The Cultural Imperative for Professional Military Education and Leader Development

ALLISON ABBE and STANLEY M. HALPIN

There is emerging agreement within the military services that culture is an important factor in irregular warfare and stability, support, transition, and reconstruction operations. Sociocultural factors affect every level of engagement in irregular warfare, from the interpersonal interactions while negotiating with local leaders, military advisers training their counterparts, to group and societal engagements during strategic communication and influence operations. The impact of these factors has been widely recognized at every level of defense leadership, and some of the more frequently cited wartime leadership challenges have an intercultural component. The top challenges for Army company commanders listed in a 2007 article included interacting or working with indigenous leaders, security forces, and members of the population.[1] Cultural considerations are a pervasive factor throughout full-spectrum operations, as then-Lieutenant General Peter Chiarelli noted regarding Operation Iraqi Freedom: "Understanding the effect of operations as seen through the lens of the Iraqi culture and psyche is a foremost planning consideration for every operation."[2] These considerations are an integral component of the "indirect approach" and "small wars capabilities" that Defense Secretary Robert Gates has cited as necessities for current and future conflicts.[3]

The question now is how best to energize these capabilities. Creating specialized groups to assess sociocultural factors, such as Human Terrain Teams, provides an important asset but does not diminish the need for cultural capability across the force. Decision support and analytic tools are additional arrows in the quiver but still require that soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines understand their utility and limitations. To date, the problem of cultural training and education has primarily been framed in terms of increasing cultural knowledge—targeting cultural awareness or understand-

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ing.[4] Cultural knowledge is a necessary but insufficient component upon which to build the broad cultural capability needed by general-purpose forces to meet current and future challenges.

This article describes current conceptual approaches to increasing soldiers' and leaders' capability of dealing with cultural factors and explains why the services need to go beyond these approaches if they are to establish a comprehensive strategy for developing and institutionalizing broadly defined cultural capability. To understand and engage foreign cultures requires a cultural shift in the Army and other services as they restructure their effort to confront unconventional threats. The authors argue that this shift is essential primarily in professional military education and leader development programs to ensure a comprehensive and sustainable cultural capability across the force.

Cultural Awareness and Understanding Are Not Enough

Teaching cultural knowledge typically takes one of two forms, either region-specific or, to a lesser extent, culture-general. Both types of cultural knowledge are important but leave gaps in the practitioners' capabilities.

Region-specific training provides descriptive facts and figures about a locale. This training has the advantage of conveying information of immediate relevance to deploying units. Although region-specific training varies in depth, it typically conveys demographics and history regarding the various subgroups in a particular region, shared values of the population, a generalized description of the predominant belief system, and may include a list of "do's" and "don'ts" based on norms. Training materials are developed for the specific nations or regions where units will be deployed. Thus, the knowledge developed by such efforts may not readily transfer to other nations or geographic locations.

Another weakness of this type of training is that its effectiveness depends on the quality of the content, which can sometimes be inaccurate or outdated due to overreliance on subject-matter experts lacking recent experi-

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ence in the region. Even when trainers draw upon recent experiences, their conclusions need to be validated, as they may reflect local circumstances that have little to do with enduring characteristics of the general population or ethnic group. Content can also be influenced by the informant's own cultural biases. For example, one recent article applied Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs to Iraqi priorities.[5] This analysis assumes that a theory based on a western conception of the individual applies equally to Iraqis at a societal level, an extrapolation that may be inappropriate without more detailed analysis of Iraqi society. Applying western theories carries the risk of promoting ethnocentric attitudes, as it implies that cultural differences can be attributed to a lack of societal maturity on the part of the nation being examined. Such an approach reflects a general bias assuming that other nationalities are much like Americans, a critical assumption that needs to be addressed in culture training.

Region-specific training may also be inappropriate or insufficient for the area of operations that service members encounter following deployment; a generalization applying to a nation as a whole may not be relevant to specific provinces or cities. These descriptions become problematic when translated into lists of what to do and not to do (e.g., do not show the soles of one's feet). Prescriptive lists tend to overlook the intercultural nature of US interaction with other cultures. What is considered appropriate and desirable behavior for Iraqis by other Iraqis is sometimes an important consideration for US military personnel, and sometimes it is not.

