INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN THE MILITARY REALM – THE ROLE OF STEREOTYPES[1]

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Abstract:
Intercultural communication refers to the study of the dynamic interactional patterns between people of different cultures, an aspect which is very important within the military realm – being it the interaction between members of different armies acting within combined operations, or soldiers interacting with local population in theatres of operations.
In the design of intercultural communication, stereotypes originate from social categorization and nourish preconceptions that can critically influence the desired effects of different activities carried out by military.
The paper provides arguments for including the study of stereotypes within the cultural awareness training in the military at all levels, as enabler for better understanding the interpersonal communication mechanisms.

Key words: intercultural communication, military, stereotypes, pre-deployment training, cultural awareness

1.Introduction

A critical dimension of the nowadays' operational environment is the human factor, through multiple features of the relation established between the military and the communities they interact with, especially within the framework of crisis response/ peace support operations.

The global flows of information make this interaction even more interesting. People learn about others, they have a degree of access to this kind of information; however, there is still room for ignorance and misconceptions, or experiences/fears from past are still feeding preconceptions[2].

In the era of the "strategic soldier", when individual actions of a first-hand encounter with a community's public may critically impact a whole mission, the cultural awareness training emerged as a critical necessity.

And this is equally important when we talk about international coalitions or NATO itself; even though there is a common nominator for operational procedures, military tactics, techniques, and procedures, also customs of working in international environment,

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[1] **Disclaimer:** This paper expresses the views, interpretations, and independent position of the author. It should not be regarded as an official document, nor expressing formal opinions or policies, of NATO or the NATO HUMINT Centre of Excellence.

[2] A relevant situation I have witnessed was the fear and precaution manifested by Afghans in remote areas of Zabul province against Romanian troops initially equipped with Russian-type armored vehicles, being convinced that Russians themselves are back.

frictions between soldiers – who often have to live together in military bases, not only jointly fighting – still can occur3.

Efforts to mitigate negative effects of intercultural communication have been intensively made in time in the military education, acquiring lessons learned and best practice from theatres of operations and exploiting them within the framework of pre-deployment training. The cultural awareness programs have embraced different forms, keeping in line with the conceptual advance (e.g. Human Terrain Systems, Counterinsurgency, Cross Cultural Competence, Comprehensive Approach, Civil-Military Interaction, Civil-Military Cooperation, Human Environment, etc.); moreover, military domains like Human Intelligence (HUMINT) collection relies on advanced communication skills performed by operators in relation with their sources, requiring a complex and systematized curriculum to meet these expectations.

The next chapters will briefly outline aspects of developing cultural competences within the military, with emphasis on how stereotypes can be used as enablers for improving inter-cultural communication.

2. Cultural awareness in the pre-deployment training

The pre-deployment training is basically oriented toward familiarization of the soldiers with the operational setting, the operation plan, tactics, techniques and procedures, legal aspects of the mission (rules of engagement, humanitarian law, law of the armed conflict), etc.

Within this realm, the basic cultural awareness – starting from the requirement of an empirically-based pre-deployment training [2] – has marked a shift to "tactical culture training" or "operational culture learning" [3], tailored to the mission need.

The subject of culture has emerged in parallel with the increased recognition on the importance of the human factor in the battle space, which ultimately has led to embracing the concept of "operational environment". In this picture, culture is acknowledged as the learned patterns of behavior and thought that help a group adapt to its surroundings, revealing itself in the beliefs, attitudes and behaviors of groups of people [4].

