Culture and Inter-Group Relations Theory as a Pathway to Improve Decision Making in Coalition Operations

William J. O'Mara, M.S.[1]
Nancy J. Heacox, Ph.D.
John W. Gwynne, Ph.D.
Pacific Science & Engineering Group, Inc.
San Diego, CA
6310 Greenwich Dr., Suite #220
San Diego, CA 92122
Phone: 858-535-1661
Fax: 858-535-1665
heacox@pacific-science.com

Robert J. Smillie Ph.D., C.P.E.
SPAWAR Systems Center-San Diego
Simulation and Human Systems Division
Code 44210
53560 Hull Street
San Diego, CA 92152
Phone: 619-535-8015
Fax: 619-535-9391
rsmillie@spawar.navy.mil

Abstract

The U.S. military frequently participates in coalitions involving foreign military organizations as well as domestic and foreign civilian groups, such as governmental organizations, private volunteer organizations, and special interest groups. Due to the wide cultural and organizational diversity of the participant groups, coalition operations pose significant challenges to the U.S. military. A macroergonomics perspective is used in this paper to evaluate how cultural factors and group process variables influence the effectiveness of coalition operations. To better understand how cultural and group process factors influence coalition operations, researchers reviewed doctrine, military analyses, workshop reports, and case studies of numerous coalition operations. Four principal inter-group factors were identified that are critical to the effectiveness of coalition missions: planning, coordination, communication, and training. These four factors were then evaluated in terms of the cultural dimensions and group process variables that influence them.

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Introduction

A coalition operation is the most common type of operation undertaken by the U.S. military,[2] a trend that is predicted to continue. Coalition operations encompass a wide range of mission types, from war to disaster relief. Since the mid 1980s, operations other than war (OOTW) have been the major type of coalition operation. Coalition operations often have major implications for national security, national interests, conflict deterrence, and world peace. They may have a high profile worldwide due to a large media presence. It is, therefore, of no small consequence that significant problems have been encountered during several recent coalition operations. Our analysis of these problems has revealed that there are several challenges to successful coalition performance.

Changing roles. The U.S. military is still gaining experience with the wide range of new roles it may be called upon to provide during coalition operations, including support, life-saving, conflict resolution, and suppression of aggression.

Disjointed efforts. Coalition operations require a high degree of inter-group cooperation and planning between multi-national military forces. In addition, there may be involvement of multiple civilian organizations that have little, if any, experience in working with military organizations.

Complexity. Coalition operations are conducted over a wide range of ambiguous situations, some with a non-human "enemy" and others involving show of force.

Culture: Its Definition and Importance to the U.S. Military

In a coalition operation, there is typically interaction between a host government, several militaries, and several humanitarian assistance organizations (non-governmental organizations or NGOs). These groups represent diverse cultural and organizational types; such diversity increases the likelihood that problems will be encountered during coalition operations. A culture, societal or organizational, may be described by the values, behavior norms, goal priorities, and ways of thinking shared by most of its members [Heacox, Gwynne and Sander, 1998]. These values are responsible for the differences in what is deemed as important and in the way people behave, or in how business is conducted. An understanding of the relationship between cultural values and behavioral consequences is imperative to achieving inter-group cooperation and avoiding disjointed group efforts.

National culture

A major theoretical viewpoint on culture contends that values form the core of cultures [Smith and Bond, 1993]. Judgments of right and wrong, of good and bad, are part of the social learning that is handed down from generation to generation. Social norms and expectations for behavior are derived from values. In the cross-cultural values paradigm, cultures are described by comparative analysis of the values predominant in the cultures. Cultures are often profiled along a number of finite dimensions.

Hofstede [1980] produced the definitive work on cultures within the values paradigm by analyzing questionnaire responses from 117,000 IBM employees in more than 50 countries. Respondents provided information about their work experiences, including perceptions of their managers' styles of decision making and value system. Through the use of factor analysis,

[2] In this paper, the term "coalition operation" includes both coalitions and alliances.