Region-specific training tends to focus almost exclusively on what is "foreign" about the target region or distinct from US culture. Training focused on cultural differences may prove to be counterproductive for Army leaders, as influence and collaboration with members of other cultures tend to be enhanced by an understanding of similarities and shared identities, not by emphasizing differences. Finding ways to establish common ground, while acknowledging differences, is a helpful tool in establishing rapport and a first step toward building a relationship.

In contrast to region-specific training, culture-general training and education teach about culture in general, rather than a particular culture. This approach identifies dimensions on which cultures vary, providing a framework to consider cultural similarities and differences. Within an anthropological tradition, such culture-general approaches to knowledge tend to identify dimensions at a societal level, such as kinship, politics, and religion. For example, the concept of operational culture used in Marine Corps education includes the dimensions of physical environment, economy, social structure, political structure, and belief systems.[6] Another example of a culture-general, knowledge-based approach comes from the principles and

methods of organizational psychology. Researchers have proposed models describing culture along a set of dimensions that reflect shared patterns of individual beliefs, practices, values, or preferences. Popular frameworks include Geert Hofstede's five values dimensions, the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness program's nine dimensions of values and practices, and Gary Klein's cognitive dimensions.[7] These culture-general approaches have the benefit of possessing broad relevance, as any culture can be characterized in terms of where it falls along the continuum of a particular dimension.

General cultural knowledge is an important part of preparing to work in an unfamiliar culture; however, cultural knowledge alone does not build the acuity required to continue learning about culture, nor does it provide the agility needed to adjust one's behavior in response to local conditions. In particular, the etic, or comparative, dimensional frameworks from organizational psychology can be misleading. Although they do provide a structure for considering cultural similarities, they can sometimes overestimate the importance of cultural differences at the national level.

The contrasts provided by cultural dimensions are informative with respect to relative, but not absolute, levels on a dimension. For example, relative to Americans, other cultures may place less importance on maintaining physical distance or personal space, but members might still react negatively to being crowded.[8] Similarly, relative to Americans, Iraqis may feel less personal responsibility for outcomes and greater trust in external factors, such as fate or Allah, but they do not abandon the value of personal effort and action altogether. Thus, applying these dimensions can be useful to predict and comprehend how people within a particular culture behave when compared to groups from other cultures, but does not necessarily provide an understanding of the relative importance of various values and norms within that culture.

Both the region-specific and culture-general approaches to knowledge provide broad generalizations concerning a group or society, which can be useful. As the primary approach for generating cultural capability, however, they fall short of preparing service members for the complexities of military operations. First, this societal-level approach does not sufficiently prepare personnel to interact with individual members of the culture. Individuals are influenced by culture at multiple levels, including national, ethnic, religious, and organizational. Individual behavior and intentions may differ depending on which cultural identity is dominant at a specific moment. Because cultural influence is not homogeneously pervasive and is, in fact, situation dependent, national or ethnic culture may at times be irrelevant.[9] In addition to the influence of situational factors, individual personality also shapes be-

havior. Variability among individuals within a culture can be as important as variability between cultures, even when cultural differences are well documented.[10] Understanding the culture is certainly important but is only one aspect of effectively operating in a foreign culture.

Second, the knowledge-based approach conveys the impression that culture is a static body of knowledge to be acquired and stored for future reference, when, in fact, culture reflects a dynamic set of processes. These processes often create shared realities and stability over time but can also result in shifts and internal variation. Knowledge-based instruction too often fails to convey the skills needed to engage with and learn about a culture through first-person experience.

