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PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL: AN OBSTACLE TO FORCE GENERATING DIVERSITY IN THE CANADIAN ARMY

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JCSP 47

Service Paper

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CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE - COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES

JCSP 47 - PCEMI 47
2020 - 2021

SERVICE PAPER – ÉTUDE MILITAIRE

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Word Count : 2,260

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Nombre de mots : 2.260

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AIM

1. The aim of this service paper is to advise the Commander of the Canadian Army (CCA) on how performance appraisal and implicit bias challenge the success of Line of Effort 2.3 within the Canadian Army Modernization Strategy, diversity and inclusion. Recommendations for training and education aimed at neutralizing the challenge of generating a more diverse force are provided. The paper contributes to the goal of eliminating deeply rooted cultural barriers to a diverse force— a key to attaining an “agile” and “innovative” Canadian Army (CA).¹

INTRODUCTION

2. Diversity in the CA is not only a Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) ordered requirement, but a desired objective.² CA doctrine seeks to conduct operations and modernize its force in a manner that reflects Canadian people and their values.³ Cultural background, gender, race and sexual orientation are the traditional identifiers of diversity, but diversity also extends in the CA to the unique mentalities and experiences of supporter, enabler and operator trades. A diverse workforce increases the “innovative ability” of an organization through the combination of varying distinct experiences and perspectives during planning and problem solving.⁴ Despite the benefits to the human

¹ Department of National Defence, A-PP-106-000/AF-001, *Advancing with Purpose: The Canadian Army Modernization Strategy* (Ottawa: Canadian Army HQ, 2020), 15.

² *Ibid.*, 39.

³ *Ibid.*, 37; Alan Okros, “Introspection on Diversity in the Canadian Armed Forces,” in *Strengthening the Canadian Armed Forces through diversity and inclusion* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 212-231.

⁴ Radoslaw Nowak, “Process of Strategic Planning and Cognitive Diversity as Determinants of Cohesiveness and Performance,” *Business Process Management Journal* 27, no. 1 (2020), 68.

dimension of CA doctrine, diversifying the ranks continues to be a considerable challenge with minimal progress.

3. One of the lesser studied barriers to achieving diversity is performance appraisal. In 2017, the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) noted within the *Canadian Armed Forces Diversity Strategy* the importance of meriting being grounded in the “ability and achievement” of individuals regardless of their background or differences.⁵ Fairly rating performance however, is much more complex in practice than in written policy.⁶ Within the rating system of the CAF, systemic human errors occur, often unconscious and contrary to published policies. Performance appraisal research has highlighted that managers inaccurately rate the performance of subordinates by unknowingly considering irrelevant factors.⁷ These inaccuracies cause discrimination and subtly promote a monocultural CA.

4. There are two obstacles the performance appraisal system presents to the CA’s goal of increasing diversity and inclusion. First, a superior’s performance rating of a subordinate is often affected by implicit biases and suppresses the promotion of diversity. Second, the narrow and over-standardized nature of the meriting system maintains an institutional bias towards a single soldier “type.” Analysis of these obstacles to diversity exposes a gap that has been left unaddressed by the CA in its strategy to become more

⁵ Department of National Defence, *Canadian Armed Forces Diversity Strategy* (Ottawa: Office of the Chief of Defence Staff, 2017), 4.

⁶ Tanya Du Plessis and Annelize Van Niekerk, "Factors Influencing Managers' Attitudes Towards Performance Appraisal," *SA Journal of Human Resource Management* 15 (2017), 1.

⁷ Simon Calmar Andersen and Morten Hjortskov, "Cognitive Biases in Performance Evaluations," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 26, no. 4 (2016), 647-662.

inclusive. Recommendations are made to fill this gap. These findings are applicable to the Royal Canadian Air force, Royal Canadian Navy, and CAF as a whole.

DISCUSSION

5. In 2016, target goals for diversity were set by the CAF. By 2026, the percentage of women would grow from 14.9% to 25%, indigenous people from 2.6% to 3.5% and visible minorities from 6.7% to 11.8%.⁸ In 2019, these percentages have seen little growth. Women are represented at 15.7%, indigenous people at 2.8%, and visible minorities at 8.7%.⁹ Further, in the combat arms, only 2.9% Regular Force soldiers are female.¹⁰ With a focus in CA doctrine on the human dimension and diversity as a force multiplier, how are these changes so slow to progress and doomed to fall short of institutional targets?¹¹ A large solution space lies within implicit and institutional biases in the performance appraisal system.

