



Translational Research

at the USMC Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning

CAOCL Dispatches • Volume 2, Issue 2

March 2012

“Unpacking a Cultural Mystery” By Kristin Post

In his foreword to Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1: *Warfighting*, Commandant Charles Krulak writes that one purpose of the publication is to “emphasize war’s complexity and unpredictability.”¹ The text goes on to examine war and warfighting, with the implication that appropriate planning and procedures can be considered and adopted to mitigate war’s complexity and unpredictability. My conception of culture is similar. Culture is complex and unpredictable, but can become less so over time when a deliberate process is followed. When the military is interacting with a foreign population, there are moments when what is intended leads to an unintended consequence, or when what seems simple becomes complex and opaque. These moments are what I call cultural mysteries. The most frequent negative operational impact of these mysteries is frustration or damaged relationships, but, on rare occasions, the impact can be reduced troop security. Planning prior to cultural interactions is one step that can be taken to mitigate their unpredictability. But given the often pressing nature of the mission and the inevitability of ambiguity surrounding cultural interactions in the battlespace, planning can only take you so far. Another critical process is what can be done *after* a cultural mystery occurs so that Marines are able to sift through the most likely “possibilities and probabilities”² in a cultural context, and navigate that ambiguity with less error. Over time, this process of perspective gathering, reflection, and analysis can become a skill that adds to the information picture and enhances better cultural decision making in the future.

Complexity is part of the Marines’ environment when they are engaging a foreign population, whether in a combat operation, a humanitarian assistance mission, or a theater security exercise. Warfighters must live with ambiguity in these human relationships, just as they must adjust to the friction, uncertainty, unintended consequences and fluidity³ of warfare. The point of this article is not to show how to remove the complexity or ambiguity from cultural mysteries, but rather to support a process of discovery so that Marines are able to improve their facility navigating the cultural terrain, just as they excel in conducting maneuver warfare on the physical terrain. A note of caution: the results will be messy and they may not fit within the tempo of the battle rhythm where “consistently faster” decisions⁴ are desired, if not required. Nor will these results fall neatly into two categories, good and bad, or enemy and ally.⁵ However, over time, the ambiguity will decrease, and in its place will emerge “broad patterns that can be represented as probabilities.”⁶ Drawing on my experiences in Afghanistan,⁷ I will discuss ways to explore the possibilities and probabilities of

Research Notes

“The al-Anbar Awakening”

On February 23, Jennifer Clark gave a presentation at the Small Wars Forum on her research into the strategies and tactics used by different groups to instigate the Awakening Movement.

“Longitudinal Research Project”

In February, Kristin Post conducted unstructured interviews with Marines from 1st Battalion, 25th Marines who were returning from performing mentoring and partnering roles in Afghanistan. The interviews are part of a larger project assessing the relevance of different types of cultural training to mission success.

“Resiliency”

During March, Frank Tortorello begins observing and interviewing Marines for a TECOM sponsored project to find out what Marines say and do to be resilient.

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potential outcomes from cultural mysteries. Over time, this exploration process can evolve from a step by step methodology (as laid out in the graphic on pg. 4) into an analytic skill that has been developed through first-hand practice, personal reflection, and a conscientious effort to train in ambiguous cultural conditions.

Question the “Obvious” Answer

At one patrol base in Nawa Province that I visited multiple times, Marines never took contact or discovered a roadside bomb. However, the Afghans suffered occasional threats and violence. On my last mission to that area a local council member survived an assassination attempt (though some family members were killed.)

When you read this, what is your first reaction? The pervasive thought at the time was that this incident fell into the broad pattern of Taliban attacks on government officials. This conclusion drives Marines to certain actions. However, what if there was a different explanation that drives a completely different set of responses? Consider this: several months prior to the assassination attempt, a nearby school was reconstructed with funds from Civil Affairs and opened to students. A few days later, the school closed. Depending on to whom I spoke, the school was closed because it was summer break, there was no teacher, the security wasn't good enough, the building construction wasn't completed, or a powerful local elder decreed that it be closed due to bad blood over the school construction money that went to a different contractor (and not his family). It was this last possibility that caught my attention because the contractor who received the reconstruction bid was the son of the community council member who was almost assassinated.

Now there were two plausible explanations for this assassination attempt. It could have been a typical Taliban tactic, or perhaps this was a local feud, driven in part by the flow of reconstruction funds and related issues of power, economic gain and prestige. If the local elder were the source of the assassination attempt and if it were directly related to his anger over the school reconstruction process, this would demand a much different response from Marines, as this situation would have more to do with the impact of the American presence on the local economy, the power base, and social relationships than it would with insurgent activity. What might first seem the logical explanation may be clouded by the cultural complexity of the operating environment. It is important to question and check your assumptions about a situation when facing an unfamiliar cultural context so that in the end your response is aligned to the threat.

