



**Merit-Based Promotion:
Does It Help or Hinder the Promotion of Diversity Within Armed Forces Hierarchy?**

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JCSP 50

Exercise Solo Flight

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MERIT-BASED PROMOTION: DOES IT HELP OR HINDER THE PROMOTION OF DIVERSITY WITHIN ARMED FORCES HIERARCHY?

‘Merit’ is defined as ‘suitability, capacity and having sufficient experience to be employed in at least the next higher rank alongside a proven track record of caring for and developing subordinates. Factors such as consistency of success, especially in the face of particular challenge; leadership and management acumen; judgement and the ability to make things happen, especially through innovation, effective management of risk and exploitation of opportunity; ability to think on a level above peer group; potential flair for command, future employability, in specialist and/or broader appointments, all constitute merit.’¹

AIM

Merit, as defined above, is fundamental to the United Kingdom (UK) Armed Forces in how they promote their personnel. This paper aims to consider whether this system of merit-based promotion, as utilised by the Royal Navy (RN), is the most appropriate given the need to recruit, retain and promote diverse individuals reflective of today’s society. It will be argued that use of a merit-based promotion system is perceived as the fairest to ensure timely progression of talented individuals. It is essential to recognise that honest, unbiased appraisal of individuals is absolutely key to the merit-based process and therefore vital in ensuring diversity within the hierarchy of the armed forces.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of a promotion system is to provide the right people, in the right positions, at the right time. Fundamentally, the promotion system must be a transparent process which engenders not only a diverse workforce but an inclusive forward-looking organisation. The UK Armed Forces will be the primary organisation considered in this paper and more specifically the RN as this is where the author, as a Naval Officer, can add personal experience to the discussion. As such, a number of anecdotes are added which have been accumulated over a 23-year military career.

This paper will consider several issues concerning the idea of promotion and diversity in a hierarchical organisation such as the military. It will start by examining the annual appraisal review which is fundamental to understanding the UK military promotion system. Types of promotion including merit-based, seniority-based, as well as several other systems including the ‘up or out’² policy such as that seen in the United

¹ Royal Navy, *Navy Personnel Management*, BRd 3(1), (April 2023): 6508.

² ‘Up or out’ – where those who are not promoted to the next rank within a specified period of time are released from the military.

States Army,³ will be discussed. The paper will then look at discrimination and unconscious bias and introduce how they may influence promotion boards. The RN and the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) promotion board systems are next discussed, particularly with reference to the recent changes in both processes which aim to help promote diversity such as psychometric testing and the 360-degree feedback process. Promotion in two non-military organisations will be examined utilising the police as another hierarchy and the private sector as a non-hierarchical institution. The perception of ‘fairness’ in these two organisations will be considered using academic research. Finally, this paper will look specifically at diversity and inclusion in the promotion system, focusing on the hierarchy and consider the advantages and disadvantages of merit-based systems in engendering diversity.

The paper will conclude that merit-based promotion will ensure that talented individuals progress, but key to this process is honest and accurate reporting written without bias or prejudice. Understanding biases, including unconscious bias is essential for anyone involved in the promotion process. The 360-degree feedback process can also assist to provide a broader picture of an individual and highlight their merit for promotion. Only when measures such as bias training, 360-degree feedback and representative promotion board members are implemented as part of policy, will merit-based promotion help to achieve diversity in the armed forces hierarchy.

THE ANNUAL APPRAISAL REVIEW

The RN, Royal Air Force and Army all use the annual appraisal review as the principal mechanism for performance reporting. Tri-service appraisal guidance is provided in *Joint Service Publication* (JSP) 757. Within this document, dedicated chapters provide guidance to each individual service on conducting annual reviews on each service member utilising the Officers’ Joint Appraisal Review (OJAR) or Servicepersons’ Joint Appraisal Review (SJAR). These reviews are conducted on an annual cycle and record both performance and potential of the subject. The appraisal review is utilised as a tool to support selection processes including promotion, command selection and commission transfers.

