Strategic Enablers:
How Intercultural Communication Skills Advance Micro-Level International Security

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Abstract

A fundamental assumption of this essay is that effective intercultural communication is a strategic enabler of micro-level international security. It will be argued in three parts that the knowledge and skills at the heart of the field of intercultural communication are a natural platform for advancing international security. First, an explanation is offered for why current PME course offerings do not sufficiently address the pressing need our military has for improving the quality of intercultural communication. Next, an overview is provided of the specific communication skills that are research-proven predictors of cross-cultural competence. Finally, a framework is offered for institutionalizing intercultural communication into Professional Military Education

Introduction

The military's "Culture Rush" (Wynn, 2008) has created a consensus among military professionals and scholars in regard to culture's significant implications for security and stability operations. In today's culturally diverse operational environment, individuals ranging from commanding officers to strategic sergeants often rely on the warfighting capabilities of negotiating and relationship-building to accomplish their mission. However, if negotiation and cross-cultural relations represent the entryway to success in this environment, communication skills are the keys needed to open the door. A commonly cited example illustrating this point is Triandis' (1994, p. 29) claim that the first Gulf War could have been avoided had the parties involved been better educated about nonverbal communication patterns:

> On January 9, 1991, the foreign minister of Iraq, Tariq Aziz, and the United States Secretary of State, James Baker, met in Geneva to attempt a last-minute compromise that would avoid a war. Seated next to Aziz was the half-brother of Iraq's President, Saddam Hussein. The half-brother kept calling Baghdad to provide Hussein with his evaluation of what was going on. Baker used the verbal channel of communication almost exclusively and said *very* clearly that the U.S. would attack if Iraq did not move out of Kuwait. The Iraqis, however, paid less attention to *what* Baker said and most attention to *how* he said it. Hussein's half-brother reported to Baghdad that "the Americans will not attack. They are weak. They are calm. They are not angry. They are only talking." Six days later, the United States unleashed Operation Desert Storm …and Iraq lost close to 175,000 citizens.

Triandis further suggests that if Baker had pounded the table, yelled, and shown outward signs of anger to communicate intent nonver-

bally, the Iraqis may have decoded Baker's message the way he intended and the outcome may have been entirely different. Situations such as these are the focus of intercultural communication research which examines patterns of interaction in order to predict misunderstanding.

This example can certainly be extended to current international security operations, whose success depends on micro-relations whether they occur at the negotiation table or on the battlefield. Such high-impact interpersonal interactions determine whether or not the practices of partnership-building or negotiating can even begin. Whereas macro-level international security often focuses on long-term strategic goals between nations, micro-level international security entails the interpersonal interactions necessary to put such goals into action. Decorated Navy SEAL J. Robert DuBois captures the essence of this relationship in his recent book, *Powerful Peace,* where he calls for the relentless pursuit of interpersonal and international peacekeeping as an imperative to global security (2012). Although DuBois falls short of offering "pragmatic methods for implementing the thesis in policy and operations" (Sine, 2012, p.122), this essay fills that void, offering a prescription for how to infuse interpersonal and intercultural communication skills into Professional Military Education (PME).

A fundamental assumption of this essay is that effective intercultural communication is a strategic enabler of micro-level international security. The communication of respect and intercultural rapport-building must be incorporated into all levels of PME in order for these skills to evolve from a "nice to have" lecture or elective to a strategically necessary

professional competency. It will be argued that the knowledge and skills at the heart of the field of intercultural communication are a natural platform for advancing international security. To develop necessary cross-cultural competence, leadership must "ensure proper application and institutionalization of these [knowledge and skill] competencies within education, training, assessment and daily application" (McDonald, et al., 2008, p. 2).

To support this claim, this essay is divided into three sections. First, an explanation is offered for why current PME course offerings do not sufficiently address the pressing need our military has for improving the quality of intercultural communication. Next, an overview is provided of the specific communication skills that are research-proven predictors of cross-cultural competence. Finally, a framework is offered for institutionalizing intercultural communication into PME.

