canadian Armed Forces, these include the underrepresentation of Employment Equity Act groups (NDDN, 2019), as well as accusations of systemic racism (DND/CAF Ombudsman, 2019) and a sexualized culture (Deschamps, 2015). In an institution with a clear dominant group, namely heterosexual males of White settler heritage, there is cause to consider the intersectional factors that are privileged within (Crenshaw, 1991). Research to understand the intersectional dimensions of inclusion and belonging will improve the institution's capacity to recognize and address the construction and policing of internal social hierarchies (Brown, 2018). Hierarchies that stand as barriers to the representation and belonging of individuals with diverse qualities and values (Ahmed, 2007). Using an intersectional perspective to understand power and privilege in the institution can reveal why 'add and stir' approaches have failed, and why more transformational understandings of culture change are required (Dharmapuri, 2011).

I in this presentation, I use the findings of my ethnographic sociological PhD research to demonstrate why thinking about inclusion through an intersectional lens and through the prism of military culture can help DND/CAF to better identify and address the lived experiences of inequality. Moreover, this specific research suggests that ongoing gender and intersectional training and education is beneficial as it has provided members of the Defence Team with the knowledge and capacity to achieve transformational culture change through localized practices of inclusion.

Methods

I conducted a series of focus groups and interviews with students, curriculum developers, and deliverers to understand how students of the Joint Command and Staff Programme at Canadian Forces College received and interpreted learning about diverse gender and cultural perspectives as well as feminist theory, critical race theory and analytical tools such as Gender Based Analysis +.

My methodological approach intentionally aimed to advance gender equality and anti-racism in the process of conducting the research. To do this I drew from literatures on intersectionality, militarized gender, and postmodern feminism to inform my research questions, to look for and interpret themes within the data collected, and to make concrete recommendations for continued feminist change. My investigation asked to what extent had gender and cultural perspectives been integrated into Joint Command and Staff Programme curriculum?; if and in what ways had military socialization and culture shaped the learning environment and influenced the reception

of gender and cultural education?; and finally, if and in what ways this learning facilitated feminist transformations and institutional culture change?

I employed multiple methods to conduct this research. The initial stages of research included information collection on policy guiding the integration of gender and cultural perspectives in Professional Military Education and a review of curriculum, learning outcomes, assessment and syllabi to uncover the extent to which gender and cultural perspectives had been formally integrated into the Programme. The following stages of research comprised a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Dijk 1993) of semi-structured interviews in the form of focus groups and individual interviews (Deschaux-Beaume 2012). Ethnographic data was collected in six focus groups with a total of 45 participants and sixteen additional individual in-depth interviews with students and staff. Follow-up interviews were then conducted with eight students of the Programme after they had graduated and been in staff and leadership roles for a minimum of 3 months. These follow-up interviews aimed to validate curriculum to assess if and how graduates applied their learning about gender and cultural perspectives to their daily work, and if this learning facilitated their individual efforts toward the culture change desired by the institution (Chief of Defence Staff, 2016). Focus groups and interviews were conducted across the College's subgroups of support staff, curriculum developers and deliverers both civilian and military, as well as students to gain a fulsome understanding of the entire social setting and culture.

Theoretical Entry Points: Intersectionality and Military Culture

The two theoretical entry points I used in assessments of the data were intersectionality and military culture. I intentionally applied an intersectional approach to interrogate taken for granted power distributions within the larger military and within the military classroom.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a theory originally developed by legal scholar, critical feminist and race theorist Kimberle Crenshaw. In developing the theory Crenshaw sought to explain the discrimination experienced by Black women in America on the basis of two mutually enforcing systems of oppression, namely gender and race. Currently, Crenshaw and scholars who continue to develop and expand on her theory have applied intersectionality prolifically across disciplines and fields of study. Indeed, intersectionality is now used as an analytical tool across the whole of the Canadian government to understand how policies, plans and actions might best serve the needs and expectations of all Canadians. For those of who are part of the public service and for members of the Defence Team, intersectionality constitutes the plus in GBA+.

More broadly, intersectional scholarship seeks to understand the social construction of differently valued categories or 'kinds' of people. It is a theory that enables scholars to trace how valuations of 'difference' emerge across social groups, societies and cultures over time. In other words, intersectionality is used to reveal the ways in which social groups conceive of and organize people into hierarchies of 'kinds' according to relational qualities such as gender, ethnicity, sex, language, education, sexuality, ability and so on.

