# The Myths of Cultural Awareness
## Culture does not eat strategy for breakfast

*by David Bergman*

**Resumé**

Under de senaste åren har operationer i internationella kontexter medfört ett ökat fokus på att arbeta tillsammans med inhemska förband och i närhet till den lokala befolkningen. Detta kräver ofta en förståelse för kulturen hos en motpart – vad som oftast benämns som "kulturell medvetenhet". Behovet av kulturell medvetenhet understryks ofta under utbildning inför insatser utomlands och utmålas även ibland som den ensamt viktigaste faktorn för framgång i militära operationer. Denna artikel presenterar en något avvikande uppfattning från den övriga litteraturen inom området och gör en kritisk analys av det kulturcentrerade förhållningssättet (primacy of culture-perspective). Istället framhävs den grundläggande psykologiska principen att huvuddelen av mänskliga beteenden är universella – inte kulturella – och att vårt synsätt ofta fördunklas av vår förväntan av betydande kulturella skillnader. Sammanfattningsvis uttrycks stöd för att kultur är en faktor att beakta i militära operationer, men bara en av faktorerna och inte på något sätt den mest avgörande. Övergripande framhålls även behovet av att en förståelse för kulturella faktorer måste grunda sig i en förståelse för vår egen kultur och hur den kommer att uppfattas av de vi möter.

DURING RECENT YEARS both the Swedish Armed Forces and the Australian Defence Force have been in similar operational deployments to Afghanistan, the Middle East and Africa. Since these deployments often involve cooperation with indigenous forces and working amongst local populations, the importance of understanding the local culture – what is commonly referred to as cultural awareness – has been stressed in military training.[1]

Experience has clearly shown that aspects of different cultures – such as religion, language, local and regional customs, values and ways of living together – will affect military operations in current and future deployments.[2] It has shown that soldiers should have a deep understanding of the local population's culture and subcultures, as well as an ability to influence people and perceptions.[3]

This article will present a view that differs from mainstream cultural awareness-training. It will dismiss common misconceptions about cultural awareness, and will present a usable framework for soldiers. This framework is based on solid scientific evidence and tested by my own operational experiences.

## Defining and approaching culture

Culture is a hard term to define, mainly due to the fact that it is a collective term describing many different things. From art and literature, to customs, values and beliefs, culture is a term that defines and describes many aspects of our lives that we

cannot easily put under the same heading. In different areas the word is given different meanings. Hence there is a need to operationalize what we mean by the word.

The word originates from the Latin *Culturae*, or "to cultivate". Whereas *Natura* is the untouched form, culture is a pattern that has been created by man. In social terms it is most often described as ways of living together. Culture is always shared, and used to distinguish different groups that have more or less distinct characteristics.

Culture distinguishes social constructions within a group of individuals. These seldom, if ever, match national, geographical or ethnic boundaries and it is very difficult to ascertain exactly how small or large a culture is.[4] Any identifiable culture can be further broken down into unique, more or less homogenous subcultures. This further complicates the definition of culture.

The problem of how to define and delineate a culture soon becomes obvious. How far should the cultural division go – does it reach down to the level of tribes, neighbourhoods, families or even individuals? How do we conceptualise the fact that an individual can be influenced by several cultures or subcultures to varying degrees? An individual can be part of the cultures of a church, a trade union, a military unit, a football team or a family – all influencing him or her to different degrees and in different ways. While these questions have no easy answer they lead to one important conclusion: when discussing culture in an operational context, it is difficult – even dangerous – to generalise so broadly as to speak of *one* Somali, Afghan or Iraqi culture. Our mindset in our work should be that we interact with *humans*, and *culture* is only one factor to consider.

But since we're dealing with human beings, do we really need cultural awareness training? Historically many wars and peacekeeping operations have been successfully waged without any such training. Shouldn't the "good bloke factor"[5] or plain common sense be enough? Certainly, being a good person can go a long way but it should be supplemented with knowledge about the individuals we are meeting. Regarding common sense, we should always ask ourselves: common to whom?[6] Individuals from another culture might view the world from a slightly different perspective, thus making ideas about what is sensible "common" primarily to them. Having a mindset that encompasses these perspectives will likely enhance operational effectiveness.

As has been shown, there is a need for cultural training in the modern military. The question is, then, how we can best prepare soldiers, sailors and airmen for future operations through this training.