6. Performance appraisal is represented in the CA by annual Performance Evaluation Reports (PER), merit boards, and succession planning. This system aims to fairly evaluate members of the CA in order to select those that will be promoted and fill key positions within the organization. The literature on performance appraisal notes that these

⁸ Stephen Fuhr, *Improving Diversity and Inclusion in the Canadian Armed Forces* (Ottawa: House of Commons, 2019), 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹¹ Department of National Defence, B-GL-310-001/AG-003 *Close Engagement – Land Power in an Age of Uncertainty – Evolving Adaptive Dispersed Operations* (Kingston: Canadian Army Land Warfare Centre, 2019), 26. Emphasis made on the balance of human capacity to counter a complex and dynamic operating environment; Department of National Defence *Advancing with Purpose...*, 39-40. Line of Effort 2 is dedicated to increasing operational readiness through the human dimension, and specifically diversity and inclusion.

meriting systems are highly dependent on the individual conducting the rating.¹² Rating accuracy is affected by the rater's attitude towards the organization, their level of motivation, and personality preferences.¹³ When rating soldiers, the leader is required to make observations of behaviour and then infer the potential of that soldier. Within this inference, "leaps of abstraction" can occur, where the leader bases ratings with little evidential support against imperfect standards.¹⁴ Rating systems also disproportionately affect the soldiers' motivation and attitude towards the organization.¹⁵ A process that occurs only once a year has a significant daily strategic effect, linked to how well soldiers respond to institutional objectives.¹⁶ Although the CA boasts fairness in performance appraisal policy, the system is complex in practice and inevitably falls prey to human error and subjectivity.

7. The error space in meriting proposes a significant challenge for diversity because minority groups are put at a disadvantage when preferential treatment occurs. By extension, the CA does not benefit from the strength in diversity that it desires. The problem in meriting inaccuracies goes beyond leaders knowing that the right thing to do is treat everyone impartially. Ethical leaders are still at risk of *unconsciously* favouring their preferred standard of a soldier. An officer with an operational background who

¹² Yu-Chun Lin and J. Edward Kellough, "Performance Appraisal Problems in the Public Sector: Examining Supervisors' Perceptions," *Public Personnel Management* 48, no. 2 (2019), 179-202.; Tanya Du Plessis and Annelize Van Niekerk, "Factors Influencing Managers...

¹³ Tanya Du Plessis and Annelize Van Niekerk, "Factors Influencing Managers..."

¹⁴ Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, Rev. and updat ed. (New York: Doubleday/Currency, 2006), 26.

¹⁵ Gabriele Jacobs, Frank D. Belschak and Deanne N. Den Hartog, "(Un)Ethical Behavior and Performance Appraisal: The Role of Affect, Support, and Organizational Justice," *Journal of Business Ethics* 121, no. 1 (2014), 63-76.

¹⁶ Carrie Dusterhoff, J. Barton Cunningham and James N. MacGregor, "The Effects of Performance Rating, Leader-Member Exchange, Perceived Utility, and Organizational Justice on Performance Appraisal Satisfaction: Applying a Moral Judgment Perspective," *Journal of Business Ethics* 119, no. 2 (2014), 265-273.

understands well the necessity of supporters and enablers is still at risk of meriting soldiers with those backgrounds lower and with no substantial reasoning.

8. The reason these partialities of meriting occur is because of implicit biases. These types of biases are left hidden and unreported by an individual. They are usually formed over time through social cues and stereotypes.¹⁷ Individuals develop an implicit view of their environment and act in accordance with these views, without noticing it themselves. In these instances of thought, diversity is unconsciously suppressed. For example, an operator is reflecting on how to rate a supporter's leadership potential. Even though the operator knows they should objectively assess the supporter's abilities they implicitly (almost automatically) assess the leadership potential at a lower level than other operators. This occurs almost completely due to an implicit understanding of what leadership is to the operator. This implicit bias will even cause contributing evidence to why the supporter should be rated higher to be seen as less important. Examples like this threaten the CA's ability to harness more enabling elements within the force. Even though new CA strategies recognize the increased role of combat support and enabler trades to optimize force structure for future threats, implicit bias in meriting undermines the force generation of such capabilities.

