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Cultural Sensitivity Training in the U. S. Military:

Is There Enough of the Right Stuff?

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Abstract

This study evaluated the quantity and quality of the intercultural and cultural sensitivity training that the United States Military receives, specifically focusing on Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps (AFROTC) cadets. Academic and military journals were consulted to determine the current training practices analyzed for this study, as were doctrine from the United States Air Force and the current university training regimen for future Air Force Officers. A comprehensive set of best-practice standards was deduced from the intercultural sensitivity literature, and the current training regimen for AFROTC cadets then was evaluated based on those standards. Findings, limitations to those findings, and recommendations for changes as well as affirmations of current practices are provided.

Keywords: military, intercultural, cultural sensitivity, training

Cultural Sensitivity Training in the U. S. Military: Is There Enough of the Right Stuff?

In the present-day U. S. Military, cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, and cross-cultural competency are expected from personnel when interacting with people from different countries, cultures, or backgrounds. However, the amount and quality of the training that is given to military members can be seen as lacking in some regards. This capstone project serves as a means to view, evaluate, and propose amendments to these aspects of U.S. Military training. First, a definition of cultural sensitivity is provided as the basis of this evaluation. Second, the literature surrounding intercultural training and military training is brought forward, discussing the past and present setting in the realm of intercultural competency. Third, current US Military cultural sensitivity training practices are compared against modern best-practice standards from the research and training literature. Fourth, limitations of this evaluation are discussed. Finally, a summary and recommendations for program affirmations and changes are provided.

Cultural Sensitivity

Over the course of this literature review, “cultural sensitivity” is defined and discussed in terms relative to the military as well as the civilian world. The degree to which the military incorporates cultural sensitivity training is assessed, including views from various other militaries around the world and members of the U. S. military. Finally, possible changes and improvements to the current policies are discussed.

Cultural sensitivity is a common topic of discussion amongst scholars in psychological and sociological fields, and consequently this definition comes from researchers in those fields. Cultural sensitivity was chosen for this specific review as it is the most commonly referred to way speaking about intercultural communication and interactions within the U.S. military. In a study about marriage and family therapy, researchers describe cultural sensitivity as “a state of

attunement, emotional resonance with, and meaningful responsiveness to others...we see cultural sensitivity as a common factor that spans models than resides within them” (D’Aniello et al., 2016, p. 234). D’Aniello et al. go on to describe the differences between being culturally sensitive, having cultural competence, and cultural humility (2016, p. 235).

Past and Current Discourse about U.S. Military Cultural Sensitivity Training

Excerpts from militaries other than the U. S. have been consulted in order to broaden discussion of military cultural sensitivity trainings. In an article by Miller, he asks the question “Does cultural sensitivity training matter?” and discusses this point from the perspective of the Australian Defense Force (Miller, 2016, p. 57). Miller brings forward the current problem the ADF is facing in regards to Islamophobia amongst themselves (2016). Through a variety of training methods, the ADF has attempted to uproot these anti-Muslim sentiments, however their training is “very short” and when it happens it is “usually lasting less than one day” (Miller, 2016, p. 58). This challenging topic however has brought to light how “soldiers can hold prejudices against outsiders in the abstract but, with the professional ethos, work well with them in practice” (Miller, 2016, p. 58). This statement, while not ideal, does bring forth the question of, while they may not enjoy each other, they can work together without too much conflict, so do they need to learn how to enjoy each other and be culturally sensitive to each other? This challenging question comes down to one of morals and ethics.

Other sources however discuss the necessity of having cultural awareness and sensitivity when they are working with other cultures, especially in times like today when counter-insurgency (COIN) wars are the main means of fighting. Cepoi brings forth the question of credibility, specifically in regards to when the U. S. entered the Middle East:

The acknowledge[ment] at the formal level by the American policy makers of the concept of cultural awareness...came at a moment when the U.S.A, as a state, within the Middle East area, and among the Muslim [community] in general...started to lose its credibility (Cepoi, 2012, p. 8).

The author discusses how the U. S. started talking about cultural sensitivity once and only once they entered into the Middle East, and how cultural sensitivity, while it may just be a front, could be a necessity to ensure peaceful interactions with the local population while they are there. Cepoi (2012, p. 8) states how “the question whether the cultural awareness is a fancy military word or a critical necessity within the COIN operations, (un)fortunately, the answer maybe affirmative for both assumptions.” Is cultural awareness necessary to complete the mission because it is helpful in accomplishing the objectives of the military members? Alternatively, does the military need to maintain the popular vote of the U. S. citizens in order to be able to continue their mission overseas? Cepoi (2012) argues that it should serve both purposes, as military members can better accomplish their missions if they receive the support of the local population that they interact with on a daily basis, as well as the support from the population at home.