Hofstede identified four cultural value dimensions from country groupings. Later work by the Chinese Culture Connection [1987] added a fifth dimension based on a study of Asian cultures, a region largely excluded from Hofstede's study. These five dimensions are:

Power Distance (PD), "the degree of inequality among people that the populace of a country considers as normal" [Harzing & Hofstede, 1996, p. 304].

Uncertainty Avoidance (UA), "the degree to which people in a country prefer structured over unstructured situations. Structured situations are those in which there are clear rules as to how one should behave" [Harzing & Hofstede, p. 305].

Masculinity-Femininity (M-F), "the degree to which values like assertiveness, performance, success, and competition, which in nearly all societies are associated with the role of men, prevail over values like the quality of life, maintaining warm personal relationships, service, care for the weak, and solidarity, which in nearly all societies are more associated with the role of women" [Harzing & Hofstede, p.304].

Individualism-Collectivism (I-C), "whether one's identity is defined by personal choices and achievements or by the character of the collective groups to which one is more or less permanently attached" [Smith & Bond, 1993, p. 38].

Confucian Work Dynamism (CWD), a bipolar dimension consisting of values "stressed in the teachings of Confucius" [Harzing & Hofstede, 1996, p. 317]. The poles are long-term vs. short-term orientation.

One important contribution of these five dimensions is that they afford an opportunity to test specific hypotheses about cultural differences that influence inter-group effectiveness.

Organizational culture

The five cultural value dimensions can be applied to organizations as well as to societies. Erez [1994] defines the behavioral links with societal values in terms of observed differences in organizations:

- High PD is associated with high levels of hierarchy, paternalistic management, large status differences and salary gaps between workers and management. Low PD is associated with a flat organization and small status and salary differences between workers and management.
- High UA is associated with formal rules regarding rights and duties of workers and control of work processes, a larger number of specialists, and a norm of risk avoidance in decision making. Low UA is associated with informal rules and procedures, more generalists, and individual decisions, even in risky situations.
- High M (low F) is associated with management styles that stress independence, decisiveness, and assertiveness; also with adversarial negotiations. Low M (high F) is associated with management styles that stress group cohesion and group decisions, and with a problem-solving style of negotiations.
- High I (low C) is associated with workers that act according to personal needs and interests. Low I (high C) is associated with workers that act according to interests of their ascribed groups.

An understanding of these behavioral links can assist the military in meeting the challenges of working with diverse groups. For example:

- "Who has the authority to make decisions here?"

In some organizations, hierarchical differences are limited and decision making is decentralized. In others, hierarchies are tall and decision making is centralized.

- "What do they use as guidelines?"

In some organizations, uncertainty is met by the exercise of individual judgment. In others, structure is imposed via formalized procedures (e.g., ROE) in an attempt to control uncertainty.

These five cultural dimensions convey important behavioral distinctions that can be used during the planning and execution of coalition operations. For instance, the U.S. military, in comparison to most NGOs, reflect higher PD, higher UA, higher I, and higher M. There is greater centralization of decision making, a more defined hierarchy, more defined procedures, and more specialized roles. Obviously, militaries exist for a purpose that is more highly assertive than NGOs. These structural and operational differences are associated with differences that can become important as the organizations attempt to work together in coalition operations. For example, NGO personnel may have difficulty in understanding *who* in the U.S. military chain of command has the authority to make a decision. Likewise, U.S. military personnel may have difficulty identifying a chain of command in an NGO and therefore be unable to contact key decision makers.

Social Psychological Theories of Group Interaction

Cultural and social psychological issues are integral aspects of every cross-cultural group interaction and must be considered together to understand group behavior. The bases of group bias and conflict often stem from differences in the Hofstede value dimensions. Four social psychological theories are particularly germane to our understanding of group behavior—especially inter-group conflict—in coalition operations. Illustrative examples are provided from actual coalition operations[3].

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner [1979, 1986], has been a key theory in social psychology for 20 years. Social identity theory attempts to explain inter-group bias, discrimination, and conflict using the social identity construct. Social identity means that individuals seek certain group identities because those identities help them achieve positive self esteem. Consequently, individuals categorize in-groups and out-groups with the aim of establishing both a positive and distinct position for the in-group. Social identity theory relies heavily on principles of self esteem, categorization, identification, and social comparison.

