



Culture Cubed: Towards Three-Part Definition of Intercultural Competence

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The nature of modern warfare has led to a surge of interest in culture in general and intercultural competence in particular. Out of this interest, the United States Military Academy (USMA) has developed a research center, the Center for Languages, Cultures and Regional Studies (CLCRS), focused on the domains of language proficiency, intercultural competence and regional expertise. The goal of this center is to define and assess cadet achievement in these three domains for the academy in particular and offer our insights to the larger military community and civilian academic community.

The issue of intercultural competence has gained extensive attention in both the civilian and military communities. The literature suggests a complex debate between various academic and military organizations. Taking their positions as a point of departure, CLCRS builds on this expertise through the integration of various military and academic discourses on cultural identity and intercultural competence and then seeks to take the discussion and operationalize it into a set of measureable objectives. Finally, we seek to develop a method of testing that assesses cadet (student) achievement in the area of cultural knowledge and intercultural competence.

Our goal is to continue the rich dialogue that has developed by offering a different perspective. Also, we seek to move the discussion beyond simply defining culture to actually assessing intercultural competence. Following comments from LTG William Caldwell¹ at the recent U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Culture Summit, intercultural competence involves looking at culture as not just knowledge, but also looking at a skill set that increases intercultural competence and identifying a set of behaviors that assist a person succeed in a cross-cultural environment. In an era of intense scrutiny in academia, business and the military, it is important for all organizations involved in teaching intercultural competence to



demonstrate what the students have learned and how well they have learned the concepts of language proficiency, intercultural competence and regional expertise. To this end, we seek to develop a definition of intercultural competence that includes cultural knowledge, intercultural sensitivity (an affect characteristic), and increased flexibility in intercultural environments (a skill).

What is Culture in the Military Context?

TRADOC has developed a working definition of culture that seems to provide a foundation for a discussion of culture in the military context. According to TRADOC,² culture is “the set of distinctive features of a society or group, including, but not limited to values, beliefs and norms, that ties together members of that society or group and that drives action and behavior.” The contemporary operating environment (COE) resulting from 9/11 and as demonstrated by the irregular/unconventional nature of military operations in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) shows an increase in the importance of culture, intercultural competence, language proficiency and regional expertise as part of the education and training program for all members of the armed forces. The US Army Counterinsurgency Field Manual (FM 3-24) has started to capture this change in military thinking and as a result, has an extensive discussion on the role of culture in modern warfare. FM 3-24³ also emphasizes the role of power in understanding insurgencies and counter insurgencies, in that “political power is the central issue in insurgencies and counterinsurgencies.” This is a significant point because it requires a rethinking of culture as in part, a political process, something that can be modified for political gain.

A second insight of FM 3-24 is the transnational nature of insurgencies. The “glue” that holds people of different countries together in coordinated actions is the notion of identity. FM



3-24 prominently identifies extremist ethnic or religious beliefs as important sources of identity, but we can also potentially see insurgencies based on economic, territorial, environmental or other ideologies. Our emphasis on other factors for potential insurgencies is important in order to avoid “pigeon holing” insurgencies or other conflicts into either ethnic or religious conflicts. This is seen too often in the world and the case of Darfur is one example of a territorial conflict that has often been misrepresented as religious in nature.

One of the most important conclusions of FM3-24⁴ is the definition of victory in an insurgency operation. Victory is achieved when the government is viewed by the indigenous population as legitimate. This is important as it extends beyond a traditional military definition of victory and requires the military leadership to engage in issues of economic development, political development, culture, and many more issues. Tactical success can contribute to security, but guarantees nothing. As has been mentioned in numerous places, counterinsurgency is a “thinking man’s” warfare, or “the graduate level of warfare.”⁵

Another important observation is the importance of the local context in insurgencies and counterinsurgencies. In order for counterinsurgencies to succeed, some regional expertise is needed in order to understand the regional and localized nature of the conflict to accurately determine and respond to local needs.

As laid out in FM3-24, the COE has changed from the conventional Cold War nature to one of asymmetrical actions, insurgencies and counterinsurgencies. This change requires a new manner of thinking that emphasizes cultural and power structures transcending the battlefield, issues requiring an understanding of language, culture and regional expertise. One of CLCRS goals is to promote a rethinking of culture and intercultural competence and how these concepts



can enrich the education and training of newly commissioned officers in particular, and also contribute to the education and training of all members of the armed forces.