Communication is the Intersection of Language and Culture

Many military members serving overseas have found themselves halfway through a mission with a partner military only to realize they are not succeeding because of an early, unintended act of disrespect (McConnell, Matson & Clemmer, 2007). As most are now painfully aware, a lack of understanding of the role culture plays in communication has serious consequences: lost time, lost resources, and lost lives. Members of the military are literally at the front lines of international security operations, yet even as late as 2011, "U.S. military personnel *struggle to communicate* with allies and adversaries in Iraq and Afghanistan" (Howard, 2011, p. 26). As unsettling as this truth might be, the *interaction* of two individuals can have a profound effect on the relationship

between two nation-states. It is here, at the micro-level of international security that the make-or-break policy moments occur. Like any other human relationship, cooperative alliances are formed or dissolved one conversation at a time.

Improving the quality and outcomes of such conversations is a main focus of intercultural communication research – which makes it distinct from the study of language alone. Whereas linguistic competence is concerned with the ability to speak a language, communication competence is concerned with the ability to *use* a language effectively and appropriately *in context*. An example that illustrates this distinction is the creation of the ABCA alliance - which was formed to create a means to continue close cooperation between the militaries of the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. To ensure interoperability, the Alliance cites communication as one of the key cultural factors that affects 'the thinking and motivation of individuals and groups' (see website: www.abca-armies.org). It is of interest that an organization was formed by several *English speaking* nations to attempt to facilitate intercultural communication and cooperation between military forces. Examples such as these highlight the distinction between culture and language and reinforce that the bridge between the two is intercultural communication. This skillset is recognized in recent DoD-related publications (Sands, R., 2013; Ingold, 2014) and has been discussed by members of the Interagency Language Roundtable.

Intercultural communication competence has been defined and distinguished from other fields of study in recent works (see Mackenzie

& Wallace, 2014, p. 241), but these assumptions bear repeating:

> Due to the fact that the field of communication came in to existence well after many of the more traditional social sciences, it is often confused with the fields of language, cross-cultural psychology (CCP), and international relations (IR). To be clear, the field of communication makes unique contributions to 3C that are not typically within the theoretical scope of these fields of study. For example, whereas linguistic competence is concerned with the ability to speak a language, communication competence is concerned with the ability to *use* a language effectively and appropriately *in context*. Additionally, while IR is primarily concerned with institutional-level analysis of political and economic systems and CCP is primarily concerned with individual-level analysis of the personal characteristics that predict competence, CCC is concerned with analyzing the normative interaction behavior of small groups that can help us identify difference and predict misunderstanding (Bennett, 2011).

Defined as the "knowledge, motivation, and skills to interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures" (Wiseman, 2002, p. 208), intercultural communication competence must have a permanent place in PME if our military is to succeed in the diverse operational environment of the 21st century.

A variety of professional fields with increasing percentages of practitioners engaging in intercultural interaction have looked to the field of intercultural communication to inform and enhance their practices and applied research. The successful theory-based, discipline-specific, cross-cultural competence training available in the professional development literature particular to the fields of education (i.e.; Barrera & Corso, 2000), social work (i.e.; Mason, 1995), medicine (i.e.; Jeffreys, 2006;

Crosson et al., 2004; Crandall et al., 2003) and law (i.e.; Bryant, 2001) illustrate this precedent. However, in the military, consular affairs, and government, the stakes are as high or higher than in the fields just cited, and one single mismanaged interaction has the potential to derail decades of diplomatic work.

In a military context, a good amount of research has been devoted to nonverbal skills (i.e, Samman et al., 2009, Kramer, 2009, Yager et al., 2009) to assist military personnel in negotiating the variety of meanings in cross-cultural contexts. The Special Forces community has also reported specific communication performance categories that have been deemed essential to cross-cultural interactions such as "building partner capacity" and "coordinating relationships" (Alrich, 2014), to include incidents reported by Special Forces members themselves (Russell, Crafts & Brooks, 1995). The importance of communication skills is mentioned in several books as well as training and technical reports (e.g.; Bauer, 2007; McCloskey, M.J., Behymer, K.J., & Ross, K., 2010; National Research Council, 2008; Rasmussen et al., 2011; & Russell, Crafts & Brooks, 1995;) however it is unclear how much of this research is being disseminated amongst military members themselves. Fully understanding and mastering these performance categories, including using nonverbal communication and negotiating, is impossible without a discussion of intercultural communication (Reid et al., 2012). Intercultural communication skills are the essential foundation on which international security-enabling practices such as conflict resolution and negotiation are built.