Performance is assessed against defined objectives, which must be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound (SMART). These SMART objectives are agreed between subject and first reporting officer (1RO) at the start of the reporting period. Performance is also assessed against ten prescribed attributes including: adaptability and initiative, awareness and understanding, breadth of perspective, communication and influence, delivering results, leadership, physical and mental resilience, problem-solving and decision making, teamwork and collaboration and values

³ Allan English, “Corruption in the Canadian Military? Destroying Trust in the Chain of Command,” *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 23, no. 1 (2017): 37.

and standards. Each attribute is graded using the grading scale in JSP 757⁴ where a ‘B’ grade (performing to the standard expected in all respects) would be expected for most individuals and therefore is the default grade awarded. The narrative section provides evidence to support the awarded grades for each attribute and separately an overall holistic assessment of the performance is given in the overall performance grade (OPG). The potential of the subject will also be evaluated by the second reporting officer (2RO) and is often regarded as the most important information in the appraisal. The grade awarded will consider potential for not only one rank up but also two ranks up, aiming to identify longer term reach. Grades awarded range from ‘exceptional’ (outstandingly suitable for promotion) to ‘no’ (not suitable for promotion).⁵

The promotion process, discussed below, is fundamentally based on the annual appraisal review. The system places much emphasis on the reporting officers to ensure an honest appraisal is submitted, one that accurately reflects an individual. In June 2023, Royal Navy Director Personnel and Training (Dir P&T) issued a letter to all reporting officers of RN people, which offered revised direction and guidance for the completion of annual appraisals.⁶ The letter, entitled “Integrity of reporting officers”, focused on the assessment of performance and indeed potential in the annual appraisal review. It suggested a tendency of reporting officers to overmark, this causing concern; “making everyone an A- negates the impact.”⁷ Overmarking has long been a common issue; as Deputy Assistant Chief of Staff (DACOS) Promotion⁸ stated in 2019: “it is dishonest to persevere with A-/high or exceptional grades if a candidate is not up with the frontrunners. It does nothing for expectation management and essentially, discredits the reporting system.”⁹ Whilst this inflated reporting may not intentionally be dishonest, one can reasonably consider that this lack of moral courage in honestly reporting is prevalent throughout the military. The Dir P&T guidance also commented that selection board chairs and members routinely saw appraisals which had been poorly written, with the reporting officers being “unclear or opaque in their comments”¹⁰ and the subject not fully engaged in the process.

TYPES OF PROMOTION

In a hierarchical organisation, such as the military, promotion is key to allow for the progression of individuals to more senior ranks. Increase in rank is often linked with an increase of pay, recognition and responsibility. The fundamental idea of a promotion system is to provide the right people, in the right positions, at the right time. There are

⁴ Ministry of Defence. *Joint Services Publication 757 - Tri-Service Appraisal Reporting Instructions*. (Pt 1, V3.5, November 2023): 5-1.

⁵ Ministry of Defence. *Joint Services Publication 757 - Tri-Service Appraisal Reporting Instructions*. (Pt 1, V3.5, November 2023): 6-3

⁶ Director Personnel & Training. “Integrity of reporting officers.” (28 June 2023).

⁷ Director Personnel & Training. “Integrity of reporting officers.” (28 June 2023): 1.

⁸ DACOS Promotion was rebranded to Head of Naval Service Promotions in 2020.

⁹ Capt R. A. M. Brown RN, “Royal Navy promotions feedback letter,” (31 July 2019): 5.

¹⁰ Director Personnel & Training. “Integrity of reporting officers.” (28 June 2023): 1.

two common systems of promotion in hierarchal organisations: merit-based and seniority-based. These form the core types of substantive promotion in the RN and UK Armed Forces more generally.

Merit-Based Promotion

Merit-based promotion is not solely performance-based promotion. Merit-based promotions are founded on a range of factors often based on a superior's assessment awarded during the annual appraisal review which has been written in accordance with merit as defined at the start of this paper. Appraisals are considered as subjective, although guidance on how they should be constructed is given and an attempt to standardise across tri-service reporting is evident.¹¹ In theory, merit-based promotion will allow those showing superior skills, performance or significant potential to progress quickly; there is no waiting in line for one's turn to come. Extra constraints may be imposed: consideration only after a certain time in rank, only after a certain course is completed or by a specific specialisation requirement. "Promotion Boards are required to select suitable candidates for promotion primarily on the basis of merit to meet the numerical requirements of the next rank and, if appropriate, specialist requirements."¹² Selective promotion in the RN can be considered merit-based and is competitive within each branch and at each rank.

As Lawson Savery, a professor of human resource management in Australia discusses, one of the issues with merit-based promotions can be the potential sabotage to trainees as more experienced personnel are conflicted by the prospect of having junior colleagues in competition for promotion.¹³ Whilst the Savery article refers to the police as an example, a similar problem could certainly be encountered in the military, where personnel may be appraised by a superior of equal rank. Whilst there is always more than one person in the reporting chain, and rank equality does not occur with great frequency, it must still be recognised that both the subject and reporting officer could be in competition at the same promotion board. This can raise many questions from candidates regarding the fairness of merit-based selection, this providing an argument against this type of promotion system.