Include Multiple Perspectives in Your Analysis

In the circumstances above, what decision are you going to make? These types of challenging situations face warfighters all the time across the globe and require a probing response. The process of identifying patterns for more effective decision-making includes pursuing many possibilities by aggregating multiple viewpoints. A critical component of this is keeping an open mind as you peel back the 'onion'. Interviewing your counterparts and the locals reveals the layers of complexity and introduces critical themes that may not have been apparent at first. Your team may also have cultural assets to deploy into the field to seek answers that you may not have the ability to pursue on your own. In the case above, I as the Human Terrain Team Social Scientist interviewed the locals to gain their understanding of the situation. But as stated earlier, aggregating viewpoints is messy. After hearing from the Afghan military, the local population and the Marines, I was never close to knowing which explanation of the assassination attempt was most likely. A broad pattern may emerge from gathering multiple perspectives, but sometimes it does not.

In addition to hearing current perspectives, adding historical context can offer insight. For example, after *Operation Moshtarak*⁸ in Helmand Province, a broad coalition of Afghan and international military, governmental and non-governmental agencies were working together to tackle poppy eradication and other agricultural and economic issues. Their efforts were especially focused on the city of Marjah. Marjah was the product of a massive government-subsidized irrigation and land reclamation project that had been commissioned by King Zahir Shah in the 1940s and '50s and executed by American planners and engineers.⁹ The land, organized into a grid-like “block system,” was originally granted by the King to families who were resettled from other parts of the country. Zahir Shah's reign ended in a coup, followed by decades of instability and war. What had been Afghanistan's leading wheat producing region eventually became foremost in opium production. And what had been an orderly process of government land grants had become muddled by years of government neglect. That said, the Marjah residents were clear in their understanding of who owned what land. Over time, a striking pattern emerged. Consistent with our expectations going in, certain blocks traced their ownership back to a grant from Zahir Shah; however, residents of other blocks all received their land under Burhanuddin Rabbani, who ruled as President of Afghanistan from 1992-1996. This settlement pattern and relationship of the Afghans to past governments would be something to consider if you are the Marine who must decide how to react to land ownership issues or how to anticipate the effects of government policies about land ownership. It could also impact other areas such as economic development or crop replacement. Information gathered for one cultural mystery will often have broad applications to multiple cultural contexts.

Is the Juice Worth the Squeeze?

Time is not a luxury afforded to Marines. However, seeking answers in these culturally complex situations can be a lengthy process. Interviewing, researching, investigating and interpreting data – all of these take time, time not available to most Marines in the field. In the landowner case, it was pretty straightforward. Landownership was critical to understand for the success of reconstruction efforts, the assets were available, and the time allotted was sufficient to build a reliable understanding for Marjah. When confronting land disputes in the area, or advising government counterparts, this clarity would serve the Marines in RCT7, the Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team, and others who came after them. However, in the case of the assassination attempt, there was not enough time to get to the bottom of the mystery. We did not find out if the school house closure and the assassination attempt were linked. Frustrating, yes. A waste of time? No. At times, it is not the answer but the process of discovery that becomes the goal.

For instance, in the case of the assassination attempt, this information could be an impetus to guide Marines in what kind of information to ask about on future patrols. That unit and future ones could keep an ear out for any hearsay about a potential feud, or keep tabs on how people speak about the elder. This type of information aggregated over time and passed on through transfers of authority can sharpen the Marine Corps' understanding of the overall operational picture and enhance a leader's abilities to take decisive, culturally effective action. This unsolved mystery can also be a useful planning tool. During the planning process, this example can be used to consider the impact of unintended consequences. Marines could consider branch plans they would recommend in the event that the assassination attempt was, for example, a Taliban tactic and what plan would account for a local feud. They could then look to see if any of their proposed actions overlap. If they do, these courses of action could be adopted first because they are not related to a specific motive, so would be broad enough to account for multiple possibilities and unpredictability. The battle is not limited to one Marine's (or unit's) experience, so cultural mysteries, unsolved or solved, should be integrated into the transfer of knowledge during the relief in place process.