From Cultural Knowledge to Cross-Cultural Competence

As others have previously argued, acquiring cultural capability is more extensive than gaining cultural awareness or understanding.[11] The Department of Defense should look to the lessons learned by nonmilitary populations working in foreign cultures. Though military personnel clearly face some unique challenges, empirical research on expatriate managers, study-abroad students, and Peace Corps volunteers suggests a broader conceptualization of cultural capability that is equally relevant for the defense context. This research identifies the traits, knowledge, skills, and abilities that contribute to effective outcomes.[12]

Based on this research, researchers at the Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences developed a culture-generic concept of cross-cultural competence, in which knowledge is an important component when also accompanied by affect and skills. Cultural understanding is helpful but in and of itself is not enough. Military personnel also need the ability to use situational cues to determine when and how culture is relevant, as well as other skills for interacting with individual members of the culture. For example, cultural knowledge may have limited utility if rigid interpersonal behavior or ethnocentric attitudes are not addressed.

In this concept of cross-cultural competence, the three components of knowledge, affect, and skills combine to provide capabilities required to work in a foreign culture. Knowledge begins with an awareness of one's own culture and includes an understanding of culture and cultural differences, but has to progress toward an increasingly complex understanding of the sources, manifestations, and consequences of a particular culture. Affect includes attitudes toward foreign cultures and the motivation to learn about and engage with them. Skills encompass the ability to regulate one's own reactions

in a cross-cultural setting, interpersonal skills, and the flexibility to assume the perspective of someone from a different culture.

Of the three components, skills and affect were most directly related to successful outcomes in earlier research, while knowledge appeared less frequently as a contributing factor. For example, flexibility, interpersonal skills, non-ethnocentrism, and coping and stress management were all linked to adjustment or performance in cross-cultural settings. Research supports the notion that these characteristics are largely transferable among settings and culture-generic. General cultural skills and attitudes contribute more to successful outcomes than some culture-specific factors.

As a whole, the body of research contradicts a number of intuitive ideas about what makes a person effective in a foreign culture. Specifically, foreign language proficiency is often cited as the most important cultural skill for military personnel to develop. Foreign language proficiency does contribute to positive outcomes for individuals working in cultures where that language is spoken, but in fact the effects of language are less than is often expected. Interpersonal skills tend to make stronger contributions than language proficiency or prior international experience.[13] Knowing a foreign language is a capability with limited transfer possibilities, providing small benefit for additional language learning and having unknown effects on cultural learning. Because of these limitations, language proficiency may be one important tool in building cultural capability but is not necessarily the gateway to culture.

A Comprehensive Strategy

The existing research suggests that cultural capability is complex and multifaceted, consisting of general cultural knowledge and skills, as well as region- or culture-specific understanding and foreign language skills. Studies have recognized the need for capabilities beyond knowledge, but these capabilities continue to be overlooked in military education and training when compared with regional knowledge and language, despite research demonstrating their importance.[14] A long-term solution for building and sustaining cultural capability should address all three components—language, region-specific, and general cross-cultural competence.

The multifaceted nature of cultural capability also suggests that its development takes time; foundational attitudes, knowledge, or skills are likely prerequisites for developing higher levels of understanding or possessing a strategic perspective on culture. As with other forms of expertise, achieving a deep, or even moderate, level of sociocultural expertise involves progression through a series of stages.[15] This developmental challenge cannot be met

by a single training center, schoolhouse, or program of instruction. America's armed forces cannot "surge" cultural expertise, nor can they expect complex interpersonal skills and cultural cognition to develop when placed in competition with fundamental military skill sets.[16]

Implementing the institutional changes required to develop these capabilities requires the services to look outward, toward other cultures, and while doing so, also focus internally. As Admiral Mike Mullen noted, the institutional changes demanded in an era of persistent conflict include determining "different ways to promote, different ways to educate, different ways to train, compared to what we've done in the past."[17]

The Army has certainly taken positive steps in that direction. Culture has been incorporated at various levels of professional military education (PME), and training tools are widely available. These efforts, unfortunately, continue to be poorly coordinated, and implementation is inconsistent. Often these efforts are founded on ad-hoc solutions that are poorly resourced and not subjected to content vetting or evaluated for impact. The vast majority of cultural training and education still lack a common vision. There is an immediate need for an overarching strategic framework, integrating the various levels and approaches. This framework should outline the learning outcomes and describe the means by which each is achieved. The three pillars of leader development—training, education, and experience—each have a role, and there are potentially multiple developmental paths to accomplish these outcomes.

