A woman role-playing as an Afghan civilian reaches out to Capt. Christopher Young, combat advisor team leader, 2nd Battalion, 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade, during a unit rotation at the Joint Readiness Training Center, Fort Polk, Louisiana. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Sierra A. Melendez)

The necessity of socio-cultural intelligence

Crystal Bradshaw, NCO Journal

Ronald J. Esser, Museum of Military History

"The use of socio-cultural intelligence and cultural skills in support of our mission requirements is a fundamental part of our day-to-day."[1]

—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.[2]

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 issues[7] 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 Afghan 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

1st Lt. David Buchan of the 4th Brigade, 10th Mountain Division, 2nd Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment security detail walks hand in hand with an Afghan National Army soldier with the 3rd Brigade, 201st Corporate Headquarters on Forward Operating Base Nahglu High, Kapisa province, Afghanistan, Aug. 1, 2013. Holding hands in the Afghan culture represents friendship and not necessarily affection. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Edward Bates)

Middle Eastern culture signifies friendship and Jackson stresses the need for Soldiers to be comfortable with these types of cultural norms.[20] 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.[21] 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.[22]

Interpersonal skills are also essential when dealing with U.S. Soldiers, who come from different backgrounds and cultures. Thus, the ability to communicate efficiently and connect with people of varying backgrounds is vital.

According to retired Army Command Sgt. Maj. James Van Sciver, 500th Military Intelligence Brigade, interpersonal skills are extremely important.

"Recognizing the variable of diversity among others within a group allows a leader to better understand how a Soldier's upbringing and other societal influences helped to shape them as an individual," Van Sciver said. "A leader who lacks interpersonal communication skills such as tact will erode and ultimately destroy the very bedrock of trust within an organization."[23]

Multi-Cultural Perspective Taking

"Knowing the adversary's culture provides the insight needed to effectively negotiate and stabilize the current operational environment."[24]

—Beyond Frontiers: The Critical Role of Cross-Cultural Competence in the Military

Multi-Cultural Perspective Taking is the ability to understand people's perspectives to appreciate and influence cultures within foreign countries.[25] Due to the Army's operations in multinational and multicultural environments, psychological operations' Soldiers use MCPT to support warfighters in accurately interpreting, understanding, and predicting the actions and attitudes of others.[26]

According to ADRP 3-05, PSYOP Soldiers execute Military Information Support Operations by conducting in-depth analyses of international target audiences, concentrating on cultural, social, political, and other mission-critical characteristics to determine and exploit selected psychological vulnerabilities.[27]

"The ultimate objective of PSYOP is to effectively engage with appropriate foreign audiences to elicit behaviors that are favorable to the national objectives of the U.S. and its allies," said Staff Sgt. K. Brown, psychological operations sergeant, Company B, 7th Psychological Operations Battalion (Airborne).[28] "We must be socially and culturally aware of our audience before we can accurately use influence techniques to affect their behaviors. By determining the causes and effects of the

current behavior, PSYOP Soldiers gain insight in how to influence that behavior."[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 wore 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.[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.[32]

Conclusion

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

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.[34]

For assistance in gaining cultural information before your deploy, contact Jennifer Dunn, deputy director and senior intelligence specialist for the Global Cultural Knowledge Network at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.[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.[36] ∎

References:

1. Master Sgt. B. Worth, interview with the author in collaboration with Sgt. First Class Regina Machine, 4th POG (A) Public Affairs Officer, January 31, 2018.
2. Elizabeth Culhane, Patrice Reid, Loring J. Crepeau, and Daniel McDonald, "Beyond Frontiers: The Critical Role of Cross-Cultural Competence in the Military," SIOP website, accessed 14 March 2018, http://www.siop.org/tip/july12/05culhane.aspx.
3. U.S. Army, Army Training and Leader Development, AR 350-1 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, August 19, 2014), chapter 8, 8-1, http://www.dami.army.pentagon.mil/g2Docs/Foundry/r350_1.pdf.
4. Cultural Intelligence for Winning the Peace, ed. Juliana Geran Pilon (Washington, D.C.: The Institute of World Politics Press) 142; Pilon 149-150; and Whitney Kassel, "The Army Needs Anthropologists," Foreign Policy website, 28 July 2015, http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/28/the-army-needs-anthropologists-iraq-afghanistan-human-terrain/.
5. Vanessa M. Gezari, The Tender Soldier: A True Story of War and Sacrifice (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 45.
6. Steve Featherstone, "Human Quicksand: For the U.S. Army, a Crash Course in Cultural Studies," Harper's Magazine, September 2008, 5, https://harpers.org/archive/2008/09/

human-quicksand-for-the-u-s-army-a-crash-course-in-cultural-studies/5/.