A further argument against merit-based promotion systems would be in the interpretation of the definition of merit and which factors take primacy. One could assume proof of caring for and developing subordinates is more important than displaying leadership acumen but this is not weighted and therefore is open to interpretation by the reporting officer and subsequently at the promotion board.

¹¹ Ministry of Defence. *Joint Services Publication 757 - Tri-Service Appraisal Reporting Instructions*. (Pt 1, V3.5, November 2023): 5-1

¹² Ministry of Defence. *Joint Services Publication 757 - Tri-Service Appraisal Reporting Instructions*. (Pt 2, V2.5, October 2022).

¹³ Lawson K. Savery, "Merit-Based Promotion System: Police Officers' Views," *Police Journal* 67, no. 4 (October 1994): 309-322.

Seniority-Based promotion

Seniority-based promotions are objective and depend on length of service or indeed time in rank. Whilst not considering performance or potential in primacy, there will be a performance-based assessment to confirm at least a satisfactory performance has been witnessed.¹⁴ Non-selective promotions, in the RN, are automatic based on time in rank or time in service or sometimes on completion of training and therefore can be considered seniority-based. Non-selective promotion is often applicable to non-commissioned personnel, ‘ratings’, and is known as ‘advancement.’¹⁵ Non-selective promotion is complicated by different rules for branches of service and age on entry. In many cases, the concept of ‘select-train-promote’ is used to ensure professional qualifications are gained prior to assuming the next higher rank or rate.

In the 2020 Defence Inclusivity report, entitled “The lived experience”, it was found that participants, irrespective of gender and ethnicity, were frustrated that service promotions were seemingly linked to ‘time-served’ compared to ability.¹⁶ The report provides evidence that whether these frustrations were justified or a false perception, service personnel, conditioned to expect a merit-based promotion system, did not agree with the principle of seniority-based promotions based on ‘time-served’.

Other Promotion Systems

Promotion systems can influence culture adversely. An example of this negative influence is the ‘up or out’ selection system introduced by the UK Armed Forces and long-used by the US Army. At Captain RN/Colonel (OF5) and above, those not promoted within a given time frame are released from the military; it is colloquially known by the RN as ‘the blood chit’. It appears this selection system can lead to fear of failure by members, a so called ‘zero defect’ culture, filled with deception and mistrust.¹⁷ Allan English, a CAF veteran and professor from Queen’s University, describes: “While the Canadian military does not have an official ‘up or out’ personnel policy, its promotion policies might be characterized as ‘up or sidelined’.”¹⁸ He also describes ‘Careerism’, which sees leaders pursue their desire for advancement trying to impress those evaluating them rather than exhibiting effective leadership; it becomes a “catalyst for dishonesty.”¹⁹ Anecdotally, CAF members believe the ‘up or out’ system does exist in the CAF at OF5

¹⁴ Royal Navy, *Navy Personnel Management*, BRd 3(1), (April 2023): 6632.

¹⁵ Royal Navy, *Navy Personnel Management*, BRd 3(1), (April 2023): 6801.

¹⁶ Defence Human Capability Science & Technology Centre “Defence Inclusivity Phase 2: The lived experience,” (30 November 2020): 12.

¹⁷ Allan, English, *Understanding Military Culture : A Canadian Perspective* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004) accessed 22 March, 2024: 81.

¹⁸ Allan D English, “Corruption in the Canadian military? Destroying trust in the chain of command,” *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 23, no. 1 (2017): 37

¹⁹ Douglas C. Lovelace, et al., *Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession-Compelling War College Study Looking at the Deluge of Requirements, Honestly Confronting Dishonesty, Making Excuses, Confronting the Truth,* (Pacific Grove, California: Smashwords Edition, 2015): 26.

and above although written proof of this cannot be evidenced. Whether ‘up or out’ or ‘up or sidelined’ systems exist, both fail to address this negative influence witnessed at more senior ranks. A promotion system of this type can be seen to encourage the rise of the toxic leader as the focus becomes on the accomplishment of a mission, the ‘what’ rather than the ‘how’ and allows micromanagement to succeed above mission command.²⁰

If the various types of promotion systems currently employed in the military are compared, it appears that selective promotion based on merit is preferred. Promoting on only current performance considers the individual at the exact time of reporting, reflecting their ability to do the job being asked of them at that specific time. Seniority-based promotion does not consider how an individual might perform in another post at another rank and the range of their skills and future employability. An individual with no subordinates must still be assessed on their leadership qualities. Performance only promotion would ensure the most productive, highest performing individual was allowed to progress but would take no further evidence into account. Merit-based promotion accounts for such a performance but also adds other qualities into consideration prior to selection; however, the promotion systems are further complicated by consideration of bias.