Within the military context, intersectionality's 'mapping' of people on the 'margins'¹ means actively looking for the structural and socio-cultural ways in which peoples' experiences of exclusion and inclusion are influenced by mutually constitutive ideas of gender, racial, sexual, religious, and linguistic constructions among others.

An important facet of intersectional research is that intersecting factors are also gendered. For example, ability is a gendered construct, sexuality is gendered, age is a gendered concept, ethnicity and constructions of race are gendered, etc. These constructed ideas are mutually constitutive and reinforcing. They are often socially produced in tandem, are relational, and thus the intersections must be considered together, holistically.

Military culture

The second lens through which I viewed the research was the production, negotiation, and maintenance of military culture. Like gender and other systems of social organization, military culture is a social construct that serves to order military personnel in specific ways. Military culture also intersects with institutionally specific 'kinds' such as occupation, rank, and service. Gleaning from the work of anthropologist Anne Irwin, there are culturally specific categories not typically applicable across other cultures, including in the public service, which are important to the development of social hierarchy within cultures and subcultures of the military.² For example, Vince Connelly's paper to be presented later in this conference notes that military culture demands high levels of normative conformity and social stratification by rank, and that conformity and rank can help to explain the high risk of marginalization of the part time Reservist. Normative conformity to particular behaviors, values and world views as well as hierarchies imposed on the basis of rank are specific to military socialization and culture. These manifestations of institutional social order can also help to explain intersecting marginalizations across the institution. They can situate experiences of sticky floors and glass ceilings for particular groups. They are also key pieces of the *context* in which marginalization and exclusion are experienced.

Findings

Now that I've spoken to the methods and theories that guided the research, I'd like to briefly present some key findings. Findings of the research attended to how learning about gender and cultural perspectives in the Joint Command and Staff Programme was experienced in relation to the learning environment.

As such, key themes across respondents' observations included the nature of the learning environment and reflections about the College's dominant culture. A common theme across participant groups was that the learning environment had been defined by social stratification produced in and through cultural idealizations of gender, race, language, sexuality, rank, service, and occupation. In the context of joint learning, cultural idealizations of military masculinity

¹ I borrow the concept of 'mapping people on the margins of society' from Crenshaw, 1991.

² Irwin, A. (2009). Diversity in the Canadian Forces: Lessons from Afghanistan. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 47(4): 494-505, p. 495-496, 498-499.

observed in the learning environment were seen to be closely associated with male bodies, whiteness, Anglo culture, language, and physical fitness, with a clear prioritization of the Army and Operator roles. Interestingly, the idealized masculinity was noted by participants as evident in hierarchies of the Army over the Navy, Air Force and services such as health and dental. This idealized masculine identity was also observed to normalize operational roles as dominant over support roles and tended to associate operational work as ‘hard’ and ‘masculine’ and support functions as ‘soft’ and ‘feminine’.

Of note, fewer women, Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) occupied these socially privileged roles within the College environment. In this joint environment with civil-military personnel collaboration, the cultural production of hierarchies based on gender, racialization, service, rank and occupation was identified as being more pronounced. Many respondents reported an exacerbation of their experiences of inequality based on gender and racial identities, service, rank, and occupation precisely because of the joint culture. As illustration, one student respondent noted:

Quote-“my peers, who seem to think that I am okay, but I am not that good, think that every time I get something, they say it’s because I am a woman. I have never had that rubbed in my face so much than while I have been in the Joint Command and Staff Programme.”-end quote.

A common theme across student participants was the reflection of feeling intense pressure to conform to the College’s idealized norms and cultural identity. Many participants both student and staff noted that peers, educators and leaders actively policed behaviors and attitudes to ensure normative conformity to the constructed but unnamed idealized identity within the learning environment.

Observations from the research suggests that gender, sex, ethnicity, race, occupation, rank and service are also mutually constituted in the culture and crucial to the development of gender hierarchy within the learning environment. Though this hierarchy was reported to be consistently challenged and negotiated by participants themselves, the intersection of gender, service, rank and occupation had deeply influenced the ways in which military students and staff navigated the culture at the College. For example, one student participant explains:

Quote-“ when it comes to leadership, that is when the military side takes over. There is bias that we have for the combat arms or operator. They will be viewed as having more leadership. They are viewed as capable of leading people to war. Whereas supporters are viewed as maybe a bit more, “they are good at their job, they are technicians rather than leaders” in some ways. So, there is a grading within the different trades and I think that came out in some ways at the College. . . Women fall even below this. Women fall in the same category as supporter I think. Because support is considered a ‘soft’ trade.”