9. The understanding of implicit biases and acknowledgement of their existence is essential to reversing their effects. Psychologists Anthony Greenwald and Mahzarin Banaji created the Implicit Associations Test (IAT) to prove that individuals could not

¹⁷ Adam Hahn and Bertram Gawronski, "Facing One's Implicit Biases: From Awareness to Acknowledgment," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 116, no. 5 (2019), 769-794.

honestly report their biases of different social groups.¹⁸ The popularization of the IAT through Harvard University's Project Implicit has led to several studies on why people are unable to acknowledge and take responsibility for having implicit biases.¹⁹ Research has shown that implicit biases are left unacknowledged because an individual overlooks them during self reflection, or lacks the introspective ability to access the biases on their own.²⁰ To provoke acknowledgment of one's own biases, research suggests that predicting individual IAT scores and then comparing actual results will spark reflection on existing biases.²¹ This type of approach could be implemented in the CA as a tool to counter the effects of implicit biases in meriting.

10. In an addition to implicit biases creating obstacles to growing diversity in the CA, institutional or systemic biases are also at play in the performance appraisal system. A systemic bias can be described as "embedded interpersonal biases" that permit a social group to steadily "maintain an advantage" over another.²² The CA is predominantly a white male dominated institution, and those in command of the CA have been combat arms officers for the last twenty years.²³ This demographic therefore dominates the thought behind policy design for the CA. Further, because the training of soldiers involves building cohesion to achieve operational effectiveness, the CA is efficient at

¹⁸ Anthony G. Greenwald and Mahzarin R. Banaji, "Implicit Social Cognition: Attitudes, Self-Esteem, and Stereotypes," *Psychological Review* 102, no. 1 (1995), 4-27.

¹⁹ Project Implicit, "About Us," last accessed 1 Feb 2021, <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>

²⁰ Anthony G. Greenwald and Mahzarin R. Banaji, "Implicit Social Cognition...", 8; Adam Hahn and Bertram Gawronski, "Facing One's Implicit Biases...", 790.

²¹ Adam Hahn and Bertram Gawronski, "Facing One's Implicit Biases...", 791.

²² Tiffany Jana and Ashley Diaz Mejias, *Erasing Institutional Bias: How to Create Systemic Change for Organizational Inclusion*, 1st ed. (Oakland, Calif: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2018), 34.

²³ Vanessa Brown and Alan Okros, "New Leaders, 'New Wars': A Reflective Approach to Applying Gender and Cultural Perspectives," in *From Knowing to Doing* (Kingston: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2018), 235-290; Government of Canada, "List of commanders of the Army," last accessed 2 Feb 2021, <https://www.canada.ca/en/army/services/history/commanders-army.html>

assimilating various social groups into *one* standard. Often this single and effective standard is used as an argument to why a military force shouldn't diversify.

Diversification can be seen as a "social experiment" in which militaries should not risk degradation of operational effectiveness.²⁴

11. Of course, diversity has been acknowledged by the CA as a force multiplier to achieve operational effectiveness. Yet, the narrow and systemically accepted view of what encompasses a good soldier or officer endures, and is reinforced by the meriting system. In a review of the meriting of black and white officers in the U.S. military, researchers found that the wording of promotion recommendations in physical fitness reports were skewed in favour of white officers even when scores were the same.²⁵ White officers received recommendations of "promote early" and black officers received "promote on time." As long as these types of systemic biases are allowed to occur in meriting, minority social groups will not rise to higher ranks, and therefore won't ever be in a position to influence change. The underrepresentation of minority groups in higher ranks discourages lower ranked minorities from seeing a future in the forces. Research notes that the lack of more senior minorities to act as idols for others has demotivated minorities to continue a career in the military.²⁶ Systemically disadvantaged minorities do not rise in rank, and therefore minorities do not wish to remain in the CA. This cycle stalls the growth of diversity.

²⁴ Rand Rodriguez, "Bias: The Hidden Figure in Diversity," *War Room* (United States Army War College, 2018), <https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/articles/bias-hidden-figure/>.

²⁵ Burk, Espinoza. "Race Relations Within the US Military," *Annual review of sociology* 38, no. 1 (January 1, 2012), 408.

²⁶ Tammy George, "Race and Belonging," in *Strengthening the Canadian Armed Forces through Diversity and Inclusion* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 127.