Culture Specific Documents

There are several key documents that have laid out various agencies' positions on culture and intercultural competence as seen from their perspective and needs. At West Point, our perspective is strongly shaped by the needs of the Army, but given the diversity of joint operations and in which the Army is involved and the considerable experiences offered by other services, we must also draw upon several outside sources as we develop our vision of culture and intercultural competence.

At the core of all discussion of language proficiency, intercultural competence and regional expertise is the Defense Language Transformation Roadmap (2005). While the first goal of the Roadmap⁶ is to “[c]reate foundation language and cultural expertise in the officer, civilian, and enlisted ranks for both Active and Reserve Components,” the remainder of the document lays out objectives for language, but remains mostly silent on culture. Since 2005, several people and organizations have offered positions on how to both define and develop cultural expertise across various agencies.

The U.S. Marine Corps⁷ has developed its own guidance for culture and intercultural competence which identify five operational dimensions of Culture: physical environment, economic systems, social structures, political structures and beliefs and symbols. This conception is useful as it provides a framework for explaining culture, but fails to completely explain all of the elements of culture within a society. For example, the physical environment should not include just the natural landscape and how people harvest its resources, but also should include a discussion of how cultures modify landscapes in an effort to promote their



identity and how modifications can project power. Wolfel⁸ looks at the movement of that Kazakhstani capital from Almaty to Astana as a geopolitical statement to the Russian minority in the north in particular and to Russia in general. By moving the capital north, the Kazakhstani government is identifying the territory in the north as Kazakhstani. Also, at the local level, Oluic⁹ comments on how the former antagonists in Bosnia use religious symbols to mark their territory. The two examples show the importance of landscape on the cultural identity of a region.

Also, their five dimensions fail to address the importance of language. Language is key a dimension of culture in several aspects. At the most basic level, language is the primary method of transmitting culture. Therefore, whoever controls language development strongly influences cultural development. It is no surprise that several theorists including Anderson¹⁰ and Gellner¹¹ look to the era of industrial development as the era when cultural identity consolidated around the European model of the state. Industrial powers were willing to allow the state to control education and create a cohort of workers with basic literacy, numeric and citizenship skills. The state willingly undertook this role as it was able to transmit its version of language and culture onto the population, creating dutiful citizens who accepted the status quo.

Language is also important as it provides a sense of legitimacy both for the leadership of a country and for foreigners wishing to interact with both the leadership and citizens of the country. Citizens are more likely to support leaders who speak their own language. In the case of the former Soviet Union, language laws were some of the first important pieces of legislation enacted. Therefore, any conception of culture that fails to address language is missing the primary method of legitimizing and transmitting culture.



The USMC statement on culture does identify the significance of nested identities and issues of individuals being members of multiple cultural groups. Nested identities refer to people who identify with different groups that operate at different geographic levels. For example, a person could identify with the population of a neighborhood, city, county, state, region, country and transnational group simultaneously. This creates two problems for an outsider trying to understand the culture of a location. First, it is difficult to accurately identify the characteristics of a cultural group as the individual's actions are often influenced by differing levels of cultural identity. Second, membership in a shared transnational ethnic group does not necessarily lead to a sense of "imagined community,"¹² as local identities could distort the characteristics of the individual. For example, an Italian-American probably has more in common with an Anglo-American than with an Italian. This is due to the influence of local identities interfering with the larger transnational identity of "Italian-ness." This is problematic when we insert people as "cultural experts" based on kinship attributes as opposed to actual field training as cultural experts might lack the "on the ground training" necessary to successfully complete their mission.

TRADOC, as the training organization of the U.S. Army has been a key player in the development of methods to develop intercultural competence. One of the key recent developments within TRADOC has been the separation of Intercultural Competence and Regional Expertise. This division is important within the new Center for Languages, Cultures and Regional Studies (CLCRS) as we too distinguish between cultural awareness and regional expertise. Based on the developing body of literature, as seen in recent whitepapers, produced by TRADOC Culture Center, the Army is moving in a direction of teaching culture as a generic construct, one that has certain themes that are common across various cultures. These basic



themes center on the Army's definition of culture based on the VBBN model. This is defined as the “values, beliefs, behaviors and norms that characterize a dynamic social system used by a particular group.”¹³ Hajjar also refers to culture as a “web of meaning”, learned through enculturation. He also emphasizes that culture is arbitrary, emphasizing that “military members should make no assumptions about what a society considers right and wrong,” This forms the foundation of TRADOC's position on culture, strongly influenced by anthropological theories of culture.