BIAS

It is important to examine what biases can be present within the promotion process. The next section will do this by considering discrimination and unconscious bias and later in the paper will look at how these relate to diversity and inclusion in the context of promotion.

Discrimination

Discrimination can be a factor in the promotion system. Under the *Equality Act 2010*²¹ everyone in Britain is protected from unlawful behaviour such as discrimination, harassment or victimisation against nine ‘protected characteristics:’ sex, gender reassignment, sexual orientation, religion and belief, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, disability and age. Any sort of discrimination is not only illegal but undemocratic. It is illegal to disadvantage a person on the basis of any one of these characteristics; however, the UK Armed Forces do have an exemption from complying with this employment legislation in respect to disability or age.²²

²⁰ Allan D English, “Corruption in the Canadian military? Destroying trust in the chain of command,” *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 23, no. 1 (2017): 37.

²¹ Equality and Human Rights Commission. *Equality Act 2010*.
www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/ea_legal_definitions_0.pdf.

²² Royal Navy, *Navy Personnel Management*, BRd 3(1), (April 2023): 3302.

Unconscious Bias

Unconscious bias may be favourable or unfavourable, where a person's understanding, actions or decisions are activated involuntarily.²³ This unconscious predisposition, also known as implicit bias, may be built into societal structures. According to the principle of social similarity, and evidenced by social science research, the majority of people have a natural tendency to favour people like themselves above others.²⁴ Without careful consideration of biases, appraisals and indeed promotion boards may be unduly influenced by at worst a form of discrimination and at best an unconscious favour towards those personnel with similar characteristics as the reporting officer or promotion board member. This could be a reason why many western militaries have historically been dominated by caucasian, heterosexual males at the top of the organisation.

RN PROMOTION BOARDS

UK Armed Forces promotions boards are conducted separately by individual services to ensure that the right numbers of people progress to meet requirements of each service. Each service has a publication to detail the procedure to be followed by the promotion board and each service has nuance. Due to this lack of coherence across the services, this paper will focus on the policy laid down in *Navy Personnel Management, Book of Reference 3 (BR3)* for RN promotions.

BR3 chapter 66 lays down the promotion requirement for RN officers stating: "Promotion boards are required to select suitable officers for promotion primarily on the basis of merit."²⁵ For a promotion board which is convened to select officers for promotion to Lt Cdr (OF3)/ Cdr (OF4) and OF5, three members will be present; the board chair will be two ranks above that being considered and the other members one rank above. One is an independent member, from outside of profession and discipline, and one must be female.²⁶

The numerical requirements for promotion are known as promotion targets and are derived from the planning figures produced annually by the workforce planners. These figures give a Maximum Authorised Number (MAuN) which informs board members by profession and discipline of the maximum promotions they can make each year.²⁷ For each candidate within the promotion zone, the promotion board members are provided with an official record, containing all annual appraisals, and a profile sheet providing a historical record on the officer of their assessments and recommendations for

²³ Defence Human Capability Science & Technology Centre, "Defence Inclusivity Phase 2: The lived experience," (30 November 2020): ix.

²⁴ Deborah May, "Cultural Audit as a Means of Uncovering Unconscious Biases and Other Barriers to Diversity within Organisations," *Governance Directions* 66, no. 2 (2014): 90.

²⁵ Royal Navy, *Navy Personnel Management*, BRd 3(1), (April 2023): 6608a.

²⁶ Royal Navy, *Navy Personnel Management*, BRd 3(1), (April 2023): 6617.

²⁷ Royal Navy, *Navy Personnel Management*, BRd 3(1), (April 2023): 0304.

promotion.²⁸ This almost absolute focus on the appraisal review means that the subjective opinion of the candidate's chain of command is seen in primacy by the promotion board and thus the integrity of these reporting officers is key to ensure the 'right' people are promoted at the 'right' time.

When reading the annual appraisal review, board members must consider that there is evidence in the narrative to support scores. If promotion boards have been presented with inflated or poorly written appraisals, their selection of individuals will be impacted. For example, if a candidate has a mediocre appraisal, which provides little evidence of their achievements during the reporting period, the promotion board will find selection of the candidate difficult. Should the same candidate have an evidence filled appraisal highlighting clearly the subject's performance and potential, the promotion board is more likely to select the candidate. Indeed, the actual merit of this individual for promotion may be lost in a poorly constructed appraisal.

