

Mission Before Self and Unlimited Liability:
How Military Culture Fosters Violence

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I want to share with you my perspective on violence via my experience as a psychotherapist who has worked with the Canadian Armed Forces for the past nine years. Woven into my talk is my own point of view along with published/known research facts. Also, as a visual person I will have visual aids and as a clinician who works predominantly with experiential based therapeutic techniques, I will include everyone in the room to highlight my perspective. The concept of violence, the culture of the military including unit cohesion and the contract of unlimited liability and the interaction between the warrior, suicide thoughts, depression, substance abuse, and intimate partner violence will be outlined.

The Miriam-Webster's dictionary gives us a definition of violence that includes "behaviour involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something" and "the use of physical force so as to injure, abuse, damage, or destroy" (www.merriam-webster.com). The World Health Organization tells us that this word involves "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation" (www.who.int/violenceprevention/). If we view these descriptions through the lens of the military, violence encapsulates the role of the warrior and war training.

Culture is complex and Goldenburg et al. (2015) define it as, "the values, attitudes and beliefs which provide people with a common way of interpreting events" (p.124). The military has its own unique culture and each element within the forces also subscribes to its own distinct ethos. Culture has been described as the "bedrock of military effectiveness", as its ability to perform is linked to the norms and rules of conduct of a military (Ulmer et al., 2000). The

military uses structure and basic training in which new recruits are introduced to new norms, language, codes and identity through forceful training, to unify culture (Redmond et al., 2015). According to Tajfel (1982), military culture relates to the characteristics of the military as an organization with a formal structure, a cultural group governed by norms and as a social group that provides people with identities. The interaction of these three elements define the difference between a civilian and a military culture (Atuel & Castro, 2018).

Differences exists between civilians and military members. The very nature of the military, including the seclusion of military bases, the military culture, the training and their service, creates a distinct separateness from non-military citizens in society. Military unit cohesion, a concept and lifestyle that is instilled and drilled into members from their time in basic training, demands a duty to one's unit, to the unit's mission and to its members (Hall, 2011). This cohesion is one factor that distinguishes military members from civilians. Unit cohesion is paramount for ensuring that the mission is executed, and the cohesion is so tight that under the stress of combat, members are psychologically prepared to die to save another (Hall, 2011). In sessions with members, I hear reference to this cohesion as something that runs deeper than any spouse/couple/family relationship.

Another aspect that separates military members from civilians is the contract of unlimited liability. If you think about daily life, we limit liability in all aspects of life (home insurance, vehicle insurance, health insurance, etc.). Enlisting in military service counters this in that, as soldiers, there is no limit to the sacrifice that troops can be legally ordered to take for the benefit of others (Coleman, 2013). Military members waive certain human rights, specifically the right to life, in exchange for "soldiers' rights" (Coleman, 2013) which render troops immune from prosecution for killing in war. As members of the military, the unlimited liability contract speaks

to the fact that they may be subjected to the risk of their own damage and/or death in war, as well as permitting troops to legally kill others (Coleman, 2013).

According to Sareen et. al. (2016), military members are 32% more likely than civilian Canadians to have suicidal thoughts and 64% more likely to plan their suicide. Due to the nature of my job in mental health, my experience may be skewed in that 90% of those I see in counselling have had/currently have suicide thoughts. Looking at substance use, 1 in 6 regular force military members report symptoms of alcohol use disorder (Statistics Canada, 2015) which speaks to the culture of mess dinners, glass turkey draws and the subtle undercurrent of pervasive substance use in most facets of military culture. Considering the previously stated definition of violence, these statistics highlight the violence that military members direct towards themselves.

The impact of military culture can also be seen in intimate partner relationships. According to Sparrow et al., (2017), psychological intimate partner violence is associated with depression and alcohol dependence in active duty soldiers. Referenced earlier, depression is the most common mental health diagnosis in Canadian Armed Forces members (Pearson, Zamorski, & Janz, 2015) and 17% of members suffer with substance use disorders (Statistics Canada, 2015). The nature of the military lifestyle, including frequent relocations, can create economic dependency, unfamiliar environments for partners and potential language barriers, not to mention being an “outsider” if spouses are not military members (Sparrow et al., 2017). Intimate partner relationships are a site where violence towards others seems to be nurtured by the military environment that separates civilians from troops, that fosters unit cohesion to the degree that unit members are closer than spouses, that sanctions mission before self, that endorses substance use and where members can be ordered to kill or be killed at any time. I am not saying that all military members struggle with depression, substance use issues and engage in intimate partner

violence. What I am highlighting are the parts of military culture that I see can potentially contribute to violence towards oneself and others and that normalizes violence in order to fulfill duty in war.

The culture of the military is unique from civilian culture and the military ethos is fostered through the pervasive and needed emphasis on unit cohesion while subscribing to the contract of unlimited liability. The interaction between the warrior and unit cohesion, unlimited liability, suicide thoughts, depression, substance abuse, and intimate partner violence can be a mix that endorses “violence”. In my estimation, the very nature of the military culture creates an environment in which “violence”, in the civilian definitional sense, is inherent in the soldiering trade and war training.

My thoughts on the interaction of factors that foster “violence” in the military



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