The Air Force recently adopted such a strategy.[18] Perhaps more importantly, the Air Force designated a central proponent for implementing the education and training programs required to execute that strategy, the Air Force Culture and Language Center. They also rapidly moved to build in-house expertise by hiring behavioral and social scientists. Of course, due to differing missions and organizational structures, an Army solution should not mirror the Air Force's solution. At a minimum, however, a strategic plan should articulate the goals for cultural capability, establish objectives to meet those goals, identify roles and responsibilities, and specify the necessary funding and resources.[19] In the absence of a plan, the organizational changes already implemented will continue ad hoc, ultimately proving to be unsustainable.

In the domain of cultural knowledge and skills, organizational change in education is especially critical. Many have heard the saying that training prepares you for certainty, education for uncertainty. The implication for irregular warfare is that the agility needed to perform effectively may be difficult to instill during training; training may simply provide opportunities for practice. PME needs to lay the foundation by teaching the generalizable knowledge and skills. General Peter Chiarelli, the Army Vice Chief of

Staff, has argued for this "broadening" role of education in contributing to a leader's versatility.[20]

PME provides the underpinning for cultural learning—that is, as an individual advances through the different levels of PME, he or she will be exposed to a coherent and incremental series of cultural topics and experiences. Learning objectives for a particular level of PME should be communicated to lower levels of PME, thus ensuring that any prerequisite knowledge or skills can be identified and developed in advance. This kind of coordination is necessary to eliminate redundancies and efficiently develop capabilities. It is necessary to ensure that the change is cultural in nature—that is, that goals for culture education are shared across the institution and continue over time.

Developing a comprehensive approach to cultural education and training does not simply imply a linear increase in hours of exposure; existing training and education can be adapted and leveraged to include culture. Indeed, education and training are already providing a foundation for cross-cultural competencies, or at least some closely related skills, due to cultural training's overlap with generalized leadership concepts. For example, the characteristic of flexibility, previously described in the skills domain of cross-cultural competence, parallels the competencies of agility described in Army leadership doctrine and leader adaptability in the Marine Corps and Air Force.[21]

One concrete application of that doctrine is the Adaptive Leader Course for junior officers in the Army, which represents a potential opportunity to link leadership with cultural capabilities.[22] Although culture may not be a domain of knowledge targeted by this particular program, building leader adaptability indirectly contributes to cultural flexibility. There are many such opportunities across PME, where existing connections between cross-cultural development and other competencies can be readily merged. These links will contribute to stronger preparation for full-spectrum operations in US warfighters and their leaders.

Another promising way to approach cross-cultural competence without providing direct cultural instruction is through contact with culturally dissimilar people. Soldiers currently have such opportunities through incidental contact in a variety of professional settings. For example, at the Command and General Staff College, international students enroll in Intermediate Level Education courses, and American students have opportunities to interact with their international classmates throughout the academic year. At Fort Jackson, S.C., new soldiers complete Basic Combat Training with soldiers who are native interpreters and translators in Arabic, Pushtu, Kurdish, or Persian. This cultural diversity presents a developmental opportunity,

and there should be ways to leverage these and other experiences that occur in the course of training and education.

Addressing the broad range of characteristics will require instructors to move beyond educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy for cognitive learning and think more broadly regarding the relevant learning outcomes.[23] Some of the education needed to facilitate further learning and effective performance does not fit neatly into Bloom's transition from knowledge to synthesis. This shift in framing educational objectives requires a professional development effort among the instructors and trainers, as many will be limited by their own levels of cultural development and teaching traditions. Instructors would also benefit from regular opportunities to interact and exchange resources with counterparts in other schools, services, or training centers. Many faculty already do so for their primary academic discipline but have fewer such opportunities for topics such as culture that span so many different disciplines and mission sets.

Though this article focuses primarily on PME, the potential contribution of civilian education should not be overlooked. In addition to exposing leaders to courses of study not available in PME, civilian education can confer other benefits. It often exposes individuals to perspectives and methods of analysis not widely represented in the military, and evidence highlights the benefits of exposure to outside voices.[24] Officers often cite their studies at civilian institutions as experiences that contribute markedly to their intellectual agility. Additionally, the role of training is critical. The relatively abstract, individual learning that occurs in PME has to be reinforced in training, particularly in the context of the unit level, if it is to be of practical use over the long-term.