Since April 2021, psychometric tests, which assess personality, motivation and cognitive abilities, have been used as a decision support tool for all promotions at OF5 and above.²⁹ These personality tests were introduced in an attempt to add more to performance documentation than just the annual appraisal and thus provide greater evidence to a promotion board on natural aptitude, or inaptitude, for certain roles. The introduction of this testing followed a pilot programme in 2020 and has now been adopted on a five-yearly review; whether this will be rolled out to other ranks remains to be seen.

In summary, RN promotion boards are heavily guided by process laid down in BR3. Every promotion board is specifically constructed to have a female voting member but only written evidence from the candidate's official record can be used in the selection of individuals until OF5 is reached, when psychometric test scores will also be considered.

CAF PROMOTION SELECTION PROCESS

The CAF selection process has similarities to the RN merit-based system, relying on performance appraisal and selection boards. The implementation of the electronic-based appraisal system, Performance and Competency Evaluation (PaCE), in April 2021, has seen a review of scoring criteria to ensure leaders are selected who exemplify CAF values and ethos and all CAF members are required to demonstrate inclusive behaviours. The CAF promotion board, or selection committee, is encouraged to take bias training provided by the Canadian Defence Academy (CDA) Gender Adviser (GENAD). This training aims to support senior leaders and managers within the Defence Team and

²⁸ Royal Navy, *Navy Personnel Management*, BRd 3(1), (April 2023): 6615.

²⁹ Royal Navy, *Navy Personnel Management*, BRd 3(1), (April 2023): 6611.

includes videos, articles and five hours of online courses to increase understanding of bias and awareness.³⁰

The CAF has also introduced an evidence-based framework for character-based assessments which will provide a broader lens to support the promotion process. The selection board for General Officer and Flag Officer (GOFO) now includes three psychometric assessments which contribute to a candidate's overall score. A 360-degree assessment is also conducted post-selection to the GOFO cadre. The 360-degree feedback process evaluates performance utilising feedback from various sources, including peers and subordinates. Instead of being limited to the perception of a direct superior the employee receives a broader balanced view from a diverse group as possible.³¹ This evolved framework is seen as a step towards the CAF's overall effort to enact positive culture change. The Arbour Report, recommendation #33, suggested the evidence-based framework did not go far enough and welcomed Director General Military Careers' (DGMC) plans to expand this framework to include other leadership ranks; this has now been introduced.³² The Arbour Report also highlighted performance appraisal, promotion and succession planning are firmly linked and future succession planning policy needed to be produced using a Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA+) lens.³³

With GBA+ initiatives seen across the CAF, such as applying GBA+ to Scoring Criteria (SCRIT) and conducting GBA+ on the policy renewal for rank and promotion, there have also been changes to the promotion board construct itself. There must now be a civilian voting member on each succession board for majors and above³⁴ and a member from a designated group such as a woman, visible minority or Indigenous member of the Defence Team, also in a voting capacity.³⁵

GBA+ initiatives, coupled with the bias training and 360-degree feedback, have been introduced to ensure the CAF meets its stated commitment to diversity and inclusion.³⁶ These implemented initiatives mean the merit-based promotion system in the CAF is given extra constraints above those seen in the RN. How these changes have actually helped engender diversity in CAF hierarchy will be discussed following a look at

³⁰ Kristine St-Pierre, *Understanding Bias: Key resources for senior leaders and Managers*, (April 2024).

³¹ Erik van Vulpen, "360 Degree Feedback: A comprehensive guide", accessed 5 April 2024.
www.aihr.com/blog/360-degree-feedback/#What

³² Arbour, Louise. "Report of the Independent External Comprehensive Review of the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces," (20 May, 2022): 253.

³³ Arbour, Louise. "Report of the Independent External Comprehensive Review of the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces," (20 May, 2022).

³⁴ Arbour, Louise. "Report of the Independent External Comprehensive Review of the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces," (20 May, 2022): 271.

³⁵ Government of Canada, 26 November 2021, accessed 14 April 2024.
<https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/maple-leaf/defence/2021/11/caf-improves-promotion-selection-process.html>

³⁶ Chief of Defence Staff, *Canadian Armed Forces Diversity Strategy*. Ottawa: Directorate of Human Rights and Diversity (2016).

non-military organisations and how employees perceive fairness of their institutions promotion systems.