Can social identity theory help explain inter-group interaction in coalition operations? The following example of an actual coalition operation suggests that it can:

- In 1991, after the Gulf War, the U.S. was asked by Turkey (a NATO ally) to resolve a tremendous refugee crisis on the Turkey–Iraq border. Thousands of Kurds had fled from Saddam Hussein in fear of their lives and were dying in frigid mountain conditions with few supplies. The U.S. State Department, United Nations, NGOs, and militaries of Canada,

[3] A high degree of interest in meeting the challenges of coalition operations can be seen in the large volume of writings (e.g., Diehl, 1994; Easter, 1996) and workshops (e.g., Center for Advanced Command Concepts & Technology, 1995; Davidson, Hayes & Landon, 1996) on the topic. In addition, military doctrine has been developed to guide these operations (e.g., The Joint Staff, 1996). These substantial efforts have guided the review and evaluation of several recent large coalition operations.

France, Great Britain, Netherlands, Turkey, and the U.S. participated to persuade the Kurds to move out of the mountains into refugee camps and then to their homes. The mission was ultimately successful; however, trust was initially low, resulting in slow involvement of NGOs with the military, due to suspicions about being used as potential political pawns [Seiple, 1996].

It is likely that low trust and consequent belated interactions resulted from a deep investment of NGO and military personnel in the social identity of their respective groups. This investment in identity—military personnel with their military organizational culture and NGO personnel with their humanitarian organizational culture—creates in-group favoritism and unfavorable out-group bias. This bias manifests itself in predictable negative in-group versus out-group comparisons. These hostile attitudes lead to polarization of attitudes and behaviors, making it unlikely that either group will trust the other.

- A cyclone hit the shores of Bangladesh in 1991 and killed 150,000 people in 48 hours. The U.S. military, in close proximity after the Gulf War, was quickly mobilized to help. With a fledgling democratic government in place, the challenge was not to take over, but to consult and support. The militaries of Great Britain, Japan, and the U.S. kept a small footprint and assisted the NGOs to provide disaster relief and to begin infrastructure renovation. There was strong cooperation between the NGOs and the militaries.

In this operation, two major issues had a positive influence on inter-group interactions. First, the gravity of the situation facilitated the development of a superordinate goal, which lessened the perception of "us" vs. "them" and instead fostered a perception of cooperation. Second, the military operated with a service orientation; they did not take over. The leadership focused on a clear role: support the Bangladeshi government and the NGOs. This mission and parameters were shared with the host government and NGOs, then repeated frequently and, most importantly, actions were consistent with words.

Equity Theory/Relative Deprivation Theory

Equity theory, originally conceived by Adams [1965], was influenced by the early work of social comparisons and cognitive dissonance by Festinger [1954, 1957]. Essentially, equity theory asks what do people think is fair and how do they respond when they perceive it is not. The model consists of two internal evaluations: 1) beliefs about what is a fair return (output) for the effort (input), and 2) a comparison with the inputs and outputs of others so that an evaluative judgment of fairness can be made. An evaluation of “unfair” leads to dissonance that creates an internal psychological conflict and motivates the individual to resolve the inequity. This drive to restore equity may take many forms—some may increase their inputs, reduce their expected output, change the comparison other, withdraw, and so forth.

Relative deprivation theory takes equity theory one step further by suggesting that only when an individual feels “relatively deprived” in comparison to a chosen reference other, will the individual be driven to behave in any manner toward the “advantaged” other. For example, relative deprivation theory is useful in looking at disadvantaged ethnic groups in the U.S. and their view toward the advantaged majority.

Can equity theory and relative deprivation theory help explain inter-group conflict in coalition operations?

- In late 1992, after years of clan wars, genocide and starvation, an acute famine crisis began in Somalia. The U.S. State Department, United Nations, NGOs, and military forces from more than 20 nations participated in complex operations that included a humanitarian mission, a peace operation, and disarmament efforts. The U.S. military was guided, in large part, by a political agenda of "no casualties."