A Teachable Moment

The value of such learning extends beyond the immediate battlespace. Scenarios involving cultural mysteries are excellent teaching tools for preparing oneself and others for the complexity and difficulty of any operation involving a foreign population. Such experiences, built on real challenges facing Marines, can be used in practical application exercises, tactical decision games, small group discussions, and case studies. Too often, these teaching tools are not sufficiently ambiguous. An ideal way to teach a cultural mystery is to expose the layers of complexity that dwell within the sorts of cultural scenarios that impact operational decision making, and to teach the process of finding the answer, not to identify what the answer actually is. School house curricula are enriched with these real-life critical thinking exercises that condition Marines to work through the complicated discovery process demanded of them in the battlespace but without the accompanying operational time pressures. By reinforcing the need to question their cultural assumptions and by incorporating multiple perspectives into their analyses, Marines will be prepared to confront – and in some cases even prevent – such cultural mysteries in the battle field and to make more informed operational decisions.

Fluidity: Use Cultural Mysteries With Care

One last important attribute of cultural mysteries is that, like warfare, they are fluid. Cultural mysteries are defined by context, and are, like each episode in war, “a temporary result of a unique combination of circumstances, presenting a unique set of problems and requiring an original solution.”¹⁰ As Marines who have served in both Iraq and Afghanistan know, the differences between the two countries and peoples are so vast that it is hard, if not dangerous, to carry cultural lessons learned from one theater into the other. Moreover, within Afghanistan, Marines have found that ethnic make-up and even language spoken varies village by village, making it difficult to generalize even about an area of operations. Thus, even though cultural mysteries can be object lessons for future deployments, they cannot be generalized into hard and fast rules to live by. The utility of cultural mysteries is in thinking through probabilities and possibilities; in other words, they should not become lessons learned and *applied* universally, but lessons *considered* in the light of the specific facts, local culture and recent circumstances.

Unpacking a Cultural Mystery (in the field and beyond)

<p>Prior to deployment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prepare yourself for how to deal with conflicting viewpoints. They are a natural outcome of cross-cultural communication. - Remember your own interpretation of events is guided by your own cultural viewpoints and try to take other perspectives into consideration.
<p>In the field (minimal time)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - When confronting a cultural mystery, write down what you know: who has told you what, what they might gain, what other pressures they are under, what is his/her relationship to you, what message he/she wants you to hear. - At the very least, talk through the scenario with at least one other person: a Marine, an interpreter, a local security counterpart. - Share what information you can in a situation report or a daily update. - If necessary, solicit help investigating or conducting interviews from Marine enablers (Human Terrain Teams, Civil Affairs, Intel, Information Operations etc.)
<p>In the field (more time)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Talk to the local population in a general way. Try not to use names or specifics that could harm another individual. When you talk to the locals, consider their economic and ethnic background and place in society. - Talk to others: Civil Affairs, Intel, LEPs, HTT, other partner forces, foreign civilians in the battlespace. - Talk to other civilians or government officials who work closely with the military. - Research both open and classified materials (when feasible). - Read open source news articles and follow local announcements on the radio (if possible). - Keep track of all the information; look for patterns to emerge. - Share what you have learned with higher headquarters or document it for after deployment.
<p>After the deployment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continue thinking through the scenario. Time and distance can provide clarity. - Continue to discuss with others. - Summarize the experience with open-ended wording for use as a learning tool. - Submit a lesson learned to the Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned. - Create opportunities to discuss these mysteries within your unit before individuals go their separate ways. - Remember cultural mysteries are fluid. Do not create a rigid interpretations. Remember that on the next deployment the context has changed.

Notes:

¹U.S. Marine Corps, *Warfighting*: Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1 (MCDP1). 1997.

²Ibid, p.7.

³U.S. Marine Corps, *Warfighting*: Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1 (MCDP1). 1997.

⁴Ibid, p.85.

⁵In *Warfighting*, war is portrayed as “a clash between two opposing wills” (p.5), and yet this simplistic definition is problematized throughout the text. War, like culture, is never about just two human wills, but the tendency is to simplify, so that the clash is “between” human wills instead of “among” them.

⁶U.S. Marine Corps, *Warfighting*: Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1 (MCDP1). 1997. p.19

⁷I was a Human Terrain Team Social Scientist with a Marine Regimental Combat Team (RCT7) in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. This article draws on research conducted on foot patrols with Marines and Afghan security forces in March and April, 2010.

⁸*Moshtarak* is a Dari word for “together.” It describes the joint initiative between Afghan and ISAF forces to “assert government authority in the centre [sic] of Helmand province,” launched in February, 2010. Source: News release 2010-02-CA-059, ISAF Joint Command- Afghanistan. Kabul, Afghanistan. February 13, 2010.

⁹Nick Cullather, “Damming Afghanistan: Modernization in a Buffer State,” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 89, No. 2 (2002).

¹⁰U.S. Marine Corps, *Warfighting*: Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1 (MCDP1). 1997. p.9

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