

Cultural competence and linguistic capability in ADF human-intelligence source operations

Captain S, Australian Army

Cultural competence is a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency or among professionals and enable that system, agency or those professions to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.

T.L. Cross *et al*, *Towards a culturally competent system of care*, National Institute of Justice: Washington DC, 1989

For some time, a range of government and non-government organisations have been acknowledging the importance of ‘cultural competence’ or ‘cultural proficiency’ in their service delivery and practitioner training. This has been particularly prominent in healthcare and social services, as well as law enforcement and the criminal justice system.

This article will argue that elements of cultural competence and related aspects such as effective linguist capability are integral to human intelligence in general, and military-related source

operations in particular. The article will then suggest how this can be better incorporated into both specialist and continuation training, and how linguist support to the capability can be enhanced to avoid cultural ‘fouls’ and missed collection opportunities.

As source operations are a human-intelligence discipline, it is explicit that human interaction is central to the capability. Throughout the selection, training, certification and employment of a military source operator (an individual trained to exploit information from a human source, most usually in an operational theatre), interpersonal skills are assessed and scrutinised. Psychological testing and observation of interpersonal interaction are used to ensure the right person has been chosen for a role which is critically dependent on understanding what is going on in the head of the person opposite them.

During the training of potential source operators, considerable scrutiny is placed on the exact



wording used during interaction with simulated sources. However, at present, almost all this scrutiny is conducted in a cultural and linguistic vacuum. With the exception of a short period of training in the use of an interpreter, all current training in the ADF is conducted between Australians and in English. This is continued during unit training, where training activities are almost exclusively conducted in a domestic context, with a simulated local source network.

Compare this to the actual conduct of source operations by the ADF. Almost exclusively, the gathering of human intelligence in an overseas theatre will be from sources who are foreign nationals, who either do not speak English or speak it as a second, third or fourth language. Less visible than the linguistic barrier will be their difference in world view. Understanding the motivation of a source is a critical component to effective human-intelligence operations. And, needless to say, the world view of a 42-year old father of three from Brisbane is substantially different to a counterpart from Kandahar, Dili, Mogadishu or Aleppo. Everything from sense of humour to honour, duty, loyalty and loss of face is subtly (or not so subtly) different when influenced by such factors as religion, educational levels, exposure to violence, and longstanding cultural norms.

At present, considerable effort is put into training to ensure that military source operators have the skills to pull the right strings when engaging with Australian role players. However, little preparation is given for re-tuning this skill-set to a source who may be Pashtun, Dinka, Arab or Melanesian. This cultural gap is currently addressed only by means of several pre-deployment 'culture briefs', which are largely untailored to source operations. Once in theatre, source operators learn 'on the job' and their most effective training in the local culture tends to be via the mistakes and missed opportunities of the first few months of their deployment. This is hardly ideal. Imagine a team of medical professionals deploying to an area with specific tropical diseases in the expectation that they would learn 'on the job'—so that after mistakes on the first dozen or so patients, they would begin effective treatment!

What is even more damaging and can delay the adaptive process for source operators is that they often have insufficient appreciation

of how significantly different the subtleties of human interaction are from culture to culture. In other words, they typically are unprepared for how people from different cultures respond to questions from others—and often in different ways about different things for different reasons. Psychologists are divided as to the extent of the impact of culture on such fundamental aspects of human interaction. But it is clear that the cultural gap can be huge.

Recent experience in Afghanistan starkly demonstrates this gap. When an Australian is offended by a comment or joke made by another soldier, their response—unlike what has happened several times with an Afghan soldier—would never be to kill the person he days earlier had considered a good friend. Shame, honour and personal goals can all be significantly different to what a 'Westerner' might expect. Hence, source operators need firstly to be aware that all preconceptions and templated solutions need to be reassessed for each deployment. Secondly, they need specific preparation for that environment so they are among the most culturally attuned personnel deployed. This is often the case by the end of their deployment. But it should be the case at the beginning as well, where lost collection opportunities and cultural 'fouls' tend to occur, as illustrated at Figure 1.

