

MILITARY CULTURAL EDUCATION

COLONEL MAXIE MCFARLAND, U.S. ARMY, RETIRED

This article was first published in the March-April 2005 issue of *Military Review*.

Over the past decade the Army has increasingly engaged in lengthy overseas deployments in which mission performance demanded significant interface with indigenous populations. Such interaction and how it affects military operations is important. In fact, engagement with local populaces has become so crucial that mission success is often significantly affected by Soldiers' ability to interact with local individuals and communities. Learning to interact with local populaces presents a major challenge for Soldiers, leaders, and civilians.

Lengthy deployments to areas with other cultures are not new. The Army has experienced many long lasting operations on foreign soil since the end of World War II. For most long-distance operations, the Army attempts to instill in deployed forces an awareness of societal and cultural norms for the regions in which they operate. While these programs have proven useful, they fall far short of generating the tactile understanding necessary for today's complex settings, especially when values and norms are so divergent they clash.

Working with diverse cultures in their home element is more a matter of finesse, diplomacy, and communication than the direct application of coercive power. Success demands an understanding of individual, community, and societal normative patterns as they relate to the tasks Soldiers perform and the environment in which they are performed. Cultural education is now necessary as part of Soldier and leader development programs.

During the Persian Gulf War, the United States demonstrated awareness of cultural issues and how they affected military operations. The potential for friction and a clash between ideas, behaviors, values, and norms led to adjusting paradigms for cultural engagement. For example, the significant differences between U.S. and Saudi Arabian cultures caused active isolation of U.S. troops from native populations. The risks over differing or competing cultural norms were too great to overcome.

Cultural friction is certainly a more complex issue today than it was in the past. During the Cold War a bias existed on the part of nations wishing to align themselves with either the East or the West. Siding with one or the other was necessary in a bipolar



Sergeant Horace Murray

Major Seth Hoffer of the 401st Civil Affairs Battalion talks to local town leaders in Pitav, Afghanistan, to find out how the Army can best help them promote stability and peace in the region.

world in which the major powers' ideology competed through aligned or nonaligned states. Nations sought identity by becoming more like the Big Brother of their choice.

The end of the Cold War forced a new paradigm on prevailing ideas of national identity. States, individuals, and societies felt free to reconnect with their own cultural and social norms. In addition, U.S. and Western economic and cultural values overshadowed societies based on more traditional or religious values. This basic competition of cultural norms resulted in a retreat from western values in many regions of the world, becoming a source of friction rather than a means of achieving common understanding.

The emerging importance of cultural identity and its inherent frictions make it imperative for Soldiers and leaders — military and civilian — to understand societal and cultural norms of populaces in which they operate and function. They must appreciate, understand, and respect those norms and use them as tools for shaping operations and the effects they expect to achieve.

DEFINING "CULTURE"

The first step in any problem is defining it. Defining "culture" usually consists of describing origins, values, roles, and material

items associated with a particular group of people. Such definitions refer to evaluative standards, such as norms or values, and cognitive standards, such as rules or models defining what entities and actors exist in a system and how they operate and interrelate.¹

Everyone has a culture that shapes how they see others, the world, and themselves. Like an iceberg, some aspects of culture are visible; others are beneath the surface. Invisible aspects influence and cause visible ones.

Ethnography, a qualitative research method anthropologists use to describe a culture, attempts to fully describe a cultural group's various aspects and norms in an attempt to understand the group. The intent behind military cultural education is to help Soldiers be more effective in the environments in which they must function. They must be culturally literate and develop cultural expertise in specific areas and regions. When balanced with study in potential areas of application, proficiency in cultural literacy and competency aids understanding of cultural factors in areas of operations.

CULTURAL LITERACY AND COMPETENCY

Cultural background is one of the primary sources of our self-definition, expression, and relationships within groups and communities. When we experience a new cultural environment, we are likely to experience conflict between our own cultural predispositions and the values, beliefs, and opinions of the host culture.²² Cultures often experience alterations in cultural identity, which might create significant insecurity in both interacting cultures, calling into question identity, and in values, which might result in an adversarial relationship.