The US Army JFK Special Warfare Center's Political Military Analysis Handbook (2004) provides an analytical framework for looking at the "cultural factors" used by the US Marine Corps and ABCA[4], defining culture as *"Learned and shared attitudes, values, and ways of behaving in a society; culture includes customs, folkways, manners, mannerisms, etiquette, behaviors, body language, gestures, celebrations, milestones, dress, outlooks, perceptions, and thought patterns. It is embodied in history, art, myths, legends and heroes. It addresses appropriate responses to situations. It determines the circumstances and quality of apology, retribution, reward, punishment, equity, commiseration, disdain, shame, guilt, congratulations and pride. It selects and applies social sanction and reward. It expresses itself in superstitions, outlooks, perspectives, conventional knowledge and points of view. It encompasses the sense of time, individuality, possessions, sharing, self-worth and group-worth. It establishes the social hierarchy, defining roles by sex, age, position, religion, wealth, family and profession. In essence, culture defines what is and is not okay, accepted, and normal"* [6].

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[3] In a survey conducted on US troops, a large majority expressed negative experiences interacting with coalition forces [1].

[4] ABCA is a program aimed at optimizing interoperability and standardization of training and equipment between the armies of the United States of America, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, plus the United States Marine Corps and the Royal Marines [5].

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In matters of cultural training, K. Trochowska marks a NATO "cultural turn" in 2010, following the US pattern [7]; the new approach was summarized in the recommendations emerged from the Multinational Experiment (MNE) 6, goal 4.3, which focused on improving the efficiency of operations through the increase of cultural awareness of soldiers. However, an earlier study of the NATO Research and Technology Organization (RTO), documenting the findings of Research Task Group 120, approached the increased cultural diversity within multinational military forces; it touched the point of what O. Uifaleanu characterized as "inside the fences" cultural awareness, meant to serve the unity of effort between military allies and partners, including civilian actors [8].

In spite of a series of "points of friction" that have been recognized as historically affecting coalitions (differences in goals, logistics, capabilities, training, equipment, doctrines, intelligence, language, leadership, and cultural practices), the military organization benefits of a supranational culture characterized as more collectivistic, more hierarchical and less salary-driven than the average civilian working culture; as a consequence, military personnel of different origins can often work and live together[5] without substantive problems [9].

Regarding the relation with the "outside the fence" actors, if we consider the results of a survey that revealed about two-thirds of the responses pointing out challenging, if not negative, experiences in interacting with local populations [10], the subject is of stringent attention.

The declaration of the NATO summit in Warsaw [11] has emphasized the importance given to education and training delivered to equip military with the necessary levels of political, technological, cultural and sociological knowledge meant to enhance regional understanding and situational awareness. Emerging from this, one of the Allied Command Transformation focus area is the development of the Human Capital – a prerequisite for enhancing individual performance in operations – fact that cannot omit the cultural training. This provision parallels an assumed responsibility over the way NATO representatives, at all levels, deal with their counterparts.

The Allied Command Transformation (ACT), recognizing the interaction with the human environment as a critical ability to be acquired and maintained, especially in missions such as counterinsurgency, stabilization, reconstruction or security forces assistance, tackles with developing a Human Environment Capability [12]. Support platforms are readily available to anyone in military and defense organizations, such as: the Innovation Hub Online Collaboration Platform [13], the Extended Hand: Cross-Cultural Skills Development Tool [14], the NATO Social Media User Open Online Course [15] and, in the close future, the NATO Cross-Cultural Awareness Massive Open Online Course.

The NATO's champion in research and promotion of cultural interaction models between military and civilians is the NATO Civil-Military Cooperation Centre of Excellence (CCOE). It proposes the concept of Cross Cultural Competence (CCC) as a step forward in apprehending the necessary level of cultural capability, trying to elude rigid interpersonal behaviors or ethnocentric attitudes. CCC is defined as "ability to quickly and accurately comprehend, then appropriately and effectively engage individuals from distinct cultural backgrounds to achieve the desired effect". Its model is based on three pillars: 'cultural knowledge' (cultural frameworks), 'affect' (attitudes toward other cultures and the motivation to learn about and engage with them), and 'skills' (ability to regulate own reactions in a cross-cultural setting, interpersonal skills, and the flexibility to assume the

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[5] In this case, continued interaction between contingents can, often, lessen the validity of stereotypes and help to minimize possible negative outcomes.