PERCEIVED FAIRNESS IN OTHER ORGANISATIONS

Like many public service organisations including police and fire departments, the military has traditions which often mean that existing process is accepted. Promotion, like pay, is an emotive issue and each member of the organisation will have an opinion on the fairness of the promotion system; how employees perceive promotion in their organisations has been the topic of several academic papers. Michael Carter, of Walden University, researched his dissertation to compare the perceptions of fairness, between the Louisiana municipal police officers' and the Louisiana sheriff's deputies, of their organisations' promotion systems, one being seniority-based and one merit-based.³⁷ Carter's research questions specifically examine whether "seniority, transparency, knowledge of promotion systems, gender and race predict levels of perceived fairness."³⁸ The foundation of Carter's study was organisational justice theory, in particular procedural justice, which involves the perceived fairness of the methodology used by organisations in their decision making about topics such as pay and importantly promotions.³⁹

The element of perceived fairness amongst employees is particularly important as years of research show the perception of fairness is correlated with organisational commitment and job satisfaction.⁴⁰ This was certainly true of Carter's findings which concluded a lack of trust in organisations, regarding promotion, may cause sub-standard performance and demotivate employees. On the other hand, Carter found enhancing organisational trust would motivate officers and positively influence how they serve the public. Improved perceptions of fairness through increased workforce awareness of procedures, including the process of promotion, created a positive workplace facilitating positive social change.⁴¹

Antonio García-Izquierdo, a Doctor of Psychology at University of Oviedo, and his colleagues conducted a study on employees' perceptions of the promotional systems across 31 private sector organisations in Spain. They evaluated seniority-based and merit-based promotion systems. Employees perceived seniority-based systems to be

³⁷ Michael E. Carter, "Seniority and Transparency in the Perceived Fairness of Seniority-Based Police Promotion," ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, Walden University, (2017).

³⁸ Michael E. Carter, "Seniority and Transparency in the Perceived Fairness of Seniority-Based Police Promotion," ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, Walden University, (2017): 7-8.

³⁹ Antonio L. García-Izquierdo, Silvia Moscoso, and Pedro J. Ramos-Villagrasa, "Reactions to the Fairness of Promotion Methods: Procedural Justice and Job Satisfaction," *International Journal of Selection and Assessment* 20, no. 4 (2012): 394-403.

⁴⁰ David A. Jones and Daniel P. Skarlicki, *How Perceptions of Fairness can Change: A Dynamic Model of Organizational Justice*, Vol. 3 (London, England: SAGE Publications, 2013): 101.

⁴¹ Michael E. Carter, "Seniority and Transparency in the Perceived Fairness of Seniority-Based Police Promotion," ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, Walden University, (2017): 101-2.

transparent, clear in the criteria required for promotion and indeed, fair. Merit-based systems, however, were perceived as biased and a possible source of discrimination, as performance evaluated by superiors is subjective.⁴² García-Izquierdo et al. recommend further research to include fairness perceptions and promotion in public sector organisations.⁴³

Whilst research may be lacking specifically in military organisations, the conclusions from both the Carter study on law enforcement and the García-Izquierdo et al. research into private sector organisations is clear. The perception of fairness in a promotion system can have an influential effect on how the employees of those organisations perform, the overall job satisfaction and commitment to that organisation, and indeed clearly impacts retention. In a public facing organisation, such as the military, this will not only contribute to organisational effectiveness but also to how the organisation serves the public; a negative perception of fairness will have negative influence.⁴⁴ Using this as an evidence base, it would be necessary to have a system that was perceived as fair amongst employees; ensuring a transparent system, where employees understand the criteria for promotion is key. A transparent system should reduce ambiguity and enhance equal opportunities for candidates.⁴⁵ Whether a merit-based or seniority-based system is perceived as fairer could be influenced by perception of bias and whether employees face discrimination through subjective assessment. Equality of opportunity is essential, and so it is necessary to consider whether current promotion systems and policy have transparency and engender diversity.

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

As stated by Deborah May, Principal, The May Group, an Australian-based consulting practice focused on gender equity, diversity and inclusion;

Bias is reinforced and perpetuated through cultural, social and gendered norms and expectations that inform behaviour, decisions and the options we think we have. It is inherent in diversity dynamics and influences how we relate to people ‘like us’ and people not ‘like us’. It exists in organisational systems, process, practices and structures that reward

⁴²Antonio L. García-Izquierdo, Silvia Moscoso, and Pedro J. Ramos-Villagrasa, “Reactions to the Fairness of Promotion Methods: Procedural Justice and Job Satisfaction,” *International Journal of Selection and Assessment* 20, no. 4 (2012): 399.