None of these methods for attaining cultural readiness can produce a sustainable cultural shift in the Army unless metrics are developed and implemented. Metrics for the relevant cultural capabilities provide the ability to assess and track personnel and evaluate programs. Aside from observing mission success or performance at the training centers, there is not a common framework or metric for determining what success looks like at various points along the way. A common language does not exist for determining what interventions are succeeding, which approaches to cultural education could be improved, or identifying existing gaps. For example, instructors do not know whether interacting with an avatar in a constructive simulation is better, worse, or equal to live simulation when teaching negotiation skills.

A further consequence of this lack of metrics is the difficulty in identifying which personnel have an aptitude for cultural adaptability. Anecdotally, soldiers from multicultural backgrounds are said to be a "natural" at

acquiring the nuances of communication and behavior in a foreign community, or having personalities that can win over almost anyone, regardless of whether they share a common culture or language. These stories are consistent with research on bicultural identity and multicultural personality, but this research has yet to be applied in a military context. The selection process continues to identify individuals by chance, or simply ignores such factors in favor of other criteria when selecting advisers, civil affairs specialists, and other positions requiring increased levels of intercultural contact.

Aside from opportunities for more objective assessments that these metrics provide, the development of assessment tools can be a great benefit, forcing practitioners to be explicit regarding what they mean when using terms such as "cultural awareness," "cultural astuteness," "cultural savvy," or other descriptors used to express cultural capabilities. This challenge has been successfully addressed in other domains, such as foreign language proficiency and leadership; it is time to address it in the realm of culture. No definition will be perfect and satisfy all critics, but participants should at least agree on a core set of concepts for communication and assessment.

Looking Back and Looking Ahead

Sociocultural factors will continue to be a central consideration for military operations in the future. A historical view of this challenge suggests that the Department of Defense has been less than successful at institutionalizing solutions in the past. Research funded by the Army and Navy in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in a number of cultural training and assessment tools that have virtually been forgotten. Specifically, the culture assimilator and contrast-American techniques were developed with funding from the military, yet are rarely, if ever, used in military cultural training today.[25] Past research recommended including culture-general learning along with culture-specific training[26] and even addressed the question of how to assess predictors of cross-cultural adjustment.[27] The research community has already addressed many of the same questions that are being asked today. Lessons learned have to become institutionalized to avoid such redundancy in the future.

A sustainable, organizational solution for institutionalizing cultural capability demands a central role for professional military education. Several specific actions can facilitate that goal. First, the Army can generate a servicewide strategic framework for culture as a component of PME and leader development. The Army Training and Doctrine Command has an effort under way to establish such a strategy, but it has yet to be adopted and

implemented Army-wide. Second, the Army should integrate culture-general objectives into cultural training and education, in the form of developmentally appropriate aspects of cross-cultural competence. Affect and skills should be deliberately addressed in learning objectives and assessments, just as cultural knowledge has been. This shift toward greater emphasis on generalizable, transferable skill sets, rather than cultural knowledge applicable only in a specific conflict, is a critical component to successfully institutionalizing culture. Third, a greater investment in the cultural capability and resources related to faculty, instructors, and observer-trainers is required. This investment will provide professional development opportunities for trainers and instructors capable of imparting aspects of cultural capability, both in the development of their own abilities and in exchanging resources with peers.

Culture is best taught as a factor across full-spectrum operations, an enabler supporting other capabilities, rather than an "a la carte" supplement to conventional warfighter knowledge and skills. Future strategic challenges may include multiple engagements around the world with a greater reliance on partner relationships, and expanded cultural breadth and agility will be required if we are to meet those challenges.[28] Incorporating into education and training a full range of capabilities provided by the triad of regional knowledge, language skills, and cross-cultural competence is a critical step toward building a ready force capable of deploying anywhere, anytime.

NOTES

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