## Awareness is not enough

To begin with, let's examine some of the basic factors regarding training in cultural awareness. A common source of error can be identified in the term itself: awareness. Have you ever received a military order that states: "Kilo Lima, advance to the town square, and be culturally aware"? Probably not. This is because cultural awareness is only a mean to reach a military objective and never an objective in itself.

When giving lectures on operational culture I often ask individuals to select which category best describes them: 1) scholars of social anthropology or 2) soldiers, sailors & airmen. To date no one has selected the first option. Since I have primarily given presentations to military audiences, this

is an expected result, but relevant exactly because of that reason. In a military context it is not the cultural phenomenon *per se* that interests us but rather how – if at all – it will affect our military operations.

The cultural awareness training given to soldiers can take many forms. It is possible, however, to group culture training programs into two broad categories. The first category comprises simple approaches, often involving a "cultural awareness smart-card" that is laminated and fits in your pocket. With clear do's and don'ts, these cards tell you how to face another culture. Do not spit, do not break wind, do not show the soles of your feet and do not greet with your left hand. If you commit one of these cultural mortal sins you will forever be doomed. But if we look at these critically the flaws become self-evident. Do you often spit at people when you talk to them? Do you not normally shake hands with your right hand? The behaviours described on these smart-cards often do not reflect *cultural*, but rather more general *human* codes of conduct and if our soldiers can't follow them to begin with then we have bigger problems than those addressed by cultural awareness-training. Nor can we, for that matter, reduce human interaction to something that can be described in an Ikea-style manual.

The other category comprises more advanced approaches, which involve reading everything about an area or a culture. These approaches often involve listening to lectures from "experts" on the area such as professors, ambassadors, diplomats or aid-workers. But the problem with these approaches is the same as the question that the rifleman asks when he or she finishes reading a prescribed book or after leaving a lecture: so what? While often highly interesting, lectures and books on the subject are often too theoretical and too difficult to easily implement within the daily military routine, especially for the common soldier. If anything, this approach can create a dangerous sense that culture is impossible to fully understand and that soldiers do better by not trying at all. The simple, smart card-approach contain too many broad generalisations while the advanced, "going for the PhD" approaches are too theoretical and not applicable to military operations.

One other possible reaction to the expectation that cultures will be substantially different is to prohibit certain topics of discussion where differences may arise. During one conversation with a counterpart in the Middle East I explained the directive from our armed forces to never discuss politics, sex or religion. The man simply looked at me perplexed and finally answered: '"then what is there left to talk about?" There are seldom any "hazardous topics" that shouldn't be discussed. On the contrary, people across the world share a willingness for conversation and the points mentioned above are among the most common topics for discussion, both within and across cultures. To reduce or restrict communication cannot be a viable solution.

What we must try to do is to give soldiers a simplified, defusing approach – free of intimidation or restrictions – that views the individuals we encounter as human beings. And that cultural behaviours of those individuals are seldom, if ever, an obstacle for communication or military cooperation.

## In a different culture, everything changes

The argument is often made that "when working in a different culture, *everything* changes". The implication is meant to be

that unless born and raised in the culture in question, one can never fully understand or function in that society. This paints the culture as an obstacle that can never be overcome. But looking critically at this primacy of culture perspective, do we really believe that some of the people we encounter are like aliens that do not share the same cognitive processes and basic human values as the rest of the world's population?[7] Probably not.

In fairness, some of the sources on cultural awareness mentioned earlier recognizes that culture doesn't change everything, even though adopting a primacy of culture-perspective. For example, ,Christopher Lamb, in his discussion of persuasion tactics in US Psychological Operations notes that "persuasive communication transcends culture by the most basic appeals" stating that the most fundamental principles, as for example the appeal to self-interest, are universal across cultures.[8]

But there is strong evidence that more than only the basic principles of psychology are common across cultures. In reality, most human behaviours are universal. Few are culturally distinctive, and I have yet to find support for the claim that culture can fundamentally alter human cognition. In fact, it was recently found that the classical psychological conformity-study conducted by Solomon Asch in 1951[9] has been positively replicated 133 times across the globe.[10] This, along with other studies, indicates that the fundamentals of human psychology are common to individuals everywhere. Matsumoto states that 'general functions are more likely to yield cultural universals, while specific functions are more likely to prove culturally distinctive'.[11] By this he means that our general human functions are the same, and that it is the small specific functions that

are culturally distinctive. Humans are humans, wherever you go in the world, and we will have more that connects us than separates us.