Equity theory helps explain one particular upset that the NGOs had with the military. Many NGO personnel objected to the military's "no causalities" theme in this and other recent operations. They felt that the military is too protective of their own—but not of others in theater—for all the strength, power, and resources they possess. This was perceived as an inequity, since the NGOs are in the field daily feeding the hungry, while exposed to hazardous conditions with much less protection. The NGOs ask, "Why is it that we can risk our lives, but the armed forces with all their training and weapons can't take the same risks?" This upset has been suggested as a major reason why the NGOs often decline to join with the U.S. military for training or exercises.

- In the Turkey-Iraq operation, field personnel were in close proximity. Key military and state department representatives lived in the same camp as NGO personnel. This propinquity facilitated building relationships and coordination among disparate units. Coordination efforts were "extremely decentralized" [Seiple, 1996, p. 40].

In this instance, there was a perception of equity by both military and NGO personnel. This perception laid the foundation for positive interactions which, in turn, allowed coordination to occur in a decentralized, efficient manner. Additionally, both military and NGO participants reported mutual admiration for the other's skills and life-saving actions throughout the operation.

Attribution Theory

The key question addressed by attribution theorists is how the individual comes to focus on one or more causes from among the many possible causes of social behavior [Hogg and Abrams, 1990]. It is the causal attribution that leads to affect and behavior (e.g. prejudice). Attribution theory can shed light on why one adopts certain attitudes, becomes frustrated, discriminatory, or resorts to stereotypical thinking. The foundation of attribution theory was laid by Heider [1958]. The popularity of attribution theory is based on the soundness of its assumptions: 1) people often seek to make sense of the world by judging the causes of behavior, 2) the major inputs to this judgment are assumed to be observed samples of behavior, either another person's or one's own, and 3) the potential causes of behavior can be classified, and the particular classification of a cause that is selected may have profound impact on subsequent behavior.

The most basic attribution distinction is whether the cause of someone's behavior is internal or external. According to Ross [1977], in the "fundamental attribution error" individuals underestimate the impact of the situation (external) and overestimate the importance of the actor's traits and attitudes (internal). This led Pettigrew [1979] to the concept of the "ultimate attribution error:" members of an in-group focus on internal attributions when defining positive traits for the in-group and on external attributions when defining the same traits for an out-group. Conversely, for socially undesirable behavior the trend is reversed (in-group = external, out-group = internal).

Can attribution theory help explain inter-group conflict in coalition operations?

- In Somalia, U.S. Marines upset the host populace by eating bacon and fraternizing with local women, eventually leading to violence at U.S. Marine barracks by hostile locals.

Attribution theory is particularly applicable when attempting to understand the interactions between U.S. personnel and foreign host nationals, and can be used to explain why the locals acted so violently in Somalia. They may have attributed internal causes to the U.S. soldiers' behavior; thinking that the offensive behavior was internal, the Somalis acted accordingly. The Somalis may have believed that the U.S. soldiers intentionally acted in a disrespectful manner. Yet, the situation (an ambiguous situation in a foreign land and culture) was novel for American soldiers. This situation provides an excellent example of attribution error due to a lack of preparation for interacting with persons from foreign cultures.

- In Bangladesh, the politics of dealing with a small, vulnerable new democracy were fully considered in all decisions. When accusations of infringements upon sovereignty occurred from challengers of the new government, they were addressed with statements of intent (General Stackpole stated, "We are here to serve, then leave") and followed up with consistent actions. For example, a high priority was placed upon working with a small military footprint; the numbers of military ashore were strictly controlled in accordance with wishes of the government.

Military leaders went to great lengths to prevent the opportunity for false attribution to arise. They provided truthful information so that the populace would understand their intent and motivation. This candor, along with consistent follow-on actions, served to diffuse fear from within the populace and to lessen the impact of the challenger's accusations.

Realistic Conflict Theory

According to Hogg and Abrams [1990], realistic conflict theory, developed by Sherif in 1962, is an economic theory of intergroup behavior that is based on three assumptions: 1) people will strive to maximize their own rewards, 2) conflict results from incompatible group interests (striving for the same reward), and 3) negative attitudes, stereotypes, and attributions of out-groups result from the conflict for resources. Thus, prejudice and discrimination result from a conflict for resources between groups. Each group has a developmental cycle. First the group forms around some mutual goal or task. Next, the group begins to realize that it is in competition with other groups. Last, the group will attempt to block, sabotage, or reduce the success of the rival group while maximizing their advantage.