perspective of someone from a different culture) (figure 1), and integrates in analysis the PMESII factors [16].
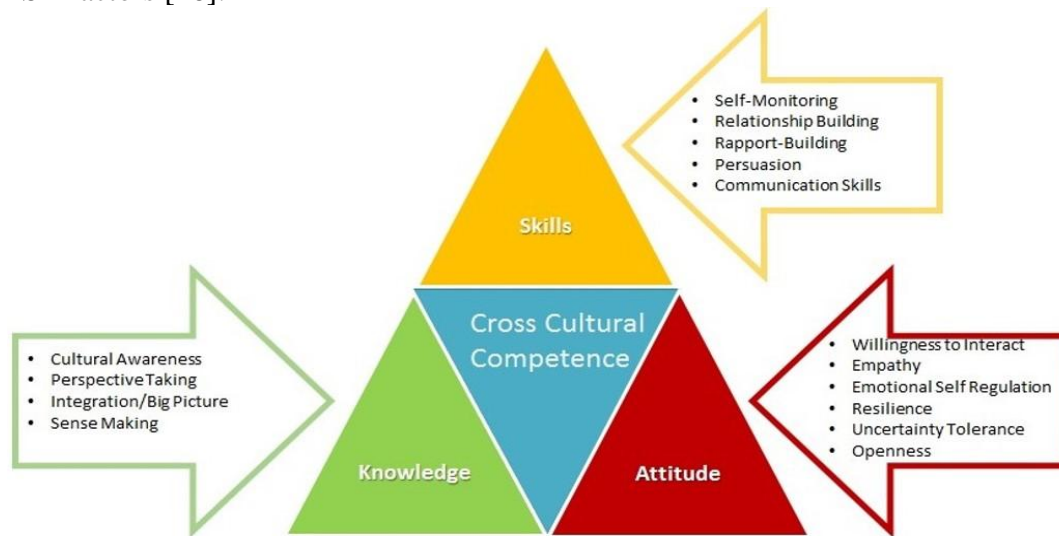

Fig. 1 Cross Cultural Competence pillars [17]

Beside this, there are many other initiatives dealing with the integration of human factors in military planning [18]. It is noteworthy to mention the project of NATO HUMINT Centre of Excellence – Human aspects of the operational environment – funded by NATO Emerging Security Challenges Division (ESCD), which has brought a systematic view on what drives human attitudes and actions, provided an analytical framework for the human environment, and determined landmarks for the complexity of cross-cultural communication [19].

It is already proven that a consistent theoretical knowledge on culture's framework and solid cultural awareness for Intelligence personnel is even more important, representing a real functional area - especially for HUMINT operators (who interact with their sources in the effort to answer information requirements) and analysts (in their effort to understand the operational environment, process data and information and provide actionable and predictive Intelligence). Further on, decision-makers are equally interested in balancing different courses of actions, driven by the desired effect. In this respect, cultural competence is critical for building and maintaining strategic legitimacy and credibility throughout non-kinetic operations like Strategic Communication, Information Operation, Psychological Operations, Civil-Military Interaction, etc., with a common denominator in targeting communities.

3.Stereotypes – a frame of human thinking

Intercultural communication builds on dichotomies generated by human interactions, such as: understanding vs. misunderstanding, agreement vs. disagreement, cultural adaptation vs. cultural isolation, conflict vs. cooperation, intercultural team cohesiveness vs. team misunderstandings, intercultural projects success vs. projects failure, emotional improvement vs. emotional deterioration, and any other relational outcome [20].

In this picture, a human interaction is naturally submitted to certain expectations – as well as preconceptions – of each of the actors involved, influencing their relation. Beside culture, biases founded on personal characteristics as age, gender, race, appearance, social class, occupation, wealth, materiel availability and equipment (specifically in the

military) etc. may equally influence one's behavior and, consequently, the communication outcomes, as they can create cultural barriers between individuals.

Moreover, impending wants or mood, or external factors placing the communicator in crisis (like time pressure) may influence the communication performance, as well.