Culturally literate Soldiers understand and appreciate their own beliefs, behaviors, values, and norms but they are also aware of how their perspectives might affect other cultures' views. Achieving self-awareness of our own cultural assumptions enables us to use this understanding in relations with others.

Cultural competency, which is more than just a framework for individual interaction, is necessary for managing group, organizational, or community cross

or mixed cultural activities and demands a more in-depth and application-oriented understanding of culture than cultural literacy requires. Competency is demonstrated through organizational leadership capable of crossing cultural divides within organizations and establishing cooperative frameworks between communities and groups from different cultures. Competency is about building successful teams with a common vision, effective communications, and acceptable processes that benefit from cultural diversity.

Military leaders are trained to make decisions rapidly with little time available for discussion, debate, or consideration of dissenting views. Events involving potential destruction or violence demand one-minute managers or leaders, but doing so entails rapidly obtaining key facts and essential information, internal processing, and then choosing and implementing an appropriate course of action (COA).

Encouraging participation of a variety of people in all activities is difficult against this backdrop. However, encouraging participation is a key value in the framework of cultural competency. Recognizing differences as diversity rather than as inappropriate responses is a challenge in tactical and operational environments. Cultural competency accepts and creates an environment that allows each culture to contribute its values, perspectives, and behaviors in constructive ways to enrich the outcome.

Cultural literacy is about understanding your individual cultural patterns and knowing your own cultural norms. Understanding how your culture affects someone else's culture can profoundly affect any COA's chances for success. Military leaders have an additional challenge; they must understand and appreciate their own military culture, their nation's culture, and the operational area's culture.

Culturally Literate Soldiers —

- Understand that culture affects their behavior and beliefs and the behavior and beliefs of others.
- Are aware of specific cultural beliefs, values, and sensibilities that might affect the way they and others think or behave.
- Appreciate and accept diverse beliefs, appearances, and lifestyles.
- Are aware that historical knowledge is constructed and, therefore, shaped by personal, political, and social forces.
- Know the history of mainstream and nonmainstream American cultures and understand how these histories affect current society.
- Can understand the perspective of nonmainstream groups when learning about historical events.
- Know about major historical events of other nations and understand how such events affect behaviors, beliefs, and relationships with others.
- Are aware of the similarities among groups of different cultural backgrounds and accept differences between them.
- Understand the dangers of stereotyping, ethnocentrism, and other biases and are aware of and sensitive to issues of racism and prejudice.
- Are bilingual, multilingual, or working toward language proficiency.
- Can communicate, interact, and work positively with individuals from other cultural groups.
- Use technology to communicate with individuals and access resources from other cultures.
- Are familiar with changing cultural norms of technology (such as instant messaging, virtual workspaces, E-mail, and so on), and can interact successfully in such environments.
- Understand that cultural differences exist and need to be accounted for in the context of military operations.
- Understand that as soldiers they are part of a widely stereotyped culture that will encounter predisposed prejudices, which will need to be overcome in crosscultural relations.
- Are secure and confident in their identities and capable of functioning in a way that allows others to remain secure in theirs.



Airman First Class Kurt Gibbons III, USAF

An Iraqi boy rides a donkey through Karbala as U.S. Soldiers patrol the area.

To effectively manage the dynamics of differences, leaders must learn effective strategies for solving conflict among diverse peoples and organizations. They must also understand how historic distrust affects current interactions, realizing that one might misjudge others' actions based on learned expectations.

Integrating information and skills to interact effectively in various cross-cultural situations into staff development and education systems helps institutionalize cultural knowledge. Incorporating cultural knowledge into the mainstream of the organization and teaching origins of stereotypes and prejudices also help.

Diversity might entail changing how things are done to acknowledge differences in individuals, groups, and communities. One must develop skills for cross-cultural communication and understand that communication and trust are often more important than activity. Institutionalizing cultural interventions for conflicts and confusion caused by the dynamics of difference might also be necessary.

