



# Translational Research

at the USMC Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning

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## Your Smarts Aren't Like Mine: Understanding Intellect Across Cultures

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Appreciating how intelligent behavior can be perceived so differently across cultures can help Marines recognize the values of a culture and enhance their ability to understand and effectively engage, work with, or train local nationals. Assessments of human intellect or “smarts” cannot be separated from their cultural context and understanding what is regarded as intelligent behavior within a particular culture can be a challenge for warfighters. Wrong assumptions may impede relationship development and mission fulfillment. When I was deployed in Iraq as a contracted operations research analyst [1], I learned of one such incorrect assumption about intelligence regarding the now-infamous contraband/explosives detector, the ADE651. This device was a large black wand, whose vendor claimed could detect drugs and bombs, among other things, at a significant distance and was easily charged by creating an “electro-magnetic” relationship just by marching in place. What a boon for Iraqi police at checkpoints. The Americans I engaged were astounded that Iraqis could believe that this device worked as claimed, and some went to significant lengths to illustrate its ineffectiveness to their Iraqi counterparts. It made no difference – the police kept using it. So did this mean the Iraqis were not “smart”?

Whether shocked, frustrated, or amused, the Americans tended to conclude that the Iraqi police who used the device were not too sharp. To me, however, this conclusion was a misleading assessment about the police because it failed to account for the cultural context of this behavior. Having witnessed “Soviet-style” leadership [2] in Iraq, it was much more likely to me that the organizational culture of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) was responsible for the loyalty to the apocryphal ADE651. Based on self-reports from Americans and then corroboration by a New York Times article [3], a key Iraqi leader evidently promoted the device as highly useful. He, in turn, pushed it on

### Research News

#### TRG at the April 2011 COSC Conference

Dr. Frank Tortorello gave a presentation on “The Basis of Stigma and the Origin of Moral Injury in the US Marine Corps” at the Navy/Marine Corps Combat & Operational Stress Control (COSC) Conference in San Diego, California. In his presentation, Dr. Tortorello argued that, culturally, the Marine Corps has institutionalized a subtle shift from *striving for* ideals (such as performing courageously on the battlefield) to an expectation that ideals *can be achieved* (such as **never** failing at performing courageously on the battlefield).

While making Marines masters of the conventional battlefield, a perhaps unintended consequence of this shift is that Marines are *invited* to hold themselves morally accountable for *any* failure, whether that failure is not firing on an approaching vehicle at a checkpoint that has been car-bombed previously, only to find out that the car does indeed hold insurgents, or firing on an approaching vehicle only to find out that the car holds civilians. Not all Marines accept the invitation, but the ensuing struggle over the moral status of actions and the Marine’s sense of self-worth after failure is one of the stressors that can contribute to moral injury.

The COSC Conference is an annual event organized by the US Navy and attended by personnel from all service branches, as well as civilians and family members. Presentations are arranged according to five tracks: Leadership, Research, Clinical, Family, and Combined.

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his subordinates who kept promoting the device down the chain. Likely recognizing the hierarchical authority structure and its import to individual job security, the police officers reinforced their leader's perception about the instrument. If taken in its cultural context, therefore, the behavior of the police in continuing to use the ADE651 was actually smart – such behavior mitigated job insecurity.

### ***Intelligence is Culturally-Bound***

How intelligence is defined varies across and within cultures. In American culture, formal intelligence is measurable and predominantly logical or analytical (as opposed to social/relational) and defined by speed of processing (the faster you solve something, the smarter you are). In contrast, a study of rural Kenyans highlighted four different types of intelligence: knowledge and competence, respect and care of others, deference to authority figures, and creativity/innovation [4].

If intelligence is so variously defined, how do American conceptualizations of intelligence compare to other conceptualizations that Marines may encounter? In a 1996 study, researchers created a practical intelligence test (local knowledge as opposed to academic) to assess rural and urban Kenyan children on their level of knowledge about disease, corresponding treatments, and the utility of herbal remedies [5]. They then compared these results to the same children's performance on American tests of formal intelligence. The results indicated no relationship or an inverse one, the latter because those who did pursue formal schooling were much less likely to invest in learning the local knowledge and vice versa. This study as well as others [6] reveals that American education, which exposes children to a variety of skills and is appropriate for American society, fails to capture key areas of intelligence that are important to other societies.