The understanding of all these factors, as well as an enhanced (learned) self-control, provide awareness and help prevent preconceptions and possible culture shocks, or mitigating negative outcomes of intercultural interaction (e.g. discrimination, hostility leading to abuse of power), all capable to alter mission's success.

While interacting with people of different background, we become more consciously aware of our own culture and identity, which becomes more important to us; it is consequently used to evaluate and categorize others.

O. Uifăleanu describes the „culture shock" encountered by deployed military personnel equally relevant in relation with fellow soldiers from other contingents or external actors. In the first phase – the initial inter-cultural contact – soldiers may experience a "honeymoon" stage (behaviors are restrained and non-aggressive); continuing the interaction, either sympathy or aggressive attitude may surface toward the "foreign culture", upon the evolution of the stress of reconciling the cultural differences [21].

A common response to this stress may include withdrawal and stereotyping the host country. However, the time passing brings adjustment to the new condition (usually after 6 months [22], which is a frequent deployment time), and even adaptation.

A stereotype represents conventional, formulaic, and oversimplified conception, opinion, or image [23], positive or negative, used to categorize a group of people. The factual explanation is based on the circumstance when people, not understanding a certain type of person (community, nation), put them into classifications, thinking that everyone belonging to a reference group is alike. A stereotype often fixes and oversimplifies the image or idea of the particular type of person or thing [24].

There are many diagrams showing how people think and perceive other groups (figures 2 and 3), and a cosmopolite military organization like NATO is not excluded from this (similar pictures are circulated in NATO or coalition headquarters, where multinational staffs are present).

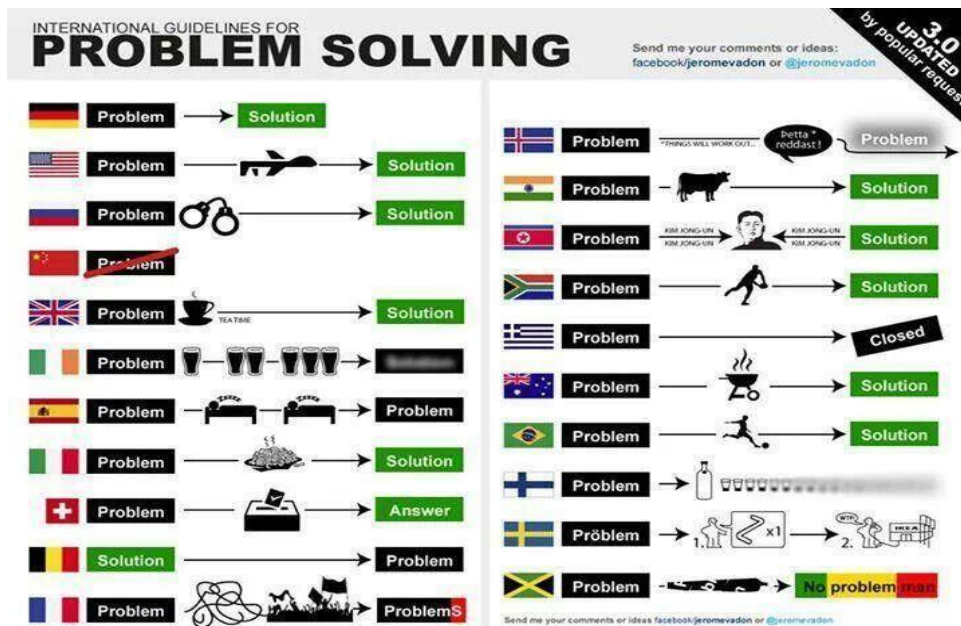Fig. 2 Stereotypes on European Nations [25]

Fig. 3 Stereotypes on Nations' problem solving approach [26]

Of course, these examples are exercises of fun, but may be as well a fine reproduction of real perceptions people have in relation with counterparts of different culture. In this case, I raise the question if deterministic categories of analysis – as one based on stereotypes[6] – would necessary result in faulty assessments, or we can exploit stereotypes in our profit?

