The necessity of socio-cultural intelligence

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“The use of socio-cultural intelligence and cultural skills in support of our mission requirements is a fundamental part of our day-to-day.”

—Master Sgt. B. Worth, narrative fusion cell noncommissioned officer-in-charge

After the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, U.S. Military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan introduced an operational environment on the battlefield that required Soldiers to interact with Middle Eastern cultures and communities. As a result, cross-cultural competency, the ability to quickly understand and effectively act in a culture different than one’s own, became extremely vital due to frequent Soldier-civilian interaction.

From 2006 to 2014, the Army deployed teams of scientists and anthropologists, known as the Human Terrain System, to act as a socio-cultural knowledge base for units overseas.
Army Regulation 350-1, Army Training and Leader Development, chapter 8, explains why it is important for noncommissioned officers to develop these skills: "The human dimension that the Army must operate in as part of today’s complex environments necessitates that Soldiers at all levels possess some cultural awareness and foreign language capability. It is no longer sufficient for limited numbers of Soldiers in specialized skill sets and units to solely possess these capabilities."³

**The Human Terrain System**

In June 2006, the Army created HTS to reduce cultural and social misunderstanding on missions. HTS provided commanders with experienced officers, NCOs, and civilian social scientists trained and skilled in cultural data research and analysis to collect and map comprehensive tribal and family information in Afghani and Iraqi villages.⁴ Ultimately, the system acted as a liaison between commanders, officers, and local leaders.

During a military operation, Tracy St. Benoit, HTS anthropologist, correctly suspected that a widows’ sons were joining the Haqqani network to support their mothers financially.⁵

During an operation in Kuz Khadokehl, a village south of Ghazni’s capital, St. Benoit showed company commander, Capt. Aaron White, how to connect with local leaders through body language. She also showed him how to reinforce a perception of leadership through minimized consultation with fellow officers.⁶

In these successful examples, HTS provided an individual trained and skilled in the local culture who collected and mapped information in the area of operations, allowing the commander to use that information to his benefit.

**HTS Issues**

Despite some success, HTS became a subject of ethical debate. Anthropologists perceived the application of social science to national security issues⁷ as unethical and a conflict of interest. Mismanagement and the loss of civilian lives led to a number of individuals and organizations questioning the program. Even several military leaders perceived HTS as counter-productive and inconsistent with current doctrine.⁸ In addition to these problems, the rapid growth of personnel brought further issues such as increased training demands, mismanagement, and recruitment of under-qualified staff.

There was also a perception of HTS as a social science research program for humanitarian purposes, which resulted in severely impaired management and over-reliance on Department of Defense contractors.⁹

The volume of criticism increased with the deaths of three HTS social scientists and reports of racial discrimination and sexual harassment.¹⁰ As a result, the Army announced the program’s termination in 2015 stating there was no longer a requirement for HTS teams in theater.¹¹

**The Importance of Socio-Cultural Intelligence**

“[T]o effectively engage with appropriate foreign audiences… we must be socially and culturally aware of [them].”

— Staff Sgt. K. Brown, psychological operations sergeant

The need for socio-cultural intelligence is still present in today’s Army. AR 350-1 states each Soldier needs to have socio-cultural intelligence and understanding. Army Doctrine Reference Publication 2-0, Intelligence, states that the consequences of not having this understanding will result in a “lack of knowledge concerning insurgents, local politics, customs, culture, and how to differentiate between local combatants [which] often leads to U.S. actions that can result in unintended and disadvantageous consequences.”¹²

With AR 350-1 and ADRP 2-0, NCOs now have the proper protocol to address consequences, such as civilian harm, in culturally appropriate ways.¹³ See Army Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures 3-37.31 for more information on civilian casualty mitigation.

Culturally aware NCOs can mitigate issues by showing their Soldiers how to conduct themselves and build operation legitimacy with international communities,¹⁴ which protects host nation populations against recruitment and radicalization by terrorist organizations.¹⁵

Failure to consider the elements defined by ADRP 3-05, Special Operations, as the social, cultural, and behavioral factors characterizing the relationships of the population of a specific region or operational environment, can give the perception that the military is not acting in the interests of the host nation or its stability.¹⁶

At the unit level, this failure can lead to miscommunication. For instance, U.S. Soldiers shot Iraqi and Afghani civilians when they failed to stop at military checkpoints because the American signal to stop — arms extended, palm out — was interpreted as “welcome” by the locals. Another example is the U.S. military’s misperception of black, religious Shia Muslim flags as hostile because flags of this color represent animosity in American culture.¹⁷