Despite its necessity for a 21st century military, the field of intercultural communication is

conspicuously absent from PME. Communication is often a taken-for-granted *process* that is neglected in the *outcome*-focused leadership and negotiation PME courses. Courses related to international security in PME lack a social/relational perspective due to the fact that the curriculum - written by faculty with advanced degrees in International Relations, Political Science, History, etc., is likely to focus on learning objectives common to such traditional disciplines. Their impact on participants' intercultural effectiveness could certainly be enhanced and optimized by a foundational intercultural communication course devoted to the crucial process of rapport-building.

Intercultural Communication Skills as Strategic Enablers

There is no question that learning a language is a critical skill for military personnel. However, there are limitations involved in relying on language skills alone to build partnerships. Not only is the spoken word a small portion of the communication process, but it would take a lifetime to learn every language spoken in each operational theater, partner military base, or location of a potential future conflict. The unique contribution made by intercultural communication skills is their applicability regardless of the language spoken or the location of the interaction. These foundational skills enable military communicators to interact more effectively in both a newly acquired language and their own native tongue.

Communication must be a part of DoD cross-cultural competence training and education (Reid et al., 2012) as such research examines the ways in which language *use* varies significantly across cultures. A recent review of "state-of-the-art themes in cross-cultural communication research" (Merkin, Taras, & Steel, 2013) reveals that the most common hypotheses related to the link between cultural values and communication behavior are devoted to: indirectness, self-promotion, face-saving concerns, attitudes towards silence, openness, interruption, personal space, high-context communication, deception, dramatism and ritualism. An understanding of these communication patterns is integral to beginning the process of building relationships across cultures, and military students must be aware of their significance.

Intercultural communication skills are actions and behaviors that are intentionally repeatable and goal-oriented during interaction (Spitzberg, 2000). Such skills use appropriate and effective processes to successfully navigate an intercultural encounter in order to achieve the desired outcome. These culture-general competencies can be effectively taught and developed[47]. Those that are most relevant to military students have been condensed into the following eight foundational skills of intercultural communication:

1. Interaction management
2. Impression management
3. Self-monitoring
4. Perceptual acuity
5. Paralanguage use and perception
6. Nonverbal communication
7. Active listening techniques
8. Communication styles

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[47] For example, the *Introduction to Cross-Cultural Communication* course offered by the Community College of the Air Force has used this model with success for three years, graduating close to 1500 Airmen. See http://culture.af.mil/enrollmentwindow.aspx for more information.

To summarize, *interaction management* is the effective and appropriate use of conversational turn-taking, information-gaining strategies, and topic choice "based on a reasonably accurate assessment of the needs and desires of others" (Ruben, 1976, p. 341). Interaction skills are goal-oriented behaviors enacted while communicating with an individual or group (Spitzberg, 2003) and are strongly affected by cultural preferences for direct or indirect messages as well as an orientation toward task or relational outcomes. *Impression management* is defined as deliberate and motivated self-presentation and assumes that a basic motivation of individuals is to be viewed favorably by others (Goffman, 1959). Effective impression management across cultures requires *self-monitoring*, which is the ability to detect appropriateness of social behaviors and self-presentation in response to situational constraints and to adjust our behaviors to fit the situation (Chen & Starosta, 1997). *Perceptual acuity* is the flip side to self-monitoring. Defined as "attention to and accurate detection of various aspects of the environment" (Montagliani & Giacalone, 1998, p.601), perceptual acuity is necessary for a communicator to accurately recognize how s/he is perceived by others in an interaction. Accuracy will often hinge on a conversational partner's verbal, nonverbal and paralinguistic cues.

Communication style is defined as: "The way in which we communicate, a pattern of verbal and nonverbal behaviors that comprises our preferred ways of giving and receiving information in a specific situation. If the message content is the what, and the communicators are the who, then communication style is the how"

(Saphiere, Mikk, & DeVries, 2005, p. 5). Difference is communication style preferences are

often conveyed via *paralanguage* (how a message is delivered through rate of speech, volume, word emphasis, intonation, and silence), via *nonverbal communication* (conveying messages through the use of touch, space, time, and body movement) and via *active listening practices* (culturally variable feedback preferences used to communicate understanding to a speaker).

Although a compelling case for intercultural communication skills as strategic enablers of international security has been made, a home for it in PME has yet to be created. It is the aim of this essay not only to initiate this discussion but also to lay the groundwork for its foundation.