With the increase in coalition and multinational cooperative military efforts, cultural competence is a critical leadership requirement. Stability and support operations demand adept leaders who can work with community, international, and private organizations whose members come from widely divergent cultural backgrounds. The Army's description of the objective force describes the need for conventional forces with Special Forces qualities, including being culturally competent.

The Army has many programs designed to build cultural competency, including multinational and partnership training exercise programs; liaison officers, foreign students integrated into leader education and training programs; and officer exchange programs, to name a few. These programs are useful, but unfortunately, they are mostly crafted around educating the foreign student about U.S. cultural norms and operations rather than the

inverse. Perhaps liaison officers could be charged with instructional duties and exchange programs could bring in more foreign instructors and experts into the school system. Would China, India, Egypt, or some African country be interested in having an instructor on the staff of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC) to teach decision-making, culture, or management?

A need for cultural literacy and cultural competency is clear, but it is also clear the educational process to achieve both will take some time to establish. The key question is, where do we start?

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Culture, which is learned and shared by members of a group, is presented to children as their social heritage. Cultural norms are the standard, model, or pattern a specific cultural, race, ethnic, religious, or social group regards as typical. Cultural norms include thoughts, behaviors, and patterns of communication, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions.³

As individuals, groups, and societies we can learn to collaborate across cultural lines. Awareness of cultural differences does not have to divide or paralyze us for fear of not saying the "right thing." Cultural awareness puts a premium on listening and comprehending the intent behind others' remarks. Becoming more aware of cultural differences and exploring similarities helps us communicate more effectively. The chart on page 43 shows some aspects of general cultural normative differences between U.S. culture and other cultures.⁴

With so many diverse cultures and the enormous amount of study required to become expert on any given one, how do we narrow the field to find the right focus for generating cultural skills in Soldiers? Certainly specific cultures represent states or groups that might be more likely to develop an adversarial relationship with the United States. Perhaps it would be best to learn more about states or cultures with whom we are most likely to form a coalition or participate in a multinational campaign. Unfortunately, history demonstrates the uncertainty of predicting where, when, and with whom Soldiers might be required to operate. Of course, this would not rule out the need to study high-probability cultures. Adopting an approach, at least initially, oriented toward some foundational cultural norms with broader application across a wider range of settings might prove more prudent, however.

FOUNDATIONAL CULTURAL NORMS

Foundational cultural norms are normative values and factors having the greatest effect on military operations and the relations of Soldiers with the populations they encounter. Researchers identify four cultural syndromes —complexity, individualism, collectivism, and tightness — that are patterns of beliefs, attitudes,

self-definitions, norms, and values organized around some theme that can be found in every society. Using cultural syndromes as a frame of reference, we can develop foundational normative values having common application across all cultures, which should provide the starting point for a cultural education program.

Cultural norms often are so strongly ingrained in daily life that individuals might be unaware of certain behaviors. Until they see such behaviors in the context of a different culture with different values and beliefs, they might have difficulty recognizing and changing them.⁵ Usually, our own culture is invisible until it comes into contact with another culture. People are generally ethnocentric: they interpret other cultures within the framework of the understanding they have of their own. Six fundamental patterns of cultural norms have greatly affected relations between differing cultures: communication styles, attitudes toward conflict, approaches to completing tasks, decision-making styles, attitudes toward personal disclosure, and

approaches to knowing.

Communication styles. Communicating between two cultures involves generating, transmitting, receiving, and decrypting coded messages or bits of information; it is about much more than language, although language is certainly key to communication and should be a part of any cultural training program. The early focus, however, should be more on effective use and application of language than on making a Soldier a linguist. Someone struggling to communicate in an unfamiliar language cannot communicate complex issues. The goal should be to orient language-skill developmental programs, at least initially, on effectively conveying simple terms rather than on linguistic competence — learning to make the most out of simple meanings. The Army needs to find simple ways of communication that will speak to other cultural norms and that will require listening. Communication is a two-way street.

Common, universal languages are available that almost all cultures understand.

Other types of languages include mathematics, music, computing, physics, and engineering. Although such are not immediately useful in most military tasks, they offer a common frame of reference of possible value under special circumstances.⁶

One of the most overlooked and effective communication tools is using pictures, drawings, or photographs.

