UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS
THE BASIC SCHOOL
MARINE CORPS TRAINING COMMAND
CAMP BARRETT, VIRGINIA 22134-5019

CULTURAL AWARENESS B4S5299XQ STUDENT HANDOUT

Operational Culture

Introduction	The current operating environment requires us to fight with and against people from cultures significantly different than our own. In order to succeed in these environments, Marines must understand the culture of our partners as well as that of our enemies.
Importance	The information provided here will help you to identify those aspects of a foreign culture that influence military operations. By identifying and understanding the role of these cultural dimensions you will be better equipped to understand our partners and the enemy and to leverage aspects of their culture in order to accomplish the mission.

General Anthony Zinni, USMC (Ret), underlines the importance of culture in operations:

"What we need is cultural intelligence. What I need to understand is how these societies function. What makes them tick? Who makes the decisions? What is it about their society that's so remarkably different in their values, in the way they think, compared to my values?"

In This Lesson

This lesson covers the following topics:

Learning Objectives

Terminal Learning Objective:

TBS-LDR-1007 Given a scenario, apply operational cultural concepts to support the ground scheme of maneuver.

Enabling Learning Objectives:

TBS-LDR-1007a Given an evaluation, define culture without omission.

TBS-LDR-1007b Given an evaluation, define operational culture without omission.

Culture Defined

Culture, as defined by *Operational Culture for the Warfighter* by Salmoni and Holmes-Eber, is "the shared world view and social structures of a group of people that influence a person's and a group's actions and choices." Expanding on this definition, culture:

- Is shared.

- Underlies our world view: what we perceive and think about the people and events surrounding us, and how we interpret and understand those people and events.

- Is interconnected and holistic; each dimension of culture is intimately related to the others.

- Is varied over time, over space, and among individuals.

- Is fluid and dynamic; humans are active agents with regard to culture, not passive recipients.

Cultural Concepts

Discussing culture in a military context is problematic in that it is often reduced to simple, generalized abstractions such as:

- Cultural "templates" that supposedly explain how entire regions of the world think and act but that are actually little more than stereotypes of little value (*i.e.,* the concept of the "American Personality").

- Simplistic cultural checklists, such as those found in "Cultural Smart Cards," that are meant to assist leaders in analyzing a foreign culture but that in fact provide an incomplete understanding of the culture in question.

Cultural Concepts

Important concepts in the understanding of culture include:

- Cultural Determinism: the belief that the culture in which we are raised determines who we are at emotional and behavioral levels. There is significant disagreement regarding the extent to which culture determines our thoughts and behavior as opposed to other factors, such as our genes and the environment, but his debate- of nature versus nurture- while interesting, is not our focus. For our purposes, it is sufficient to say that the culture(s) in which we are raised plays a significant role in determining who we turn out to be.

  Cultural determinism can be taken too far: it can lead us to make assumptions about our partners or the enemy that are inaccurate. For example, it may be tempting to think of a foreigner as the "output" of the "cultural software" by which he has been "programmed." This type of thinking results in misleading stereotypes that ultimately inhibit our ability to partner effectively or to properly assess the enemy situation.

- Ethnocentrism: the tendency to believe that one's ethnic or cultural group is centrally important, and that all other groups are measured in relation to one's own. This is a natural bias that we can only mitigate, but never overcome. Like it or not, we are "trapped" inside our culture and see everything else through its lens. We are unable to separate ourselves from our culture and naturally look at the behavior of others in relation to our own cultural norms, which we take for granted as being natural.

  Taken to the extreme, ethnocentrism can be perverted into the belief that one's culture is superior (not just different) to all others. This perversion of the concept is at the root of racist and supremacist world views and has been the source of some of the most repugnant activity in human history, to include eugenics and genocide.

- Cultural Relativism: the principle that an individual's beliefs and activities should be understood by others in terms of that individual's own culture. For example, the practice of taking multiple wives is culturally acceptable and "makes sense" in many countries around the world. In the US, however, the practice is illegal and considered inappropriate and scandalous. The practice of taking multiple wives, then, is not itself at issue. Rather, the propriety of this behavior largely depends on the cultural context in which it occurs.

  - Moral Relativism: cultural relativism is sometimes conflated with moral relativism, the widely condemned concept that there are no absolute or universal moral standards. When this occurs, cultural relativism can be misinterpreted to mean that *all* cultural practices are acceptable and that all value systems, however different or morally questionable, are equally valid. If this was the case, a practice as horrific as honor killings could be rationalized because it is accepted by the culture in which it occurs. Clearly, this approach runs counter to our Core Values and is to be rejected. That said, the distinction between cultural relativism and moral relativism may be difficult to draw, especially when partnering with cultures very different than our own.