## They are the strange ones

So far we have limited our considerations to the culture of the individuals that we encounter during overseas deployments. But another equally important variable in the culture equation is your own culture, how it manifests itself and how it will be perceived by the local population.

If we are talking about cultural differences, then we are talking about a measurable distance between ourselves and another social group. When considering the distance between point A and point B, it is always the case that the distance from each point to the other is the same. To another culture, we are as different to them as they are to us. If we perceive cultural differences, so will they.

In this cultural equation we often view our own culture as normal – we are the normal ones and they are the strange ones. But there is no logical argument to support such a claim. In fact, when visiting another country, wouldn't it make more sense to accept that we are the strange ones and that that country's citizens are normal? Our culture does not set the standard for what is "normal culture", even though we might unconsciously assume this. If we try to avoid making this assumption, wouldn't this give us the possibility to strengthen our means to focus on the objective?

This error in thinking is not uncommon and has a natural explanation. We view the world through our own eyes and interpret it according to our own expectations, values and beliefs. Information that is new to us and does not match our expectations

or previous experiences is, by definition, strange to us.

To view culture in black and white terms is a characteristic of ethnocentrism.[12] This view often results from a lack of education and experience and can cause an individual to see his own culture as "right" and any other as "wrong". To what degree ethnocentrism influences our perception of the world may vary. But it is clear that in order to fully understand and appreciate another culture we must first be aware of and embrace our own culture, and be open to the fact that other persons may view us as culturally strange.

## Organizational culture and operational culture

In addition to the differences in culture of individuals in another country, we must also consider the culture of our own organisations. We often react strongly to the differences of a foreign culture, but are often blind to the fact that these can be dwarfed by the differences between the different services (army, navy, air force) within our own military.

This is natural in all major organizations. A study of international corporations notices that sometimes the differences within an organisation can be greater than the differences between similar organisations in different countries. "The temptation to attribute differences to different cultural mindsets is strong", states Professor Livia Markószy, "... but may pale in comparison to the differences between the production people and the marketing people in that same firm."[13]

In one of his books, Israeli Army Psychologist Ben Shalit makes a similar point when he recounts his experiences from visiting the front line troops in the Sinai de-

sert.[14] The first stop was the commander of the Paratrooper battalion. Eager to make a good impression, sharply dressed Shalit saluted crisply when reporting correctly to the commander. His behaviour led to a scolding and almost got him thrown out of the command-post. Saluting, wearing head-gear in the field or calling title by rank was nearly a mortal sin (no reason to give the snipers a clear target) and unheard of among the strongly functional discipline of the paratroopers. A few hours later Shalit put his newly acquired experiences to action when visiting the commander of the Armour battalion, which in turn got him another scolding and almost got him thrown out of that command post as well. Attention to the smallest details was considered fundamental for combat success among the tankies (the formal discipline was considered crucial for the intricate team-work of the tank crews) and a negligence to pay attention to details was never acceptable. Behaviour was operationalized in regards to the objectives and *modus operandi* of the different kinds of units, which in turn affected their organisational culture.

Shalit points to even more interesting differences in organisational culture when he admits (with good humour), that the only probable reason that the two battalion commanders tolerated his behaviour was the fact that he was wearing a Navy uniform, which automatically excused his ignorance of proper military manners. Despite notable differences in organisational culture Shalit makes no indication of a reduction in combat-effectiveness as a result – rather the opposite – of each respective unit or the ability of the two commanders to work together toward a common objective.

These examples leads to an important question: if we can successfully work together with individuals from other parts of our own organisation with significant differences in organisational culture without any advanced training, then shouldn't we also naturally have the capability to just as easily work together with individuals from cultures in other countries as well?

Markóczy's theories argue that we indeed already have the capability to work in other cultures as she states that 'our view is obscured by our expectation of substantial cultural differences'.[15] When we expect the individuals we are meeting to be radically different, whose behaviours will be impossible to fully comprehend, we tend to limit our communication, making our expectation a self-fulfilling prophecy. But if we instead embrace the fact that every individual is a human first, who holds the same basic values and beliefs as we do, we can start to look for commonalities that will facilitate communication and likely enhance the overall efficiency of the operation we are undertaking. If you search for differences you will build obstacles – but if you search for commonalities you will build bridges. Even if there can be many factors which differ between cultures, an approach based upon trying to see the commonalities can be more fruitful.