The above example demonstrates how intelligence varies across cultures, but the concept of informal or practical intelligence illustrates how variations also exist within cultures. Understanding the difference between formal intelligence (institutionalized/schooling) and practical intelligence can allow Marines to expand their understanding of intelligent behavior and by consequence their ability to identify a greater range of intelligent behavior in unfamiliar environments. **Practical intelligence is defined as the ability to effectively adapt, shape, or select a new environment [7] in response to non-academic, real-life problems, which tend to be ill-defined, have gaps in information, and present multiple potential solutions [8].**

### ***Intelligence is Culturally-Bound: So What?***

Training is a common task for Marines in foreign cultures. As intelligence is bound by its culture, **teaching or training something new to a foreign culture should contain content and methods that are embedded in a familiar context, integrating ideas or things that locals use every day.** For example, sixth-grade children in Alaska improved their learning of geometric concepts when taught with examples involving fish racks, a common feature in their culture [9]. Such problems are bound by context; therefore, someone who could successfully perform math in the context of their job might perform much worse if given similar math problems in a paper-pencil, abstract context [10]. When making assessments of intelligence, outsiders need to be cognizant of what that population perceives as intelligent and avoid imposing their own construct of “smarts” on another population.

While definitions of intelligence vary across cultures, **assuming limitations on intelligence by imposing one's own cultural construction of what is “smart”,** as in the case of the ADE651, **can hinder not only training but mission goals.** According to a radio broadcast of a first-hand account, last year a U.S. Army Captain in Afghanistan worked with Afghan National Army counterparts who operated without any technological aids. The captain had stumbled upon computers already loaded with Dari-compatible programs and keyboards in one of the U.S. Army's storage trailers; however, when he approached his commander, he was told that previous commanders had found that Afghans were too ignorant to use computers. The commander did release one computer, however. The captain and a proactive Afghan soldier revolutionized the administrative section of the unit. It went from “the dark ages to a modern office, capable of printing, copying and distributing reports... the productivity of the entire battalion improved.” The commander then released all of the computers, and this key Afghan soldier began teaching his compatriots how to use them [11]. In short, lack of familiarity does not equate to lack of intelligence.

## Identifying Intelligence in a Culture

Identifying what smart behavior looks like within a culture is difficult and highly likely to vary among sub-cultures. Some potential guidelines, however, can aid in developing a concept of how intelligence is perceived within a culture of interest. **The focus for these proposed guidelines are on identifying intelligence in a military culture** [12]. Marines can use this understanding to help them interpret what initially might seem to be odd or illogical behavior and allow them to shape their understanding or interactions with foreign militaries (to include coalition partners) by using methods of engagement or content familiar to their audience. **Identifying how intelligence is defined locally can also help Marines understand how their own behavior might be perceived and facilitate a means of collaboration that works for both parties.**

The questions provided here offer a very basic, preliminary guide for identifying constructs of intelligence in foreign cultures. While various subject matter experts (cultural advisors, analysts, Marines with successful

### SUGGESTED GUIDELINES FOR UNDERSTANDING INTELLIGENCE IN A FOREIGN MILITARY

#### Information (Practical) Intelligence

- Who are the leaders regarded as successful by both their peers and subordinates?
- What behaviors do these leaders use to set goals and accomplish them?
- What behaviors do these leaders use to establish credibility?
- What behaviors do these leaders use to establish trust?
- What behaviors do these leaders use to motivate their subordinates?
- How do members of the military understand their duty to the nation/civil-military relationship?
- How do they characterize the military ethic?
- How do they appreciate their role/responsibility within their own chain of command?
- How do they appreciate hierarchy between officers and non-commissioned officers?
- How is discipline demonstrated?
- How do they react to initiative and authority?

#### Formal Intelligence

- How is DOTMLPF\* conceptualized?
- What are the key principles taught at the professional military institutions?
- How are techniques, tactics, and procedures (TTPs) conceptualized?
- What is the method of teaching or training?

\*Doctrine, Organization, Training, Material, Leadership and Education, Personnel, Facilities

#### Factors that Impact All Types of Intelligence

##### Internal to the Military

- What can derail a military career?
- What are the drivers of a successful military career?
- How would you characterize the organizational culture?
- What are the styles of leadership?
- What are the civilian dynamics, such as ethnic or religious affiliations, that influence unit member behavior?