Can realistic conflict theory help explain inter-group conflict in coalition operations?

This theory is inadequate to explain why the military and NGOs have problems working together because it is unclear whether these group have any resource conflicts. However, realistic conflict theory is an excellent way to explain why there is conflict among groups within a given category; such as NGOs, militaries or nations. Each organization is competing against the others for resources and survival. For example, in large humanitarian assistance efforts, several NGOs are often competing for U.S. State Department contracts and public donations. It is not surprising that they often focus on competing against each other and make no attempt to coordinate their efforts.

Critical Processes for Coalition Operations

By integrating cultural value dimensions with social psychological theories of group interaction, four inter-group processes were identified as critical to coalition mission outcome. These inter-group processes can be used to help plan and execute U.S. military involvement in coalition operations. Of course, much additional research remains to be done in order to construct a more complete understanding of how cultural values and organizational variables interact in the context of coalition operations.

Inter-Group Planning

Effective coalition operations begin with thorough planning that includes all participating organizations in clearly defined, appropriate roles. Two key factors that influence the success of inter-group planning for coalition operations:

Inclusion Planning. This factor is the degree to which all participating coalition organizations are included in planning prior to deployment. It can range from being fully inclusive of all organizations to being fully exclusive, where each organization develops its own plans independently. When implemented well, Inclusion Planning creates a positive first step in relationship building between coalition partners and facilitates the exchange of valuable information throughout the operation.

Common and Consistent Goal. This factor is the degree to which all participating coalition organizations agree on a common objective and strategy (role compatibility) prior to deployment. It can range from being fully agreed upon by all organizations to being conflicted, where each organization pursues objectives independently. The development of a Common and Consistent Goal fosters relationship building between coalition partners and facilitates the exchange of information throughout the operation.

Inter-group planning builds a foundation of trust for a coalition operation. It must be acknowledged that cultural differences between groups can add to the challenges of inter-group planning—differences in PD and UA may mean that planning is carried out differently by the groups involved (e.g., different levels of personnel involved, different procedures used to plan). However, inclusion planning can facilitate the formation of a common and consistent goal even between groups with dissimilar purposes and perspectives, if the planning process focuses on the big picture and on the population needing assistance. In turn, inter-group bias and perceptions of "us" vs. "them" are lessened, and unity of purpose is strengthened. Participants contribute to the plan of operations, lessening the chances for misattribution of intent and the development of feelings of inequity. Early inter-group planning paves the way for later inter-group coordination.

Inter-Group Coordination

After the initial planning has been completed, coordination must occur throughout all phases of an operation for it to succeed. Inter-group coordination (along with communication) helps to assure positive relations and efficiency. There are two key factors that influence the success of inter-group coordination for coalition operations:

Service Oriented Military. This factor relates to the existence of behaviors that reflect mission-appropriate service to the affected populace and to participating organizations. These behaviors can range from a full customer service orientation where the U.S. military seeks to understand how to serve and behaves accordingly to a take-charge mentality where there is no customer

focus. A service orientation is particularly important in OOTWs that require a high degree of customer focus, such as relationship building, diplomacy, negotiation, understanding, and problem solving. When implemented well, a Service Orientation facilitates teamwork, high morale, trust and good will.

Task Reciprocity. This factor refers to the existence of a reciprocal helping relationship among groups such that "you help me do what I need to do for the good of the mission, I help you do what you need to do for the good of the mission." This reciprocity is based on the viewpoint that all mission participants have valuable roles to fulfill, and mutual helping is the only way for all participants to succeed. Social identity of groups is maintained, but the groups are perceived to be of fairly equal status. Seiple refers to this mindset as "altruistic self interest…. the cornerstone of NGO/military interaction" [Seiple, 1996, p. 63]. When implemented well, Task Reciprocity contributes toward solid working relationships and leads to high cooperation among organizations and high mission commitment.