“Having good socio-cultural IQ can dramatically increase the effectiveness of military operations,” said Master Sgt. B. Worth, narrative fusion cell noncommissioned officer-in-charge, Headquarters Support Company, 8th Psychological Operations Battalion, 4th Psychological Operations Group (Airborne).¹⁸ "In the early days of Afghanistan and Iraq, our inability to understand that their respective military cultures are dramatically different than ours created a myriad of problems.”¹⁹
1st Security Force Assistance Brigade

The 1st SFAB receives specialized training in foreign language, advising, and weapons to help understand the impact of cultural intelligence in their roles as advisors to the Afghan Army. The U.S. Army selected Soldiers for the 1st SFAB based on their ability to interact and work with different cultures.

For example, according to Col. Scott Jackson, commander of the 1st SFAB, handholding between men in Middle Eastern culture signifies friendship and Jackson stresses the need for Soldiers to be comfortable with these types of cultural norms. Just as unit cohesion is necessary for U.S. military units to complete objectives, it is also essential in building rapport with host nations and their soldiers.

Interpersonal skills

“Soldiers are increasingly finding themselves making complex, time-sensitive decisions in multifarious [diverse] environments,” Worth said. While NCOs many have little to no context of tribal dynamics and regional hydro-politics (politics/fights to control a water supply), he points out that interpersonal communication and cultural skills connect them to host nation soldiers or civilians on a socio-cultural level.
current behavior, PSYOP Soldiers gain insight in how to influence that behavior.\textsuperscript{29}

In other words, “know your enemy.” When NCOs get to know their enemy, they can zero in on the messages and culture adversaries used to exploit or gain support in vulnerable communities and begin intervention or prevention methods.

**Socio-cultural Examples**

Below are two examples of NCOs using social and cultural knowledge to demonstrate professionalism, adaptability, and solidarity.

**Staff Sgt. K. Brown**

As a female team sergeant, I foresaw interactions with host nation security forces in a Muslim/Christian country becoming a concern in my previous deployment; however, being cognizant of the socio-cultural differences prepared me for the challenges that I could have encountered. For instance, when meeting with individuals from a police force, I wore business attire to minimize the possible tension of not only being a female in an authoritative role, but also being in the U.S. Army. Alternatively, I would only wear my combat uniform when meeting with military personnel to demonstrate my professionalism and our similarities.

Regardless of the key leader engagement taking place, my ability to exhibit confidence, professionalism, and commonalities worked in my favor.\textsuperscript{30}

**Master Sgt. B. Worth**

During the summer of 2016, I worked with Soldiers who were training Syrians to fight ISIS. [The Syrians'] base was ambushed and bore the brunt of a devastating suicide attack by ISIS militants. Several Syrians died, and many more were wounded. Their morale was low and, working with the Special Operations Forces commander, I arranged for the Syrian commander to present Combat Infantry Badges in a ceremony to recognize the wounded and fallen. He was later presented his CIB in a private ceremony, providing him some special recognition as well. By giving the Syrian commander an opportunity to present these awards to his troops, he gained “wasta” (influence) in his unit and became more amenable to working with us. I saw several of these soldiers almost a year later, and many of them still had their CIBs tucked away in their pockets.\textsuperscript{32}

**Conclusion**

Soldiers must look beyond conventional warfare requirements and learn how to negotiate with local leaders or conduct culturally-based infrastructure projects.\textsuperscript{33} To meet these demands, they must “accurately interpret cross-cultural encounters across cultural boundaries, and then choose appropriate actions based on their observations.”\textsuperscript{34}

As Brown and Worth demonstrate through their actions, NCOs’ cultural awareness should guide their actions and decisions, allowing them to forge stronger relationships between the U.S. and host nations. They should expose their troops to different social norms they can expect to encounter when preparing for deployment. By maintaining close interaction, effective communication, and credibility in a cross-cultural context, NCOs can develop cohesion with their translators and host nation soldiers to bridge the gap between themselves, locals, and adversaries.\textsuperscript{34}

For assistance in gaining cultural information before your deployment, contact Jennifer Dunn, deputy director and senior intelligence specialist for the Global Cultural Knowledge Network at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.\textsuperscript{35} GCKN provides cultural, social, and political infrastructure and economic information to the Army. Visit its website for tipping points or implications of socio-cultural fault lines in specific operational environments, causes of conflict, stories/messages that “threat actors deliver to vulnerable populations within particular operational environments,” and more.\textsuperscript{36}

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