⁴³ Antonio L. García-Izquierdo, Silvia Moscoso, and Pedro J. Ramos-Villagrasa, “Reactions to the Fairness of Promotion Methods: Procedural Justice and Job Satisfaction,” *International Journal of Selection and Assessment* 20, no. 4 (2012): 401.

⁴⁴ Xin Qui, Run Ren, Zhi-Xue Zhang, and Russell E. Johnson, “Fairness Heuristics and Substitutability Effects: Inferring the Fairness of Outcomes, Procedures, and Interpersonal Treatment when Employees Lack Clear Information,” *Journal of Applied Psychology* 100, no. 3 (2015): 751.

⁴⁵ Antonio L. García-Izquierdo, Silvia Moscoso, and Pedro J. Ramos-Villagrasa, “Reactions to the Fairness of Promotion Methods: Procedural Justice and Job Satisfaction,” *International Journal of Selection and Assessment* 20, no. 4 (2012): 395.

certain behaviours, people and outcomes. It is a barrier not only to women but to anyone who does not conform to ‘how we do things around here’.⁴⁶

Consideration of diversity and inclusion (D&I) must apply to the conduct of promotion boards and as such, “All candidates presented at a promotion board must be given the equality of opportunity to be selected and promoted against criteria set or considered by the promotion board as prescribed by the regulations in [Book of Reference 3 (BR3)].”⁴⁷ From the author’s experience witnessing officers’ promotion boards in 2014, 2015, 2021, 2022 and 2023, a statement on discrimination and unconscious bias is read prior to the conduct of each promotion board in the RN to remind board members of their duties with respect to D&I.

Despite at least 10 years acknowledgement of the necessity to consider D&I with respect to RN promotion boards, the hierarchy of the RN continues to show a lack of diversity. It will now be considered why this lack of diversity remains in 2024 and how the requirement to engender diversity within the hierarchy of the military is crucial to ensure divergent views are heard.

ENGENDERING DIVERSITY IN ARMED FORCES HIERARCHY

Many western societies, including that seen in the UK and Canada, have been constructed in a way that values “certain traits and identities to the exclusion of others – for example, white, male, Christian, English-speaking, thin/fit, not having a disability, heterosexual, gender conforming.”⁴⁸ The tendency of the military to be represented at senior levels by this so called ‘model of the modern, ideal soldier’⁴⁹ constitutes a barrier for minority groups who do not conform with this identity. The UK Armed forces and the British legal system acted together for many years to sanction this ideal through legislation creating an almost social legitimacy to discriminate against certain groups.⁵⁰

As May discusses, “Diversity and gender bias is embedded in organisational systems, structures, informal and formal practices and works to the advantage of the dominant group.”⁵¹ To change the embedded biases from the dominant group, action is needed; this must not only increase diversity but also shift the environment of the institution through culture, policy and systems to make an inclusive organisation. In

⁴⁶ Deborah May, “Cultural Audit as a Means of Uncovering Unconscious Biases and Other Barriers to Diversity within Organisations,” *Governance Directions* 66, no. 2 (2014): 89.

⁴⁷ Royal Navy, *Navy Personnel Management*, BRd 3(1), (April 2023): 6507.

⁴⁸ Canadian Human Rights Commission, “Discussion paper on systemic racism,” (Canada, 23 Oct 23): 1.

⁴⁹ Joan Kathleen Ferrier Heggie, “Uniform Identity?: Lesbians and the Negotiations of Gender & Sexuality in the British Army since 1950.” Order No. U209274, (The University of York (United Kingdom), 2003): 75.

⁵⁰ Victoria Basham, “Effecting Discrimination,” *Armed Forces and Society* 35, no. 4 (2009): 739.

⁵¹ Deborah May, “Cultural Audit as a Means of Uncovering Unconscious Biases and Other Barriers to Diversity within Organisations,” *Governance Directions* 66, no. 2 (2014): 89.

recognising the divergence from societies' expectations that "demand greater equality between social groups"⁵² western militaries have seen recruitment threatened. In an attempt to update policy, and create this environmental shift, the CAF Diversity Strategy has focused on recruiting to reflect the Canadian society it serves.⁵³ Since the misconduct exposed by the Deschamps Report in 2015⁵⁴, culture change is now embedded firmly within the CAF. As Egnell & Alam suggest⁵⁵ there are usually two catalysts for a change in culture: a strong individual or a specific incident that sparks a reaction. Several years since the misconduct ignited culture change in the CAF, several very senior women, including the Vice Chief of the Defence Staff, Lieutenant-General Frances Allen, have been appointed in the CAF hierarchy.