A great deal of truth is behind the expression “a picture is worth a thousand words.” Creating graphic and pictorial aides for cross-cultural communication is much easier and often much more effective than linguistic aides. However, in any form of information transmission, meanings are not always clear, and certainly, missing presentation skills, timing, and context can be as confusing and counterproductive as any other. Using a culture’s iconography, such as religious symbols — the cross for Christians or the crescent moon for Islamics — can lead to developing means of symbolic communication.

Another major aspect of communication

Comparing Cultural Norms and Values

Aspects of Culture	Mainstream American Culture	Other Cultures
Sense of self and space	Informal, handshake	Formal hugs, bows, handshakes
Communication and language	Explicit, direct communication; emphasis on content, meaning found in words	Implicit, indirect communication; emphasis on context, meaning found around words
Dress and appearance	“Dress for success” ideal; wide range in accepted dress	Dress seen as a sign of position, wealth, and prestige; religious rules
Food and eating habits	Eating as a necessity, fast food	Dining as a social experience, religious rules
Time and time consciousness	Linear and exact time consciousness; value on promptness, time equals money	Elastic and relative time consciousness; time spent on enjoyment of relationships
Relationships, family, friends	Focus on nuclear family; responsibility for self; value on youth, age seen as handicap	Focus on extended family; loyalty and responsibility to family; age given status and respect
Values and norms	Individual orientation; independence; preference for direct confrontation of conflict	Group orientation; conformity; preference for harmony
Beliefs and attitudes	Egalitarian; challenging of authority; individuals control their destiny; gender equality	Hierarchical; respect for authority and social order; individuals accept their destiny; different roles for men and women
Mental processes and learning style	Linear, logical, sequential problem-solving focus	Lateral, holistic, simultaneous; accepting of life’s difficulties
Work habits and practices	Emphasis on task; reward based on individual achievement; work has intrinsic value	Emphasis on relationships; rewards based on seniority, relationships; work is a necessity of life

Graphic adapted from Lee Gardenswartz and Anita Rowe, *Managing Diversity* (New York: McGraw-Hill) 1998, 164-165. Reproduced with permission of McGraw-Hill.

is the degree of importance given to nonverbal communication, including facial expressions and gestures as well as seating arrangements, personal distance, and sense of time. Different norms regarding the appropriate degree of assertiveness in communicating can add to cultural misunderstandings.⁷

Attitudes toward conflict. Some cultures view conflict as a positive thing; others view it as something to be avoided. In the United States conflict is not usually desirable, but people most often deal directly with conflicts as they arise. For example, a face-to-face meeting is a customary way to work through problems. In many Eastern countries, open conflict is considered embarrassing or demeaning. Differences are best worked out quietly. A written exchange might be the favored means to address the conflict. Another means might be enlisting a respected third party who can facilitate communication without risking loss of face or being humiliated.

American military culture deals with problems head on. As in a game of checkers, the intricacies of subtle and indirect moves are more often than not relegated to civilian and military strategists. Many other cultures, however, employ indirect approaches and subtle means as part of day-to-day activity. When Soldiers trained in the direct approach encounter these cultures, communication is difficult and can often lead to profound misunderstandings and miscalculations.

Approaches to competing tasks. From culture to culture, people have different ways of completing tasks. They might have different access to resources, different rewards associated with task completion, different notions of time, and different ideas about how relationship-building and task oriented work should go together. Asian and Hispanic cultures tend to attach more value to developing relationships at the beginning of a shared project, with more emphasis on task completion toward the end, as compared with European-Americans. European-Americans tend to focus immediately on the task at hand, allowing relationships to develop as they work together.

Decisionmaking styles. The roles individuals play in decisionmaking vary widely from culture to culture. In America, decisions are frequently delegated; that is,

an official assigns responsibility for a particular matter to a subordinate. In many Southern European and Latin American countries, strong value is placed on holding decisionmaking responsibilities oneself. When groups of people make decisions, majority rule is a common approach in America. In Japan, consensus is the preferred mode.