During a deployment in Afghanistan I served as Team Leader, working closely with the local population. During one patrol, a colonel along with his Close Protection Team was accompanying us. During a short stop, while trying to negotiate the best way to reach the police station that was our destination, I noticed that one of the military bodyguards – a military policeman – had engaged an Afghan police officer in conversation at an intersection ahead. Surprised, since I knew that the individual could not speak the local language, I walked up to them. As I approached I could clearly hear the soldier, a social and outgoing man from Gothenburg, in heavily accented Swedish and with wild gesticulations, asking for directions to the police station. What was more surprising was that the Afghan police officer clearly understood him, answering with directions in the local *Dari* dialect. These directions led us directly to the police station.

When asked for the reason behind his actions, the military policeman simply answered "I saw that he was a police officer as well, I figured he had to know the way." When asked more specifically why he didn't bring an interpreter, the man only laughed and said "now you're only seeing the problems".

Although I firmly believe that the communication between the two police officers would have been better with an interpreter, it clearly indicates that communication does not have to be complicated. The two individuals were not afraid of cultural boundaries, and instead they searched for commonalities. Identifying each other as police officers established common ground between them, and the use of simple words such as "police" and "motor", together with body language was sufficient for them to communicate.

## Culture does not eat strategy for breakfast

A phrase often heard and repeated as a mantra before and during overseas deployments is that "culture eats strategy for breakfast".[16] This phrase, and others like it, suggests that unless we understand the cultural context where we operate, our military strategies will never succeed. In some cases, military theorists have gone so

far as to coin the term *culture centric-warfare*[17] with the implication that we should approach all military operations from a cultural perspective. Overall, it is not uncommon for culture to be portrayed as *the* primary factor affecting success in military operations.

But is understanding the cultural context really more important than understanding the military profession, operational art or military strategy? If that was the case then local employees – natives from the culture in question – would be best suited to conduct negotiations, liaison, psychological operations, mentoring, special operations or any other type of military task that involves contact with the local population. That is probably not the case. Looking back at the most successful campaigns and operations in military history, are those successes the effect of superior cultural awareness or the overall best military strategy and resources to fulfil that strategy? Not understanding the cultural context *might* be a barrier, but not nearly as dangerous a barrier as not having sufficient skills in the military profession.

Whenever considering cultural factors we should always keep in mind that we are soldiers – experts on the instrument of legitimised violence[18] – who conduct military operations. We're not midwives, priests, anthropologists, journalists or members of any other profession. We're soldiers, and as soldiers we should adapt only to the cultural phenomena that affect our military operations, and leave the remaining part of the culture for others to explore.

## Cultural awareness or Cultural adaptation?

During overseas deployments it is not uncommon to see soldiers from different na-

tions, to varying degrees, embrace some of the cultural practices of the local population. Examples can be growing long beards, wearing civilian scarves or hats from the area or participating in local customs in order to express "deep cultural sensitivity". The implication is that this will raise the level of communicative trust and therefore operational effect in the area. Committing to the "go native-style" (a practice originally undertaken by Special Operations Forces) is sometimes accepted as a good enough reason to break military rules and regulations even if there is no other logical reason as to why.

There is, in fact, little support in the literature on cultural psychology or in military doctrine that the "go native-approach" – mimicking or adapting to the culture in question – produces any increase in operational effectiveness. On the contrary, the individuals that you encounter will expect you to be a good representative of *your* culture. To over-adapt can easily be counter-productive and cause more harm than good. Markóczy agrees when she states that 'the line between being insensitive and sensitive to cultural differences may be as thin as the line between being sensitive and oversensitive to them'.[19]

To exemplify, let us consider another example but in reverse: a warlord from Afghanistan comes to your Regiment in your home country to negotiate. Upon arrival he is clean-shaven, sporting a back-slick hairstyle and is dressed in clothes common among the hip-hop culture of the urban youth in your city. Would you interpret this as incredibly culturally sensitive in a way that makes you trust the individual more, or would you rather find it suspicious or even laughable? Probably the latter!

One possible explanation for the go native-approach can be that it lends a perception of cultural competence. From a purely individual perspective the approach can actually have some limited effect. Reducing the differences in physical appearance might give the perception that as a corollary any cultural differences will be reduced as well – thus facilitating interpersonal communication. If an individual feels confident that a longer beard makes him better to communicate, then it might give him the confidence that perceived cultural obstacles can be overcome more easily. However, this will only affect the individual's belief in his own ability to communicate, and not how this behaviour will be interpreted by a counterpart, thus still making it highly likely to be counterproductive.