4. Impact of stereotypes in the military; tips for cultural awareness/ training

The social identity theory postulates that members of an in-group will seek to find negative aspects of an out-group, thus enhancing their self-image [31] ("positive social identity", self-esteem). Therefore, stereotypes not only regulate particular inter-group interactions, but are part of a broader cultural system that orientates our behavior in various social contexts.

Another function of stereotypes (the "safety" hypothesis) resides in providing a sense of control over our social contacts, helping us reduce uncertainty and avoid risk situations (both personal and social) [32].

Stereotypes are not only a source of prejudice or discrimination; they might be useful, if not unavoidable, in everyday situations. Stereotypes contribute to the cognitive economy, providing a first set of attributes, particular to an alien culture, to any inquirer.

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[6] Concepts closely related to stereotypes are prejudice, discrimination and otherization. A prejudice is a preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience, thus a cultural ignorance [27]. While stereotypes can include both negative and positive characteristics, prejudice can be described as beliefs that attribute negative characteristics, and they usually carry a more emotional component. Discrimination is the practice of unfairly treating a person or group of people differently from other people or groups of people [28], which is usually prejudicial [29] to the discriminated group. Otherization is a linguistic construct used to distinguish and identify (label) someone as belonging to a category, defined as "Other", or alien, different [30]. In practice, otherization excludes those persons who do not fit the norm of the social group, which is a version of the Self.

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Knowing common stereotypes about a society who is responsive on this, military personnel can easier initiate interaction and establish contact with local counterparts, especially exploiting national or cultural clichés (with regard on a line of acceptability [33]) and subtle and benign references to charming national idiosyncrasies.

Even more, stereotypes are not exclusively a matter of communication, but one of self-conscience. Complex social situations promote stereotypes as quick, effortless and even adaptive answers [34] serving the social efficiency of an individual. Being aware on potential stereotypes the counterpart has on the military force [7] or nation he represents, the military approach is fairly simple – having to reinforce as many as possible of the positive stereotypes, and defeat the negative ones that do not apply to his person/ group.

Being deployed in Iraq (Dhi Qar province) as CIMIC officer and interacting with both fairly educated Iraqis, as well as with lower educated local people, I have acknowledged lot of stereotypes in the way the local population judged the coalition troops. Romanians have been perceived as modest and peaceful characters (with a history of bilateral relations during the authoritarian regimes of Ceauşescu and Saddam), while US and Italian troops have been negatively labeled (invaders, respectively lazy soldiers, not committed to support local communities [8]).

In a way, it enabled Romanians' freedom of movement (opening paths for successful cooperation with elements of the local US units, securely embedded in our own outreach patrols), but it did not represent a lifeline for our forces (it happened that stereotypes have been used as a – senseless – excuse for an attack against a Romanian patrol, allegedly "confused" by some local "tolerated" insurgents with an Italian patrol). This is just a proof of how stereotypes can mislead if you strictly adhere to them.

However, in this case, I have hardly worked with local authorities to remove preconceptions and to offer an accurate image of the facts. From this perspective, it is critically important to be aware of stereotypes – if only to be able to avoid biases. Lesson learned - positive stereotypes should not be over-valued, in the same way as negative stereotypes (although containing elements of truth) should not be ignored, but defeated. Fighting against prejudices involves better promotion of own values, improved communication and self-exposure, raise of the intercultural (communication) competence of the actors involved [36].

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In Intelligence, stereotypes are present at multiple levels, starting from collection and up to processing stage.

In the collection effort, HUMINT is the most exposed as it involves interaction between operators and human sources, in a game where demeanor, behavior, message, gestures and other culturally-backed aspects are of paramount importance. It requires from operator integrity, receptivity to, and understanding of foreign points of view, as well as enough flexibility to adapt himself to the character of his (various) sources, while building rapport.