Attitudes toward personal disclosure. In some cultures, it is not appropriate to be frank about emotions, the reasons behind a conflict or a misunderstanding, or about personal information. Questions that might seem natural to you might seem intrusive to others. (What was the conflict about? What was your role in the conflict? What was the sequence of events?)

Approaches to knowing. Notable differences occur among cultural groups when it comes to epistemologies; that is, the ways people come to know things. European cultures tend to consider information acquired through cognitive means, such as counting and measuring, more valid than other ways of coming to know things. African cultures prefer affective ways of knowing, including symbolic imagery and rhythm. Asian cultures tend to emphasize the validity of knowledge gained through striving toward transcendence. Recent popular works demonstrate that American society is paying more attention to previously overlooked ways of knowing.

Obviously, different approaches to knowing can affect how we analyze or find ways to solve a community problem. Some group members might want to conduct library research to understand a shared problem better and to identify possible solutions. Others might prefer to visit places and people who have experienced similar challenges and touch, taste, and listen to what has worked elsewhere.

SPECIFIC CULTURES TO STUDY

In the future, key powers in a regional or global context will most likely be the United States, the European Union, China, Japan, and Russia, and future alliances, coalitions, and partnerships will most likely be tied to these nations. Key regional powers, whose activities or issues have the greatest possibility for creating global consequences, are most likely to be Indonesia, India, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey,

Egypt, South Africa, Brazil, Algeria, and Mexico. In addition, natural resources in the Caspian Basin, off the coast of east-central Africa and in Venezuela will certainly increase those regions' importance. These nations might offer a good starting point for a program of study of other cultures.

Cultural expertise takes time. Cultural literacy and competency skills will enable us to cope with most any circumstance of cultural difference. Areas of specific expertise deepen those skills and provide context to their application, but programs designed to achieve expertise in a given region or culture must begin early and be continuous. The officer corps should begin training while in precommissioning programs. Prescribed courses in regional studies and some language training would be a great beginning. We could certainly look at expanding summer opportunities for travel and study in specified foreign countries. A program of this nature currently exists within the foreign military studies office involving West Point cadets. We could expand the program to include select Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) students. Branch schools could coordinate with local universities for instructors, course materials, and expertise.

The Army War College's (AWC's) country studies program could certainly serve as a model for cultural education at lower levels. Using electronic connectivity between schools and individuals would allow the creation of virtual teams with AWC, CGSC, or advance course students around a specific country or regional area. The AWC students could serve as study directors, orchestrating and facilitating team members' efforts in other schools.

Another possibility is to leverage business and industry programs for cultural education, making them available through distributed learning. We should also not forget the expertise available from the Special Forces. The bottom line is there are many ways available to achieve our goals if we can agree on the focus and end state.

Three other factors play into cultural differences that influence communication: religion, tribal affiliations, and nationalism.

Religion. Religion, one of the most important aspects of cross-cultural conflict resolution, is a powerful constituent of cultural norms and values, and because it addresses the most profound existential

issues of human life (freedom and inevitability, fear and faith, security and insecurity, right and wrong, sacred and profane), it is deeply implicated in individual and social conceptions of peace. To transform current conflicts, we must understand the conceptions of peace within diverse religious and cultural traditions while seeking common ground.⁸

An exploration of religious cultural norms could take the form of comparisons of foundational cultural values as they apply to the world's prominent religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Juche).

Tribal affiliation. Tribal cultures, prevalent in developing countries, are often the only structure in ungoverned areas. Tribal cultures differ, but at their core, they share a common foundation. They arise from a social tradition that often lacks written histories or philosophies and independent perspectives, and they espouse ideas and beliefs held unanimously by the entire tribe. Tribal leaders are not accustomed to external challenge.

Regardless of region, tribes also share foundational norms with respect to decisionmaking, knowledge, and disclosure. Studying norms for tribal structures might well prove the only way to understand these cultures because of the absence of written material.