Incorporating Intercultural Communication into PME

In order to help military members avoid as many mismanaged interactions or unforeseen difficulties as possible, intercultural interactions must be framed and examined as accurately as possible with the most precise tools. In matters of international security, it would be an unfortunate oversight not to "take advantage of the diversity of knowledge and epistemologies" offered by the discipline of communication, which is both problem-focused and task-oriented (Capella, 2011, p.1476). Insights from the field of communication (to include the subfields of interpersonal, intercultural and organizational) must inform how military personnel are taught to communicate effectively within a multitude of contexts and circumstances of cultural complexity.

Currently, communication is found only as a component of other courses or in bits and pieces throughout PME. It typically falls under training; and often, if it is getting done, it

Table 1: Intercultural Communication PME Framework

What is Intercultural Communication?
Intercultural communication is a field of study that enables us to interact effectively and appropriately across cultures. The field of intercultural communication (also called cross-cultural communication) is based on the insight that communication everywhere contains traces of culture (s) and that cultural values are displayed in communication behavior. The field is often aligned with socio-linguistics, cultural anthropology, and cross-cultural psychology – however, practitioners in the field of intercultural communication focus on communication in context as their primary theoretical concern.
Why is Intercultural Communication important?
Intercultural communication education can improve the quality of intercultural interactions - thereby minimizing misunderstanding and conflict. Cross-cultural relations and negotiations are dependent on communication skills, which make them foundational to cross-cultural competence. The knowledge, motivation, and skills to interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures (also known as intercultural communication competence) is a most necessary competence for military personnel in the diverse operational environment of the 21st century.
What are the goals of Intercultural Communication?
• To encourage communicators to notice cultural distinctions in others' behavior and interpret these distinctions appropriately   • To describe, interpret, and evaluate the communicative patterns and practices of particular people in a particular place and compare them across cultures   • To provide communicators with resources to create a variety of explanations for confusing cross-cultural interaction
What is covered in a Intercultural Communication course?
• Impression Management: Defined as "deliberate and motivated self-presentation", this skill is crucial to intercultural interaction since our projected message is often not interpreted the way we intend it to be. This lesson also focuses on self-monitoring and perceptual acuity.   • Paralanguage: What we say and how we say it influences the way we perceive and are perceived by others. Factors such as volume, tone of voice, rate of speech, word emphasis and interpretations of silence impact the meaning of a message.   • Nonverbal Communication: Haptics (how we use touch to communicate), proxemics (how we use space to communicate), chronemics (how we use time to communicate), and kinesics (how we use our bodies to communicate) are important aspects of communication that military personnel in culturally diverse circumstances can leverage for mission success.   • Communication Styles: The ways in which our cultural values are displayed in our behavior reflects our communication style. These styles are often characterized by "high" and "low" context communication patterns and connect to collective and individual cultural values, respectively.   • Situational Judgment Tests: Concepts are applied in culturally complex, military-relevant scenarios.

is not being done in an accountable, traceable way. Moreover, intercultural training must develop intercultural communication competence based on research-proven predictors, as opposed to a taken-for-granted or assumed skill that all military personnel possess. What follows is a one-page synopsis of how Intercultural Communication should be introduced, defined and defended. It is intended to be an action-item that can serve as a roadmap for the programmatic inclusion of intercultural communication into all levels of PME.

This framework has been taught in-residence and on-line throughout the Air Force, to include students at: the Senior NCO Academy, Squadron Officer College, Air Command & Staff College, International Officer School, Air War College Distance Education, among others. It is a starting point for the inclusion of a field of study that suggests concepts, theories and skills to improve the quality of personal and professional relationships across cultures.

Conclusion

Former Harvard Business School Dean, Nitin Nohria, once said that communication is the real work of leadership (1992). If this is the case, and if we want our military students to realize their potential as leaders, communication courses must be infused into PME in a serious, specific and systematic way. The skills and educational framework suggested here move us closer toward helping military members increase *attributional confidence* in their intercultural interactions. Defined as "the perceived adequacy of information with which to explain behavior occurring and to predict appropriate future behaviors" (Sanders & Wiseman, 1993, p. 3), attributional confidence is essential for reducing the kind of uncertain-

ty that impedes micro-level international security operations. Arming our military with the tools to explain behavior in culturally complex interactions is essential to building trust, rapport and partnerships. This essay has made the case for creating a permanent place for this essential process in military education – anything less is a security risk that PME decision-makers should not be willing to take.

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