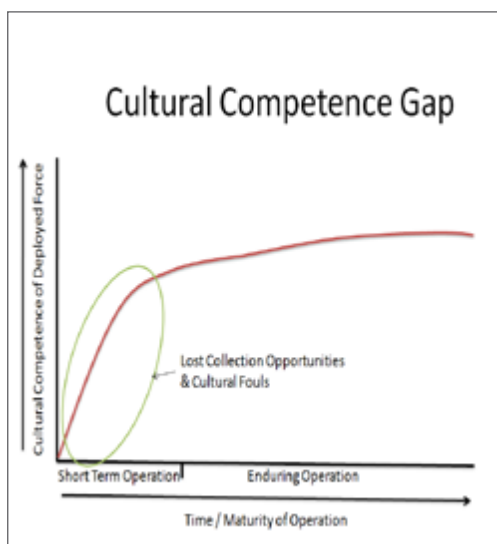


Figure 1: The propensity for lost opportunities and cultural 'fouls' to occur early in deployments

In addition to the issues of what is going on inside a source's head is the reality of what is coming out of their mouth. As mentioned earlier, source operator training gives particular attention to the exact language used by a source, scrutinising the language for ambiguity or lost meaning. Yet the availability and quality of interpreters on deployment can be so poor that the most basic question can readily be mangled into something with quite different implications.

Two major issues impact the availability of good linguist support. First is the need to have linguists or interpreters who are security vetted for the nature of the conversations being held. Second is the availability of linguist support in the specific language being used, including the correct dialect for that region and ethnic group. In an ideal world, a human-intelligence team would deploy with sufficient personnel trained in the local language, and to a standard high enough to replicate local language skills. In practice, this is highly unrealistic, even in regions in which Australia has been militarily involved for decades. As a Pashto linguist, the author can attest to the extreme challenges in teaching military personnel to speak a language which is so regional that even a native speaker from one province can barely understand someone from another.

The challenges in vetting local nationals to a sufficient standard are obvious in countries suffering prolonged instability, limited records and high levels of insurgent intimidation. The result is that field human-intelligence teams are typically forced to rely on limited numbers of contracted linguists provided by commercial companies, which usually source native speakers from diaspora populations in the Western world. Because of their lives in the West, these individuals can be vetted to a reasonable degree. Understandably also, these individuals are in high demand, and so are both expensive and few in numbers. The result is fatigued interpreters, notwithstanding that they often have extensive knowledge of a source network due to their high workload.

Nevertheless, these same interpreters, who tick the key boxes of vetting and language ability, may lack the necessary temperament or character. In human-intelligence operations, more than any other military activity, an interpreter must be in full unity with the individual they are working

for. In many cases, contracted interpreters are an excellent asset and are both hard working and capable. However, this is far from guaranteed. Complex conversational plans, concealed essential elements of friendly information and unspoken signals require a high level of synergy. A fatigued, arrogant or disinterested contracted interpreter, motivated only by a high wage, is unlikely to deliver this close cooperation.

So how does a small, specialised capability increase cultural competence and build a linguist support system which can assist with as yet unforeseen future operations?

Training cultural competence

Military source operator training needs to incorporate two distinct elements to achieve cultural competence. The first is to teach a generic understanding of the differences between cultures and the challenges this can produce in source operations. At present, this is usually delivered in an ad hoc manner via vignettes from the experiences of individual instructors. However, it should be formalised into a dedicated component of source operator training. It could, for example, be delivered as part of a pre-course study pack which required trainees to read historical cases of successful (and failed) source operations and the complexity of cross-cultural communication.

It could also be reinforced during training by amending slightly some role player parts to include certain cultural issues and requirements. For example, one serial could include an otherwise placid source taking offence over something very minor which then requires the trainee to apologise and identify how to rebuild rapport. This could be continued during further training, and elaborated with external presentations and study on relevant religious and cultural beliefs in likely areas for deployment. If the related security sensitivities could be addressed, it would also be invaluable to conduct training exercises in friendly countries to better incorporate and expose source operators to cultural differences.