Nationalism. Studying nationalism is to study cultural norms and values as driving factors. Separated from the context of states, nations embody the importance people place on culture and heritage without respect to geography. Nationalistic movements have common aspects in how they relate to other cultures and how their behaviors are governed. This area of study would be particularly useful in understanding and dealing with transnational organizations, whether they are legitimate, criminal, or terrorist.

ASSESSING EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS

Any educational program requires a way to assess its effectiveness. I am not sure how training would progress across the framework of a Soldier's career, but every Soldier would at least be at the basic level after completing initial entry training and, at the advanced level, culturally proficient after completing the Primary Leadership Development Course.

Cultural education is not a new subject or issue. Over the years, the Army has introduced internal and external programs to address cultural factors within its organization and during long-duration deployments. The programs effectively created an Army value of cultural acceptance as a standard, but only so long as differing values did not compete with Army values or standards. These same programs, modified and refocused, could serve as the foundation for an expanded cultural education program to create better skills for dealing with other cultures during conflicts, partnerships, or stability operations and support operations. Resources associated with such programs could be the nucleus for a rapid start-up and foundation for expansion.

Cultural education is a growing concern among major businesses operating in the global market. For this reason, there are a wide variety of commercial, academic, and government programs for cultural education. In many cases, coursework is available and training-development work has been completed. Assessing and, where practical, using these programs offers significant cost savings in developing educational materials and courses.

The Army can expand on the educational base by ensuring tactical and operational training programs address cultural factors. At the national training centers, opposing-force role players should be skilled in emulating key cultural norms that might affect military actions and activities. All leaders should be exposed to these factors and receive appropriate feedback on how well they manage differences and accomplish tasks. Perhaps the Army should also consider introducing cultural-awareness training into Battle Command Training Programs and combat training centers where, with allies and partners, command and staffs would be combined to foster development of cultural competency skills.

Models and simulations in support of training and education should begin to include cultural factors as the Army moves to an agent-based construct, which will increase the number of variables and complicate environments so they more closely approximate reality. This program, which is already being worked by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) is one we should seek to guide and direct.

In generalized study areas, the Army should educate Soldiers and leaders on foundational cultural norms and values and teach them skills used to understand and bridge cultural differences, looking at religious, tribal, and nationalistic factors in representative and nonrepresentative societies. Over time, specialized study should enable Soldiers to build expertise in specific regions concerning specific societies.

NOTES

1. Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

2. Nancy E. Briggs and Glenn R. Harwood, "Furthering Adjustment: An Application of Inoculation Theory in an Intercultural Context," Eric Reproduction Services, no. ed. 225, 221, 1983.

3. Lisa Castellanos, "Hispanic/Latina Women: Cultural norms and prevention"; Project Director, Abriendo Puertas, 1986, Florida Alcohol and Drug Abuse Association, Tallahassee, on-line at <www.fadaa.org/resource/justfact/hispnorm.html>, accessed, 9 March 2005.

4. The chart is based on one published by Lee Gardenswartz and Anita Rowe in *Managing Diversity* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998), 164-65.

5. Jean Willis, "Understanding Cultural Differences," American Society of Association Executives, Washington, D.C., 1 March 2001.

6. A growing perception in many circles is that military cultures are moving toward establishing an artificial or formal language.

7. Marcelle E. DuPraw and Marya Axner, "Working on Common Cross-Cultural Communication Challenges," A More Perfect Union (AMPU) Guide, on-line at <www.wgcd.org/action/ampu/crosscult.html>, accessed 5 November 2004.

8. Abdul Aziz Said and Nathan C. Funk, "The Role of Faith in Cross-Cultural Conflict Resolution," presentation at the European Parliament for the European Centre for Common Ground, September 2001, on-line at <<http://shss.nova.edu/pes/journalsPDF/V9N1.pdf>>, 37, accessed 5 November 2004.

Colonel Maxie McFarland, U.S. Army, Retired, is a Defense Intelligence Senior Executive and the Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, Fort Monroe, Virginia. He received a B.S. from the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga; an M.Ed. from Southern Arkansas University; an M.S. from the Naval War College; and he is a graduate of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College.