The arguments for go native-approach also rest on the premise that culture is an obstacle that has to be overcome in order to communicate. Methods to overcome perceived cultural obstacles *might* have some effect, but will probably never be as effective as not regarding cultural differences as an obstacle in the first place.

## The tendency to over-complicate culture

So why are the views expressed above not mentioned more often in training or in the literature? Many people, not just soldiers, are required to work within a different culture. This has made the market for consultants and cultural awareness training programs flourish. To simplify the problem or downplay the need for training is not in the interests of individuals making a business from the delivery of such training. Another explanation is that academia places a premium on statistics and identifiable differences between experimental and control groups. Intercultural psychology places a premium on finding differences, not similarities, between cultures. And humans – including researchers – tend to find what they expect to find.[20]

Kelton Rhoads emphasises these effects in his work on intercultural communication. He asserts that it is not uncommon for researchers as well as lecturers to masquerade psychological universals as cultural specifics.[21] In his work he shows several examples of influence campaigns designed to be successful in a given cultural setting when in reality these campaigns would succeed – or fail – in any cultural setting for similar reasons. Although Rhoads' work is centred on cross-cultural communication in general, military examples of this difference-bias are not hard to find.

- A study discussing communication techniques for psychological operations to foreign target audiences in the Arab world stated that using "Western style" dissemination methods such as television were less persuasive and that the culture in question was more likely to be influenced by relationship-centred, interpersonal communication. This is absolutely true, however it is also true in other parts of the world as well, and a good example of a universal principle masked as a cultural specific.[22]

- During the conflict in Afghanistan, US forces have to date been accused several times of desecrating the bodies of enemy combatants. During one incident in 2005, the action to incinerate the bodies instead of burying them infuriated the local community and was by many categorised as a "huge cultural blunder", indicating the need for increased cultural awareness train-

ing.[23] The act was in itself of course despicable, but a valid question is: can you name any culture where the desecration of bodies would be anything but insensitive? If a taboo is shared across cultures then it is not *culturally* but rather *humanly* insensitive.[24]

In addition to the difference-bias, culture is sometimes used as a scapegoat for behaviours which have no valid justification. Comments such as: "it's in their culture" or "they don't want to help themselves" are sometimes made in frustration. Such comments are clearly externalising the cause for the failure to communicate and are also attributing this failure to a culture – not a person. To attribute failure to external causes, without acknowledging one's own shortcomings, is actually a normal reaction, according to Attribution Theory, a psychological principle by Fritz Heider.[25] Ironically, in the reverse situation, the same individuals would more likely internalise the causes of successful communication. They would ascribe success to their own personal competence (such as a high cultural awareness), rather than favourable situational factors. But the fact remains. In general we have a tendency to automatically attribute failures to the external causes generally, and often culture specifically, rather than to take the time to find more plausible explanations.

We don't always need to come up with complex answers to cultural questions. Sometimes the simple explanations are best. The principle of simplicity is an excellent tool when encountering a foreign culture.[26] For example, in some under-developed countries they sit on the floor and eat with their hands. We can seek a complex cultural explanation for this behaviour – and believe me, I have heard several of them – or we can accept a simpler explanation that requires fewer assumptions: they are very poor and have never been able to afford furniture or cutlery.

## Conclusions

Culture should best be viewed as a moderator of psychological effects rather than something that fundamentally changes human nature. Cultural differences are natural, and should exist, but are seldom – if ever – an obstacle, nor are there any "cultural mortal sins". Most human behaviours are universal, not cultural. If we search for cultural differences we will build our own obstacles. But if we instead search for commonalities we will build bridges and a stable ground for future military cooperation.

Cultural differences are something that will enrich your experiences in another country, but they are seldom – if ever – a factor that fundamentally changes human psychology or the basic principles of warfare. The extent to which a cultural phenomenon requires an explanation depends on your task: if it is clear that culture will affect your operations, then by all means it should be included in as a factor in operational planning. But if the culture does not affect the task at hand – and chances are that it won't – then the solution can be as simple as carrying on with the military operation and leaving culture as a phenomenon for the anthropologists to study.

The Author is a captain in the Swedish army and a doctoral student in Psychology at Stockholm University

# Notes

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