Effective inter-group coordination results when roles are clearly defined. Groups with differences in the amount of specialists or generalists on staff (associated with differences in UA) may find that task-role linkages need to be explicitly defined for coordination efforts to proceed smoothly. Personnel that provide liaison to the other groups are essential for on-going coordination; in addition, problems due to misattribution of intent are reduced when supportive relationships are established. Effective inter-group coordination also increases the efficiency of resource usage, thereby reducing conflicts due to resource scarcity.

Inter-Group Communication

A comprehensive, mutually agreed-upon plan forms the foundation of an effective coalition operation. Inter-group communication is the means by which organizations share information on the development and execution of plans. Two key factors influence the success of inter-group communication for coalition operations:

Inter-Organizational Communication. This factor is the degree of information sharing between leaders belonging to different groups (e.g., participating militaries, United Nations, NGOs). It can range from being inclusive so that all organizations share and minimize gaps to exclusive, where participating organization do not share any information. When implemented well, Inter-Organizational Communication creates ease and speed in accomplishing difficult tasks, improves planning/replanning, and reduces major mistakes.

Information Transfer. This factor is the degree of information flow from group leaders to those performing task assignments in the field. It can range from being fully transferred so that all field personnel are informed of plans to minimally transferred where, due to technological difficulties or lack of a system, field personnel are not informed. When implemented well, Information Transfer enhances unity of effort by facilitating efficient task execution.

Effectively functioning inter-group communications are key to coalition operations. Aside from the obvious issue of the technology used by the different groups, protocol for communications is important to define how communications occur. Again, cultural differences may play a part. Differences in hierarchy and the absence or presence of gatekeepers—associated with differences in PD—set limits on who communicates with whom. Further, it is hypothesized that differences in M are associated with protocol for one-way (usually top down) or two-way communication. Differences in these areas may be overcome by creating communications

protocol specifically designed for and bounded by the needs of the specific operation. Without effective communications, personnel may be performing needless tasks or may be put into harm's way. The likelihood of misattributions, inter-group bias, and conflict over resources is increased in the absence of effective inter-group communications.

Inter-Group Training

Inter-group training is an essential pre-mission/between mission method for assuring positive relations, knowledge, and team work. It prepares groups to be at their best when working with each other under the stress of disaster, war or other unusual circumstances in which coalitions often function. Two key factors influence the success of inter-group training for coalition operations:

Cultural Awareness. This factor refers to behavior by military personnel that takes into account the values of the host nation and participating organizations. When implemented well, this factor promotes positive goodwill and publicity and enhanced ability for effective operations. The consequences of poor Cultural Awareness can be serious; for example, alienation of the host populace and the creation of threatening conditions for U.S. military personnel.

Combined Rehearsal. This factor refers to specific combined training or simulation exercises prior to or during a mission that allows all organizations an opportunity to start building unity of effort. When implemented well, Combined Rehearsal facilitates unity of effort, effective service to the customer, and reduces inefficiency and mistrust.

Inter-group training is the ultimate facilitator of success. There is no substitute for experience in how to plan together, how to share resources, or how to establish effective communications. However, as noted above, resistance to shared training has been encountered. Issues such as military security and control of exercises as well as NGOs' desire to maintain neutrality must be considered. As these diverse groups increasingly find themselves as partners in real operations, creative solutions are developed. For example, the Center of Excellence in Hawaii has expedited combined exercises and exchanges between the military and NGO communities.

Conclusion

When groups possessing diverse cultural and organizational backgrounds must work together, differences among them can become major impediments to mission success. Gaining an awareness of these differences is a necessary first step in developing strategies to overcome these differences and forge effective working alliances.

In nearly every coalition operation, personnel from diverse groups are expected to interact effectively in order to achieve mission objectives. The organizations involved, such as the host government, U.S. military and the NGOs, frequently struggle in this effort. Knowledge of inter-group variations in core cultural values and their related behavioral consequences can help to promote positive inter-group relations. Implementation of planning, coordination, communications and training processes that are designed to meet the needs of diverse groups is needed to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of coalition operations.

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