A second element would be the delivery of effective pre-deployment cultural training to make human-intelligence team members among the most culturally attuned personnel on the deployment. This would need to include,

as a minimum, a study pack on generic cultural issues in that region, external lectures or engagement opportunities with diaspora communities in Australia (with suitable pretext), and a tailored reading list and appropriate funding to obtain study materials and books. By engaging with academic experts as well as appropriate analysts within Defence, a combination of experts could be utilised to brief and inform teams prior to deployment. This is every bit as relevant as reading into the reporting currently being produced in a respective theatre of operations, as it would provide the broader context in which that specific reporting is being produced.

Building adaptable linguist support

More complex would be the provision of appropriate and agile linguist support. The best way to achieve this is also one of the most difficult, that is, by developing military linguist resources tailored to human-intelligence operations. As it is not viable to maintain a large cadre of full-time linguists covering every possible language required, some risk must be taken in predicting which languages will be required. This prediction should look up to a decade into the future, which presents obvious problems in an unpredictable world.

However, it should be possible to produce a list of around half a dozen languages which reflect Australia's strategic collection priorities and anticipated areas of involvement. These languages should then form the basis for a two-tier approach to linguist capability. Following the example of the 2nd Commando Regiment, every source operator should be supported to develop their own basic language skills. This would require three things: direction, funding and specific time allocation for study.

Based on individual aptitude and operational requirements, each potential operator would be given a language to develop. They would then need to be adequately resourced by being provided access to high quality self-paced learning programs, such as the Rosetta Stone on-line language learning software which has been used so successfully by the British military. In addition, places on courses such as those offered by the

University of Queensland, or bespoke intensive courses using the Defence School of Languages could assist to deepen linguist ability.

Finally, dedicated periods of time would need to be ring-fenced to support learning, with operators held accountable for progressing their study in the allocated time. If, as a result of such training, Australia was able to deploy just two source operators to a new operational theatre with a basic understanding of the local language, it would prove of significant benefit to the quality of the human intelligence subsequently produced. The importance of language as a rapport-building tool is immeasurable. Even a limited vocabulary would allow the first rotation of intelligence-collection personnel to understand the local situation more quickly. It would also allow deployed source operators to quality-check their interpreters.

The suggested second tier of linguist support would be a cadre of dedicated ADF linguists possessing a high degree of fluency in one or more of the target languages. Existing linguists could be captured on a database for use by human-intelligence collection elements both on operations and in training (noting that language skills are already recorded on personnel records). In order to ensure these linguists were optimised to support such operations, a short course could be created to ensure they had a basic understanding of human-intelligence processes, requirements and considerations.

The inclusion of dedicated ADF linguists on exercises would also serve the double purpose of enhancing their ability to support source operations and provide training to source operators in working through interpreters. However, what would greatly enhance this capability is the targeted recruiting of a reservist linguist capability. Currently, linguist reservist capability is significantly undermanned and consists primarily of ex-Regular personnel. These unfilled Reserve positions could be filled with linguist support personnel recruited via University Regiments from students studying appropriate foreign languages. By advertising the financial benefits of having languages recognised in the ADF, appropriate candidates might also be enticed to join the Intelligence Corps and sit within the ADF's human-intelligence capability.

These suggested changes to both cultural training and linguist capability are small and relatively cheap by comparison to the cost of other intelligence-collection capabilities. They would, however, be significant in enabling an increase in the quality of human-intelligence reporting in the crucial early period of an ADF operation. The biggest barrier to their effective implementation is the current limitation in manpower and training time available within the ADF's human-intelligence capability. It would be necessary, therefore, to balance the importance of understanding (both literally and figuratively) the human terrain and the importance of other training that the ADF's human-intelligence resources are currently committed to.

As the world continues to be both unpredictable and volatile, it will remain vital for ADF commanders to appreciate the importance and complexities of human terrain as an aid to decision making. Human intelligence-related cultural and linguistic competence will continue to be a key factor in understanding complex environments across a range of operations from short-term humanitarian support to longer-term warlike operations.

Captain S has been an Intelligence Officer for over ten years and has served on multiple deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq. These have included a variety of human-intelligence related roles, including command of a Field HUMINT Team and as a Pashto-speaking Human Terrain Officer. He has also deployed in support of Special Operations elements, as well as a considerable period involved in mentoring and advising local partner forces. He has participated in numerous exercises in Europe and the US, as well as bilateral activities in Southeast Asia. He has a Masters degree in Conflict, Development and Security.