7. Montgomery McFate and Steve Fondacaro, "Reflections on the Human Terrain System During the First 4 Years," Prism: A Journal of the Center for Complex Operations, vol. 2, no. 4 (Sept. 2011), 64, http://cco.ndu.edu/Portals/96/Documents/prism/prism_2-4/prism_volume_2_issue_4.pdf

8. Major Ben Connable, "All Our Eggs in a Broken Basket: How the Human Terrain System is Undermining Sustainable Military Competence," Military Review (March-April 2009): 57-64, https://www.wired.com/images_blogs/dangerroom/files/MilitaryReviewConnableApr09.pdf.

9. David Price, "Human Terrain Systems, Anthropologists and the War in Afghanistan," CounterPunch website, 1 December 2009, https://www.counterpunch.org/2009/12/01/human-terrain-systems-anthropologists-and-the-war-in-afghanistan/; Yvette Clinton, et al. "Congressionally Directed Assessment of the (HTS)" Center for Naval Analyses (Nov 2010).

10. Noah Shachtman, "Army Social Scientist set Afire in Afghanistan," Wired website, 6 November 2009, https://www.wired.com/2008/11/army-social-sci/.

11. Tom Vanden Brook, "Army kills controversial social science program," USA Today website, 29 June 2015, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/06/29/human-terrain-system-afghanistan/29476409/.

12. U.S. Army, Intelligence, ARDP 2-0 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, August 2012), chapter 1, 1-15, https://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/misc/doctrine/CDG/cdg_resources/manuals/adrp/ADRP_2-0.pdf.

13. U.S. Army, Stability, ADRP 3-07 (Washington, D.C: Government Printing Office, August 31, 2012), chapter 1, 1-39, https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/adrp3_07.pdf.

14. ADRP 3-07, chapter 1, 1-39.

15. Worth, interview with the author.

16. ADRP 3-07, chapter 2, 2-12.

17. Gezari, 31; and McFate and Fondacaro, 65.

18. Worth, interview with the author.

19. Worth, interview with the author.

20. Jay Price, "Soldiers, With Empathy: U.S. Army Creates Dedicated Adviser Brigades," NPR website, accessed February 18, 2018, https://www.npr.org/2018/02/26/588927205/army-creating-units-whose-training-and-mission-is-to-serve-as-advisers.

21. Worth, interview with the author.

22. Worth, interview with the author.

23. Command Sgt. Maj. James VanSciver, "Interpersonal Communication," ed. retired Command Sgt. Maj. Joe B. Parson From One Leader to Another, (Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Institute Press, 2013).

24. Culhane, Reid, Crepeau, and McDonald, "Sustaining 3C at Various Levels" section of "Beyond Frontiers: The Critical Role of Cross-Cultural Competence in the Military."

25. Multi-Cultural Perspective Taking," accessed 01 February 2018, http://www.361interactive.com/focus.php.

26. Joan R. Rentsch, Allison Gunderson, Gerald F. Goodwin, and Allison Abbe, Conceptualizing Multicultural Perspective Taking Skills (Arlington, VA: U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, November 2007), v, http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/army/tr1216.pdf; "Multi-Cultural Perspective Taking."

27. U.S. Army, Special Operations, ARDP 3-05 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, August 2012), chapter 3, 3-70, https://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/misc/doctrine/CDG/cdg_resources/manuals/adrp/ADRP_3-05.pdf.

28. Staff Sgt K. Brown, interview with the author in collaboration with Sgt. First Class Regina Machine, 4th POG (A) Public Affairs Officer, January 31, 2018.

29. Brown, interview with the author.

30. Brown, interview with the author.

31. Worth, interview with the author.

32. Multi-Cultural Perspective Taking."

33. "Multi-Cultural Perspective Taking."

34. Culhane, Reid, Crepeau, and McDonald, "Defining and Developing a Cross-Cultural Competence Framework" section of "Beyond Frontiers: The Critical Role of Cross-Cultural Competence in the Military."

35. "Global Cultural Knowledge Network – Wiki," APAN website, accessed November 2017, https://community.apan.org/wg/oekn/w/wiki/13872/defaultwikipage/.

36. "Global Cultural Knowledge Network," APAN website, accessed November 2017, https://community.apan.org/wg/oekn/.

NCOJournal

https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/
https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal
https://twitter.com/NCOJournal