Also witnessing a catalyst for change, with incidents such as sexual harassment against women in the submarine service witnessed in recent years⁵⁶, the UK is now placing military culture change as a priority. Whilst it may take time, seeing a woman or Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) member of the military serving in the top echelons of defence must also be a short-term aim for the UK.

The military rank structure creates the ultimate social hierarchy. As Magee and Galinsky suggest, "Inherent to the definition of a social hierarchy is the stratified ranking of group members along a valued dimension, with some members being superior or subordinate to others, and fewer members occupying the highest positions."⁵⁷ It takes time to progress through the ranks of course, but the lack of speed on career progression was cited as an area where Foreign & Commonwealth (F&C) BAME UK military members felt bias and nepotism were reasons for their slow advancement.⁵⁸ According to the 2020 paper, "The lived experience", white males often assume the organisation operates universally as a meritocracy and as such have attributed a lack of progression for females and BAME members to their attributes rather than structural inequality.⁵⁹ The socialisation process of adopting traditional gender norms of the military continues

⁵² Victoria Basham, "Effecting Discrimination," *Armed Forces and Society* 35, no. 4 (2009): 728-744.

⁵³ Chief of Defence Staff, *Canadian Armed Forces Diversity Strategy*, Ottawa: Directorate of Human Rights and Diversity, (2016).

⁵⁴ Marie Deschamps, *Executive Summary. External Review into Sexual Misconduct and Sexual Harassment in the Canadian Armed Forces* (2015), accessed 22 March, 2024.
<https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/sexual-misbehaviour/external-review-2015.html>.

⁵⁵ Robert Egnell & M Alam, "Chapter 12. Conclusion – Lessons of comparison and limits of generalization," in *Women and gender perspectives in the military* (Georgetown University Press, 2019): 253-266.

⁵⁶ BBC News, "Royal Navy investigates after women come forward with abuse claims", (October 2022)
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-63435129>.

⁵⁷ J. C. Magee & A.D Galinsky, "Social hierarchy: The self-reinforcing nature of power and status," *Academy of Management Annals*, 2(1) (2008): 354.

⁵⁸ Defence Human Capability Science & Technology Centre "Defence Inclusivity Phase 2: The lived experience" 30 November 2020: 21.

⁵⁹ Defence Human Capability Science & Technology Centre "Defence Inclusivity Phase 2: The lived experience" 30 November 2020: 25.

despite an increase in women's representation.⁶⁰ A merit-based system must be bias free or will never engender diversity. In order to shift the current hierarchy from the patriarchal system, culture change is needed throughout policy. This change is policy remains outstanding in the RN at present time.

CONCLUSION

Any type of promotion system must be considered by the organisations employees as fair and transparent if that system is to engender organisational commitment and job satisfaction, both key in a military context. Whilst the merit-based promotion system, as utilised by the RN, appears to be perceived as fair amongst employees, it does not currently help to promote diversity amongst the organisations hierarchy. Knowledge of the system is widely disseminated through publications and the criteria for success is understood by employees; RN officers and ratings know their annual appraisal reviews are key if they are to be selected for promotion. However, if appraisals are not honest, accurate and written without bias, then timely progression of talented diverse members will not be achieved. Increased bias training for all RN reporting officers and promotion board members, as conducted in the CAF, would help to achieve greater diversity in the UK Armed Forces hierarchy. Inclusion of a 360-degree feedback process amongst all leadership ranks would ensure views are gathered from a broader, diverse group and this could help promote positive change. Representative promotion board members, implemented as part of policy, will also aid a fairer selection process; the inclusion of women in RN promotion boards since 2020 is regarded as a step in the right direction but more can be done.

With culture change rising in importance throughout the UK, it is vital to recruit, retain and promote diverse individuals reflective of today's society at all levels of the military. As such, helping promote diversity through the promotion system is essential to ensure an inclusive operationally effective military for the future. A change in the type of promotion system is not the answer, but enhancing merit-based promotion with extra constraints, such as implemented in the CAF, may start to help rather than hinder the promotion of diversity within armed forces hierarchy.

⁶⁰ V Brown & A Okros, "New leaders, 'New Wars': A reflective approach to approach to applying gender and culture perspectives," In *From Knowing to Doing: International Perspectives on Leading Effectively*, 235–289, (Essay 17 Wing: Winnipeg Publishing Office, 2018): 248.

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