While this is a solid foundation on which a definition of culture can be developed, it fails to address two important elements. First, the spread of culture through socialization does not take into account the political structure of a region and the methods by which culture, or national identity, is used to bolster the political legitimacy of a specific government. Gellner has emphasized that not all possible cultural identities have blossomed into dominant national identities. In fact, Gellner¹⁴ suggests that there is “one effective nationalism for *ten* potential ones.” This means that ninety percent of all cultural identities fail to develop. Gellner, and many others explain this failure as the need to consolidate into a common national identity in order to increase industrial development. While economic on the surface, this is also a political process in which one group gains power and imposes its cultural identity on the entire group within a region. History has seen many examples of a single group within a region gaining power and imposing their culture upon the rest of the country. The Prussians of Imperial Germany, Magyars of Hungary, the Russians in the Soviet Union and the Karimov regime in Uzbekistan are just a few examples of small groups with power imposing their identity on the larger society. This emphasis on competition over culture knowledge was an important point of emphasis in a recent speech by MG (Ret) Robert Scales at the TRADOC Culture Summit II¹⁵. In



his speech, he emphasized that modern warfare includes perception as an “operational lens.” According to MG Scales, “two sides are engaged in dueling narratives. Whoever comes out most believable wins.”

Hajjar and TRADOC also do not address the role of geography in the formation of cultural identity. Geography will play several roles in the formation of national identity. First, as noted by Smith,¹⁶ one of the six main attributes of an ethnic community is “an association with a specific homeland.” The emotional attachment to territory is an important source of identity for a cultural community. Often important events are commemorated in the landscape and control over territory is a defining principle of the modern state. Therefore, in order for a culture to consider itself legitimate, it must have an association with a homeland. The word association is key in this context. A culture does not have to be physically occupying the homeland, as in the case of diaspora communities, or regions of irrendentism or secessionism, but it must develop a case for inclusion of the territories in its homeland. When an attachment to a homeland to an increased call for sovereignty occurs, this has the potential for conflict. Within the last several decades, US military actions in Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan have all been forced to engage with the mismatch between ethnic homelands and aspirations for sovereignty. As US Africa Command (AFRICOM) develops and the US increases interest in Sub-Saharan Africa, this disconnect between homelands and sovereignty will continue to plague US operations.

The second major insight geography offers to studies of culture is how governments use space to control the population. Foucault emphasizes that geography has an important influence on the power structures within a society. According to Foucault,¹⁷ “tactics and strategies deployed through implantations, distributions, demarcations, control of territories and



organisation of domains” are important tools in an evaluation of the power relationships within societies. Especially important in landscape studies is a discussion of the organization of domains. A state constructs tourist landscapes in an effort to promote its ideology. This is done through a conscious selection of sites to promote or preserve. Architecture is used by a society in an effort to present people what they should believe for the purpose of developing an identity. This is shown to them constantly as they move throughout the city. Also, states can either destroy or disavow sites in an effort to hide themes that are not consistent in the national identity being constructed.

The definition and production of space is currently an important debate within the geographic community. According to Lefebvre,¹⁸ until recently, space had a “strictly geometrical meaning.” In other words, space was not something that was influenced by cultural or political actions, it was innocent, and isolated from the political process. Lefebvre¹⁹ challenges the innocence of space in the political development of a region by prominently stating “that every society...produces a space, its own space.” Space is now widely viewed as an active player in the political development of a region. It influences change and is changed during the process of political development.

Societies produce space for very specific reasons. One important use of space is to promote power for the leadership of a society. Smith²⁰ notes, “landscape is, in part a ‘work’ consisting in itself as the construction of specific individuals and parties in pursuit of specific technical, political and sometimes artistic goals.” In other words, landscapes are developed in an effort to promote a certain identity, often at the expense of other potential identities. Such a conclusion leads to an evaluation of landscape that not only focuses on the message of the architect, but places the individual building, or monument, in a wider discussion of the



overarching political, economic, cultural and social development of the nation and state. This is an important guiding principle in modern studies of landscape within geography. Landscapes are not just an isolated object, but part of the wider process of identity construction undertaken by the leadership of the state, with a specific objective in mind. Usually this identity construction is part of the process of nation-building. The urban built environment is an important component of this process.

Specific examples of how space is used to mold culture can be seen in any major urban center. Wolfel²¹ connected post-World War II reconstruction in Berlin to the development of Cold War ideologies and the divergent cultural identity programs in West and East Germany. Here important projects were undertaken not just for utilitarian needs, but also to demonstrate the superiority of one system over the other and to promote the heroes, historical events and themes that the leadership viewed as significant. Wolfel²² has extended this work into discussions of cultural, heritage tourism in which governments construct and promote tourism landscapes in an effort to transmit their theme of identity to society in less overt manner through tourist landscapes.