12. The short term solution to the systemic bias is often to mandate certain positions that will be filled by a minority group, but this should be avoided and contributes to the problem. Earmarking positions for minority groups is a form of benevolence bias, and ends up undercutting the abilities of the minority group even if the intention is positive.²⁷ This type of treatment in the meriting system is at risk of criticism for unfairly rating individual performance in general. The enduring changes to reducing implicit and institutional bias lie with training and education, as well as larger system changes.

13. Performance rating training is an evidence based strategy to improving the accuracy of meriting systems.²⁸ Approaches such as rater error training, behavioural observation training, and frame-of-reference training can help reduce the impact of implicit and institutional biases.²⁹ All of these approaches focus on educating leaders about “cognitive processing” and how errors can occur during inferences of subordinate behaviours and actions over the course of an appraisal period.³⁰ Currently no formal training on this subject occurs for leaders within the CA. Instead, a reliance is placed on institutional leadership training to build the necessary skills for conducting performance review. Unfortunately, the institutional training has embedded biases itself and is not focused on appraisal systems. Unit and formation PER instructions are focused on ensuring procedural standards and efficient processing rather than ensuring leaders understand the cognitive processes behind rating performance. The CA can stand to

²⁷ Elizabeth M. Trobaugh, "Women, Regardless: Understanding Gender Bias in U.S. Military Integration," *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 88 (2018), 47.

²⁸ Theresa J. B. Kline and Lorne M. Sulsky, "Measurement and Assessment Issues in Performance Appraisal," *Canadian Psychology = Psychologie Canadienne* 50, no. 3 (2009), 162.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

improve in this domain of training, taking a bound forward on improving a process that impedes the growth of diversity.

14. There are alternatives to the traditional top-down merit based approach the CA employs, but caution must be taken in examining implementation of new approaches. The traditional approach is still widely used in hierarchal organizations even with its limitations. In terms of changes to the performance appraisal system to allow for a more diverse force, research points to a more open appraisal system.³¹ Organizations that generalize performance criteria have more room to accommodate diversity. A more open assessment may seem counterintuitive and permissive to rating biases, but it is really the manipulation of restrictive rating scales that allows a dominant social group to take advantage of the rating system.³² It is possible that very structured criteria have been favoured to ensure the efficiency of promoting talented performance, but have simultaneously halted the promotion of more diverse talents. Additional research suggests that digitalizing performance appraisal systems can create more “fairness” through the removal of human errors in rating.³³ These emerging approaches to performance appraisal warrant further research and exploration by the CA.

³¹ Armin Trost, *The End of Performance Appraisal: A Practitioners' Guide to Alternatives in Agile Organisations* (Cham: Springer International, 2017).

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Bryan Hancock, Elizabeth Hioe, and Bill Schaninger, “The fairness factor in performance management,” *McKinsey Quarterly* (5 April, 2015), last accessed 3 Feb 2021, <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/the-fairness-factor-in-performance-management>

CONCLUSION

15. Significant research and resources have been applied by the CA towards defining the future of the organization and what operational effectiveness looks like. These efforts have noted the importance of the human dimension and the strength in diversity of personnel towards developing a force that is innovative and agile enough to meet the challenges of the future complex operating environment. Historically, the CA and militaries in general have struggled to credibly improve diversity due to their unique need to generate a standardized and disciplined workforce. Implicit and institutional biases threaten the success of a more diverse force, specifically in the manipulation of performance appraisal systems and the meriting process. Further training and education, as well as exploration of modern diversity friendly systems needs to be a priority for the CA if the organization wishes to see successful change to its newer force generation requirements.

RECOMMENDATION

16. In order to reverse the effects of implicit biases in performance appraisal it is recommended that:

- a. the CA investigate the development of an Implicit Association Test that not only improves acknowledgment of traditional stereotypes, but also Army-internal stereotypes between trades;
- b. the CA order the Canadian Army Doctrine and Training Center (CADTC) to review leadership courses for the inclusion of self-reflection techniques and

assess where improvement is required in teaching introspective skills to Army leaders; and

c. the CA implement performance appraisal training as part of the annual PER process targeted at the cognitive pitfalls that can occur in the meriting process.

17. In order to modernize the performance appraisal system and remove it as an obstacle to diversity, it is recommended that:

a. the CA, in consultation with Military Personnel Command (MILPERSOM), conduct further research into performance appraisal systems that promote workforce diversity; and

b. the CA, in consultation with MILPERSOM, investigate the use of technology as a solution to reducing human error within the performance appraisal system.

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