##### External to the Military

- What is the overall level of violence in the area?
- What is the overall state of health in the areas from which the population of interest are drawn and the current area of operations (AO)?
- What social norms (e.g., based on gender, class, family, authority, etc.) enhance or restrict certain groups' learning?
- What is the state of local infrastructure?

experiences working with locals, reports from the area, etc.) can assist in answering these questions, **the best approach for understanding intelligence in a foreign culture is time, careful observation, and thoughts and perspectives gained directly from the population of interest.** Furthermore, **it is critical to approach the proposed guidelines with an awareness of one's own conceptualization of intelligence as well as receptivity to observing and hearing how the locals conceptualize intelligence.** The necessity of addressing all of the following questions should be driven by operational needs. The cultural context will be as narrow as the Marine chooses to define it -- even within the same cultural group, there will be sub-groups who define intelligence differently, as dictated by various demographics (age, gender) or social norms. **This information can inform a wide variety of tasks – training, engagements, planning, information operations, and any other tasks in which it is important to understand foreign perspectives.**

## Conclusion

While no easy task, attempting to understand how intelligence is defined in a culture, why it is defined that way, and what intelligent behavior looks like will benefit Marines. Doing so could not only facilitate general engagement with Marine counterparts and locals but also allow for improved training programs and outcomes. Ultimately, armed with understanding of culturally-bound intelligence, Marines can figure out how to help their counterparts in a way that makes sense to *them*.

### Notes:

[1] I was deployed on a Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization contract as an operations research analyst from September 2009 – January 2010.

[2] Several members of various Military Transition Teams had characterized this rigid authoritarian structure as “Soviet style,” and I also observed an example of the behavior.

[3] Rod Norland, “Iraq Swears by Bomb Detector that U.S. Sees as Useless” New York Times, November 3, 2009, accessed March 21, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/04/world/middleeast/04sensors.html>.

[4] Grigorenko et al., 1999 as cited in E. Mpofu, “Indigenization of the Psychology of Human Intelligence in Sub-Saharan Africa,” Online Readings in Psychology and Culture Unit 5, Chapter 2 (International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology: August 2002), accessed April 4, 2011,

[http://orpc.iaccp.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=62%3Aelias-mpofu&catid=23%3Achapter&Itemid=15](http://orpc.iaccp.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=62%3Aelias-mpofu&catid=23%3Achapter&Itemid=15).

[5] Robert J. Sternberg & Elena L. Grigorenko, “Intelligence and Culture: How Culture Shapes What Intelligence Means, and the Implications for a Science of Well-Being,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society: B* (2004): 1429-1430, accessed April 4, 2011, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1693428/pdf/15347533.pdf>.

[6] For example, D.A. Wagner, 1978 as cited in Robert J. Sternberg, “Cultural Dimensions of Giftedness and Talent,” *Roeper Review* 29, no. 3 (Spring 2007): 160 – 165.

[7] Robert J. Sternberg, George B. Forsythe, Jennifer Hedlund, Joseph A. Horvath, Richard K. Wagner, Wendy M. Williams, Scott A. Snook, Elena L. Grigorenko, *Practical Intelligence in Everyday Life* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 34.

[8] Robert J. Sternberg, *Handbook of Intelligence* (Cambridge University Press: UK, 2000), 381.

[9] R.J. Sternberg, J. Lipka, T. Newman, S. Wildfeuer & E.L. Grigorenko, “Triarchically-Based Instruction and Assessment of Sixth-Grade Mathematics in a Yup’ik Cultural Setting in Alaska,” *International Journal of Giftedness and Creativity* (then in press) and G. Ladson-Billings, “Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy,” *American Educational Research Journal* 32 (1995): 465–491 as cited in Robert J. Sternberg, “Who are the Bright Children? The Cultural Context of Being and Acting Intelligent,” *Educational Researcher* 36, no. 3 (April 2007): 141.

[10] Robert J. Sternberg, editor, *Handbook of Intelligence*, 383.

[11] Benjamin Tupper, “Combating Computer Illiteracy in Afghanistan,” National Public Radio, All Things Considered, accessed on March 21, 2011 <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=128167900>.

[12] The guidelines pertaining to military leaders was inspired by the following: Jennifer Hedlund, George B. Forsythe, Joseph A. Horvath, Wendy M. Williams, Scott Snook and Robert J. Sternberg, “Identifying and Assessing Tacit Knowledge: Understanding the Practical Intelligence of Military Leaders,” *The Leadership Quarterly* 14, no 2 (April 2003): 133-134.

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