The USMC document also simplifies geography to a simple mapping exercise, in which they identify certain aspects of culture that can be mapped. These maps would be simple distributions of demography, physical geography, social patterns, amongst others. The problem with this vision of geography is that it ignores the barriers and points of transition on the map. It also ignores the fourth dimension of mapping, change over time. Finally, the authors ignore the connection between several of these elements. Such a statement firmly identifies the need for geography in discussions of culture. Left to this definition, culture would be seen as a static



concept that one could “pin on a map”²³ and ignores the connections that would allow for a more robust explanation of culture and the dynamic nature of culture.

Intercultural Competence and the Military

Intercultural (or cross-cultural) competence is the primary goal of the military when it comes to cultural knowledge. Our goal is to effectively communicate and understand enemies, allies and cultures in which we operate in order to accomplish a mission with minimum damage to self or local populace. Selmeski has been one of the leading proponents of cross-cultural competence within larger military circles. Selmeski begins to move toward a working definition of cross-cultural competence (3C) by first stating what it is not:²⁴

1. It is not cultural awareness: or a simple briefing about the characteristics of an area of operation.
2. It is not additional language training: language alone will not increase 3C.
3. It is not more knowledge of International Relations: As International Relations theories tend to focus on the state, several important layers of identity tend to be ignored.
4. It is not additional background on radical Islam: This is too focused and fails to address other global issues.

Selmeski²⁵ starts to operationalize 3C through a definition that includes an “understanding of other people’s “ways of thinking and acting.” This would require training that could be assessed on the cognitive domain of Bloom’s taxonomy of learning. Also, Selmeski emphasizes the need to extend assessment through the addition of the affective domain in Bloom’s taxonomy while maintaining assessment in the cognitive domain. Abbe, Gulick and Herman²⁶ support this move



as they identify attitudes and empathy as important components of 3C. They also emphasize skills including interpersonal skills and flexibility as significant predictors of effective 3C instruction. This leads to a wider definition of intercultural competence, one that extends beyond just knowledge and into other domains of learning.

Therefore, the military needs to move in a direction where intercultural competence is defined, taught and assessed in three different domains. First, academic knowledge must focus on an interdisciplinary definition of culture that focuses on both the characteristics of culture and how cultures evolve both spatially and temporally. The second domain is affect in which we need to emphasize the ability to use cultural knowledge to help the military think from the perspective of other cultures (empathy). This will allow for both more effective operations but also more effective communications. Finally, we need to develop skills in the soldiers that will allow them to flourish in intercultural environments. Flexibility is a key skill as soldiers will need to quickly adapt to changing cultural landscapes as they move through an area of operation or change areas of operation.

Cultural Immersion Experiences and Cultural Competence

Cultural immersion experiences provide an opportunity to develop all three domains, language proficiency, 3C and regional expertise. A vast amount of literature exists on the usefulness of short term cultural immersion experiences; almost all emphasize the benefits people receive from the experience. One key issue raised by Wood and Atkins²⁷ emphasizes two components to cultural competence, culturally specific knowledge and generic knowledge about culture. This is an especially enlightening division, as most people focus on the specific cultural experiences received from study abroad.



Another important issue in the research is the need to clearly define 3C. Paulston³⁰ emphasizes that biculturalism is a unique process in which each person internalizes certain values of each culture in order to create a unique identity for themselves. Such a statement has important ramifications for this project in that cadets will begin to internalize certain elements of culture as they are immersed in a foreign environment. These elements could differ from cadet to cadet. As a result, qualitative approaches of data acquisition will be necessary in order to acquire a complete assessment of the immersion experience.

Another important component in 3C is to connect the immersion program to classroom instruction. Einbeck,³¹ emphasizes the need to include orientation sessions in order to “manage culture shock.” However, she does not include any reflection activities in order to allow students to reflect and personally assess their development as a result of the program. Lee³² emphasizes the need to add a reflective activity, specifically a portfolio, in an effort to allow the students to reflect and internalize important concepts they learned as a result of the immersion experience. Also, portfolios provide the instructor with important supporting documentation to support the assessment of the success of the program.