The HUMINT operator has to be a subtle reader of biases or deception attempts, through a systematized process of source management (validating its credibility) and overseeing information viability. In this respect, searching on stereotypes and preconceptions the source may have over different subjects would offer priceless indicators on how to deal with the data gathered and orient further collection. In Interrogation,

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[7] Regular stereotypes on military are described by Wolfe, Tom (2016) Career Coach's Corner: Use military stereotypes to your advantage, in [35]

[8] It sanctioned a perceived lethargic performance of the Italian Brigade responsible for the Dhi Qar province in the reconstruction effort, compared to other provinces

stereotyping views and prejudices of the subject, if known, can be fruitfully exploited in the process of data collection.

Another challenge in this work is the use of interpreters, as often the local language is not a common one. Besides mastering the technical relation with the interpreters, the operator has to be aware that the interpreting/ translation work is also affected by stereotyping, as long as it supposes interposition between two (or even more) different cultures. Besides his personal quality, manners and education, the interpreter has to be knowledgeable on all cultures' traits involved in his job, and expert on decoding and accurately modeling messages, in order to ensure a coherent and purposeful interaction, and react appropriately to abrupt changes in the behaviour of the counterparts, to guide the supported military.

Analysts are further confronted with processing and fuse data, where bias can influence the quality of the information provided; knowledge of source's personal attributes, specifically the motivation[9] (where prejudices are derived from), connected to the subject of the information content, is definitely helpful in their work. However, erroneous products are still persistent, and contributing to this outcome is a series of analysts' wrong interpretations and prejudices, including – among others – ethnocentrism, lack of empathy, projection of the ego, ignorance, or hypothesis of rationality/ irrationality in the subject's action, the preconception of proportional countermeasure, activism, the Pollyanna (credulity and excessive optimism) or Cassandra (extreme/ unwarranted skepticism) complexes, or routine thinking [37].

5. Conclusion

Stereotypes have always accompanied the image of the military, and equally preconceptions have always biased the soldiers' view over the population in a theatre of operations.

There is no standard, or a perfect model on how to deal in communicating with an alien culture; it differs from person to person, at communities or organizations' levels. Reactions, although related to a main culture, are settled throughout common sense – thus scarcely predictable – in concrete interactions between individuals. From this interactions emerge the primary dimension of stereotypes, getting at the question: "will they hurt me or help me?" [38]

For military, this question has a deeper significance, as they are exposed to permanent danger. Cultural specific knowledge is not enough to deal with this situation; it has to be accompanied by understanding and adequate responses in complex situations.

The management of intercultural messages has to consider the effects of communication stereotypes on individuals and societies and follow different strategies to reduce negative outcomes. In this respect, it addresses aspects like: development of cultural sensitivity; anticipation of the meaning the receiver will get; careful encoding/ decoding; the multitude of communication supporting features; avoidance of slang, idioms, regional sayings; selective transmission; relationship-building; receive and process feedback from multiple parties; improve listening and observation skills; observe follow-up actions. Further on, the "serious games" embedded in pre-deployment training are an excellent opportunity to assimilate appropriate knowledge with the purpose of determining proper behavioral and attitudinal reactions [39]

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[9] On the other hand, a common practice in the social influence techniques is to educate attitudes and motivation through a desired effect by cultivating stereotyping messages

Operationalization of culture has also to include the integration of universal cultural competence training into the overall career training development of military personnel [40].

Involvement of Partner Nations can offer excellent opportunities to enhance cultural engagement of NATO troops and develop skills in environments genuinely reproducing the areas of operational interest. A relevant example is the Jordan offer to NATO and Partners to train in its Peace Operations Training Centre elements of Allied and Partner forces, as well as UN personnel, for deployment to Muslim countries [41].

In this educational effort, lessons learned and best practice have to be consistently addressed. As J. Chandler observes, the military would do a disservice to itself if it does not go back to the foundational body of existing knowledge, because the military will end up repeating mistakes or making decisions that are based on personal experience and preferences [42].

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