Operational Culture Defined: The Five Dimensions

Operational Culture, as defined by *Operational Culture for the Warfighter,* is "those aspects of culture that influence the outcome of a military operation; conversely, the military actions that influence the culture of an area of operations." In other words, Operational Culture is *those aspects of culture that matter to us because they affect our ability to accomplish the mission.*

While it would be preferable to have a complete and accurate understanding of the culture of our partners and enemies, it is nearly impossible to achieve this level of comprehension during time-compressed pre-deployment training. Instead, we analyze culture as part of the planning process in order to achieve a functional understanding. Despite their seeming diversity, all cultures are organized according to a predictable set of categories or dimensions. The five dimensions of Operational Culture are as follows:

1. Physical Environment

2. Economy

3. Social Structure

4. Political Structure

5. Belief Systems

Dimension 1: Physical Environment

All cultures have developed a unique interdependent relationship with their physical environment, particularly with regard to water, land, food, materials for shelter, climate and seasons, and fuel and power.

Dimension 2: Economy

All cultures have a specific system for obtaining, producing, and distributing the items that people need or want to survive in their society. This system (which does not necessarily require money or banks) is called the economy of a culture.

All cultures that Marines operate have both formal and informal economic aspects:

- Formal Economy: those economic interactions and exchanges that are regulated, taxed, tracked and measured by a state government.

- Informal Economy: those economic interactions and exchanges that are not recognized, regulated, controlled or taxed by a state government.

Economies work as networks of exchanges, but economic interactions also shape social relationships.

Dimension 3: Social Structure

All cultures assign individuals different roles, status, and power within the group. The way people organize themselves and distribute power and status is called their social structure.

Operational Culture for the Warfighter uses the analogy of a building to illustrate social structure:

"In the structure of a building one finds walls- these are like social boundaries. Physical structures also possess corridors- these are like channels of social access...Buildings are also composed of rooms which define what kinds of activities occur among what kinds of people; similarly, social structures define the kinds and nature of activities among groups of people."

Some of the more common social structures include: family, business, political, age or school grade, religious, legal, military, economic class, and social networks. Individuals are often categorized within a social structure based on their age, gender, family/tribal identity, economic class, ethnicity and religion.

Social structures have certain features in common:

- They consist of a set of organized relationships among people (think of a military organizational chart).

- Individuals within the social structure occupy a position relative to other people.

- Each position is associated with a specific role.

- They exist independently of the specific individuals within them.

Dimension 4: Political Structure

All cultures have a system that determines who leads the group and makes decisions about its welfare. How a group is ruled is referred to as the political structure of the culture.

The political structure of a culture deals with both *power* and *authority*:

- Power: the ability to control or influence the behavior of individuals or groups of people.

- Authority: the legal or popularly granted permission to exercise power; legitimacy in the exercise of power.

Understanding the power and authority structure and how to work with the individuals filling roles within that structure is critical to operational success.

Dimension 5: Belief System

All cultures have a shared set of beliefs and symbols that unite the group.

Belief systems are a composite of history, collective memory, folklore, icons, symbols, rituals, taboos, norms, ceremonies and religious beliefs. Together, they form a *narrative* that explains the world and the role of the group within it.

Resources and Opportunities

The mission of the Marine Corps' **Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning** (CAOCL) is to ensure that the Marine Corps is a force that is globally prepared, regionally focused, and effective at navigating and influencing the culturally complex 21st Century operating environments in support of missions and requirements. Located aboard MCB Quantico, CAOCL offers mobile training teams and cultural resources to units and leaders across the Marine Corps. For more information, visit the CAOCL homepage at:

http://www.mcu.usmc.mil/caocl/SitePages/index.aspx

Additionally, **MarineNet** offers language training and a number of modules that deal with operational culture and partnering.

Following your first tour in the operating forces, you may be eligible for the **International Affairs Officer Programs**, which includes both the Foreign Area Officer (FAO) and Regional Area Officer (RAO) programs. These programs offer the opportunity to become an expert in the political-military dynamics of a particular country or region. Training to become a FAO/RAO includes language immersion as well as a tour of duty in a designated area of the world. For more information, visit the MMOA-3 website at:

https://www.manpower.usmc.mil/portal/page/portal/M_RA_HOME/MM/A_OA/OA-3

The **George and Carol Olmsted Foundation** offers scholarships for graduate study in a foreign country to competitive applicants. The Olmsted Scholar Program "offers educational grants for two years of graduate study in a foreign language and other educational experiences in a foreign country to competitively selected career line officers from the four branches of the U.S. military." For more information, visit the Foundation's website at:

http://www.olmstedfoundation.org/olmsted/web/

Last, do not forget your microregion assignments. Your assignment will stay with you for the rest of your career, and, as the **Marine Corps' Regional, Culture and Language Familiarization (RCLF) Program** continues to grow, opportunities for more extensive, guided study will likely become available in the near future.

Summary

You must apply the five dimensions of Operational Culture in a flexible and creative manner in order to accomplish the mission. Attempts to create a "cultural checklist" or to reduce our partners or enemies to a single stereotype will fail. CAOCL is an excellent resource for additional information and culture-specific resources.

References

Reference Number or Author	Reference Title
CAOCL	USMC Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning (CAOCL) Website: www.tecom.usmc.mil/caocl
Salmoni and Holmes-Eber	*Operational Culture for the Warfighter: Principles and Applications*

Notes