Scheunpflug³³ supports the need for preparation and debriefing in cultural awareness programs. In her program, she set a specific objective of eliminating xenophobia through cultural immersion experiences. Therefore, it is important to orient the students, before arrival in the foreign region, in order to lead them to discover important themes, visible during the immersion experience. Also, it is important to debrief the students when they return to assess if they acquired the skills and knowledge deemed important by the instructor. This leads to the conclusion that any successful immersion program must contain three elements: an orientation,



an immersion experience, and a debriefing. All of these elements provide opportunities for the collection of data to be used in assessment of the immersion experience.

Assessing Intercultural Competence

The literature on intercultural competence suggests three key outcomes: knowledge of culture, empathy and flexibility. These represent the three domains that are significant in intercultural competence: knowledge, affect and skills. Therefore, any assessment program must evaluate the degree of intercultural competence based on these three domains.

Knowledge tends to be the easiest trait to assess. Working from a common definition of culture and an understanding of the processes that define and allow culture to evolve, instruction can be developed. At USMA, culture is one of the important goals of the curriculum and more cultural instruction is being inserted into the curriculum. This will allow for assessment based on curriculum alignment and individual instructor evaluation.

Two tools will be used for assessing increases in affect and skills. A scenario based assessment is being developed within CLCRS³⁴ in an effort to require cadets to solve a scenario in which they are placed in an intercultural engagement that requires them to make a decision. While there is no “right” answer to the question, their thought process and the decisions made will demonstrate increased flexibility in a complex and relatively unknown situation and empathy in which they will need to address the values, beliefs and behaviors of a culture different from their own.

Along with the scenario based assessment, a standardized test of intercultural development will be administered to cadets who travel on international cultural immersion experiences both before they leave and after they return. Following the Army Research Institute,³⁵ the Intercultural Development Index (IDI) will be utilized. The IDI is a standardized



test that measures an individual's intercultural sensitivity from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. Traditionally, the test has been administered to long term cultural immersion experiences, but recently Anderson, et al. (2006) have demonstrated the tests' effectiveness on short term cultural immersion experiences. Also, Klak and Martin³⁶ have demonstrated the effectiveness of the IDI on students who participate in on campus multicultural events. This demonstrates that the IDI would be effective for all types of intercultural experiences, from long term study abroad programs, through short term, travel study courses to campus events.

Conclusion: Towards more Dialogue

Multiple tools of assessment will allow for a robust triangulation of student achievement in the intercultural competence curriculum. Our goal is to frame the intercultural competence curriculum around three major issues: cultural knowledge, affect and skills. Cultural knowledge is focused on defining the characteristics and development of culture. TRADOC and USMC have developed excellent foundational guides on cultural knowledge. These foundations need to be supplemented with interdisciplinary insights as stated here. Geography adds to this discussion through its study of place, space and spatial processes. It is important to understand that landscapes have meaning, that meaning is contested and landscape is a visible part of the formation of identity within a region. Other social sciences would add a greater richness to this discussion and would lead to a more robust definition of culture and intercultural competence.

Also, the discussion of culture needs to be augmented with a discussion of language proficiency and regional expertise. As a primary transmitter of culture and principle tool for communication, language proficiency provides the modern soldier with an important tool for understanding the local culture. Also, the ability to communicate adds greater legitimacy for a soldier during a cross cultural encounter and reduces misunderstandings due to the use of a third



party as an interpreter. Numerous examples exist that show misunderstandings between locals and soldiers due to a misunderstanding of the translator.

Regional expertise provides the geographic knowledge in order to understand a community. The characteristics of places from their physical landscape, through their cultural landscape to their political-economic landscape influence the local population and their values, beliefs, behaviors and norms. In order for a soldier to understand the region, it is necessary to pair language proficiency with regional knowledge in an effort to promote greater intercultural competence.

Affect is a strong point of emphasis in the 3C literature. Intercultural competence includes how people react in certain situations and how they mentally approach intercultural experiences. This is a challenge to teach and assess and USMA tends to employ international travel as one method of affective learning.

Finally, skills are another important element in intercultural competence. Flexibility is one of the key skills as all people must be prepared to adapt to changing situations if placed in a “foreign” cultural environment. Again, international travel is very effective in increasing flexibility as an intercultural sensitivity trait.

Intercultural competence has become an important issue within the modern military. This is a result of the changing nature of warfare in which soldier often coordinate and conduct conflict operations in a multicultural environment. At USMA, our goal is to create soldiers who have an increased level of intercultural competence in terms of cultural knowledge, an increased feeling of ethnorelativity and flexibility to adapt to changing environments. As has been demonstrated continuously, an interculturally competent person will have greater success in dealings with people from other cultures.



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