Similar observations of the intermingling of military culture and intersectional experiences of cultural marginalization were made by the College staff. As one staff participant explains,

Quote-“There is a noticeable hardening of gender lines, and there is a noticeable hardening of diversity lines. There is a noticeable hiding of how people deal with each other in ways that are not inclusive. I find that it has created within the student body a very toxic environment, and on the staff side I find a very toxic environment. . . I am hopeful that there are ways of shaping that future, but what concerns me is that [there are] two individuals who [] have been directly affected specifically along the ethnic and diversity lines as well as gender. People who have chosen to retreat from the College [] because they didn’t feel that, at the senior leadership level, there was anything more than a “now, now, everything is just fine” approach. The problem is, in a hybrid environment of military and civilians that approach doesn’t work. It reduces the credibility of the institution writ large. So, how do we as an institution deal with that?”-end quote.

As these findings suggest, participants actively identified intersectional exclusions at play within particular constructions of military culture in both the learning and working environment. In this way, while many participants acknowledged and recognized structural forms of inequality, such as inadequate numbers of female and non-binary washrooms, and more readily visible systemic inequality such as the limited representation of employment equity groups at the College, most observations of exclusion and inequality were in relation to socio-cultural practices of marginalization.

Irena Goldenberg’s presentation will detail findings showing that defence personnel who engage in more *positive* military-civilian personnel collaboration in their defence organisations are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs, engaged in their work, and committed to the organisation. My findings show that more *negative* military-civilian personnel relations have the inverse effect. Examples of the hardening of lines across civilian and military sub-cultures, with distinct practices of conformity to narrow militarized gender, ethnic and diversity identities were experienced materially as exclusion by respondents on both sides of the civil-military coin. These experiences were reported to have cost the Defence Team in terms of both credibility as an employer of choice and in terms of larger institutional goals of inclusion and culture change.

However, an additional and important theme expressed specifically across graduate respondents in individual follow-up interviews was that learning about gender and cultural perspectives at the College enabled them to better identify practices of exclusion, and to work to shape their environments, leadership, and practices in inclusive ways.

Some examples include awareness raising, bias interruption, and facilitating shifts in thinking. As an example, one senior officer reflected that learning about gender and cultural perspectives allowed them to guide their team to more inclusive event planning that considered the particular needs and expectations of spouses and families. This officer noted that they would use discussion and real-world examples about gender, sexuality and race in order to overcome observed exclusionary thinking and bias in their team.

Some participants also spoke about their work towards broader organizational shifts by advocating for policy change. The following reflection from a senior officer shows their experience of mainstreaming gender and cultural perspectives in personnel policy. They state:

Quote--I make sure it's included. It would be part of the GBA+ protocol, but nobody was doing it before I got here. I work mostly with the Gender Advisor of the Command. . . A good example, men are able to wear a beard now. So, the minute that conversion came out, I contacted the dress company and I asked "Ok so when are we going to do the full gender, like the GBA+ analysis and consider some changes for women?" And as an example, like the way women have to wear their hair. And they go "We're not ready for that." I'm like "I don't care if you are not ready, we as a society are there, so we need to move on with it—end quote.

In addition to ensuring that gender and intersectional perspectives are included in military policy, some participants also indicated that they used their knowledge to request disaggregated information on sex, gender, and other intersectional identity factors such as ethnicity, age, and biometrics to inform policy, procurement, and operational planning decisions.

Two officers deployed on international missions described using gender and cultural perspectives to tailor their approach and conduct in operations with local communities. Each reflected on how they considered power disparities in gender, sex, and age, as well as competing cultural interests in specific regions. Both indicated the value of applying gender and cultural perspectives to their work, but, each also informed me that gaps in PME about how to conduct gender and intersectional analyses led them to do more independent learning on the fly during missions such as consulting online courses and reaching out to peers that had formal gender education and training (Ibid).

These examples of the application of gender and intersectional perspectives indicate deep consideration of institutional, interpersonal, and personal bias. They demonstrate efforts to uncover and address inequalities. And, they illuminate how gender and cultural learning at Canadian Forces College had contributed to military members' localized efforts towards meaningful social transformation and change.

In Conclusion, as this brief illustration of key themes and findings of the research demonstrate, thinking about inclusion through an intersectional lens and through the prism of military culture can help DND/CAF to better identify and address the lived experiences of inequality. Moreover, this research suggests that ongoing work to expand gender and intersectional training and education has provided some members of the Defence Team with the requisite knowledge and capacity to achieve transformational culture change through localized practices of inclusion.