Also on the note of COIN, Danielsen (2011, p. 2) discusses the importance of culture, specifically when performing COIN campaigns (2011). Danielsen explains, in the words of Sun Tzu, how:

If you don't know yourself and your enemy, you will lose 100 wars and if you know yourself you will win 50, but to win all wars you need to know both yourself and your enemy...not idealized strengths and weaknesses.

In bringing forth this comment, Danielsen discusses the strategic value of learning the cultural codes of the insurgency and being able to understand their culture in order to strike them down more effectively in the future. He also explains how these insurgencies are constantly changing and modifying themselves and thus requiring more time and effort than is currently being placed in the cultural sensitivity training (Danielsen, 2011).

Finally, Crawley (2004, p. 18) discusses why “the military must foster flexibility, adaptability and cultural awareness in junior officers to prepare them for the complex world they’ll face as senior leaders in 25 years.” Crawley elaborates on how crucial it is for young officers specifically to develop cultural awareness, in order to prepare themselves for the times in which they must make decisions for the larger populations of the world, with implications bigger than the outcome of a singular mission. Crawley states how “officers need to know how to develop deep local knowledge quickly themselves. Predeployment briefings that warn military personnel to not show the soles of their feet no longer suffice” (2004, p. 18). As shown above, despite being a topic of conversation for decades, cultural awareness and sensitivity training continues to prove lackluster. In the following section, the current best practices are discussed in light various fields of literature.

Best Practices for Intercultural Training

Defining Intercultural Competency. This section discusses the methods that have been found to be the best practices for successful intercultural training, to include not only methods, but also knowledge and skillsets required for successful communication. The authors define cultural competence as “the presence of cultural awareness where awareness refers to a state of having insight and knowledge about diversity issues” (D’Aniello et al., 2016, p. 235). This definition seeks to act as a less interpersonally connected form of intercultural communication, in

which the various parties involved attempt to be aware of each other's cultures, versus attempting to resonate and respond accordingly to them. This difference in definition proves helpful in determining the optimal word choice for military members to be trained on, as it leads towards a more guided method of interaction with individuals from different cultures.

Another definition of intercultural competency comes from Deardorff (2006), in which various theories and research conclusions were compared and compiled in order to distill a more concise, accurate definition of what it means to be interculturally competent. Deardorff (2006) surveyed 23 other intercultural scholars from various universities in an attempt to create a working definition, and came one that rose above the others. In order to be interculturally competent, one must have "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Deardorff, 2006). This definition was selected due to its focus on the communicative and behavioral aspects of being competent in intercultural situations, showing that being able to effectively adapt one's behavior and communication methods to one's environment are the most critical to one's competence. For the purposes of this review, this definition as well as the definition described by D'Aniello et al. (2016) is utilized as a baseline for what it means to be interculturally competent.

In order to fully understand intercultural competency as defined above the individual parts of the definition must be unpacked. The first piece in this definition is regarding attitudes that are required for someone to achieve intercultural competency. Deardorff (2006, p. 254) describes three attitudes, respect, openness, and curiosity and discovery. These attitudes are the foundation for developing the other skills and knowledge that are required of someone that seeks to be interculturally competent, as they provide a base level of humanity to strangers that may

appear, act, or sound different. Deardorff proceeds to discuss how these attitudes build into the skills and knowledge that epitomize someone who is interculturally competent.

For one to be describable as interculturally competent, one must have the appropriate skillset to navigate uncertain situations and unfamiliar scenarios. Deardorff describes two primary methods that are necessary to appropriately handle an intercultural situation. The first of these sets is “to listen, observe, and interpret” (Deardorff, 2006, p. 254). This set of skills allows for people to begin to understand the environment that they are in, grasp on to what is happening, and begin to gain insight on how this particular setting varies from what they are accustomed to. As they begin to gain this insight, they then are expected to employ the second skillset, which asks them “to analyze, evaluate, and relate” (Deardorff, 2006, p. 254). This skillset focuses on creating mutual understanding and shared meaning between oneself and the foreign environment, which, when used in tandem with the previously mentioned skillset, allows one to begin forming an empathic relationship with the new environment. This new relationship comes from the knowledge that the communicators have been gaining through their new skillsets.

The knowledge that communicators gain from their interactions and skillsets however, is not necessarily enough to get them through each interaction. It is also important to come into new environments with an educated background and understanding of the cultural intricacies of the new environment. These intricacies could be anything from gender roles, political climate, language, whether they are a high or low context culture, and many other factors. If this knowledge about the culture is found before encounters occur, then the communicator has a higher likelihood of being able to communicate appropriately and effectively (Deardorff, 2006, p. 254).

Developing Skills and Knowledge. Now that what is known about intercultural competency has been discussed, it is important to discuss what is known about training people in the three areas that are required of an intercultural competent communicator. Abbe and Gouge (2012), who are also discussed later, provide a basis through which these areas can be taught. Through the use of Merrill's Principles of Instruction, Abbe and Gouge (2012, p. 10) present methods that proved successful, for a time, in engaging and developing the skills and knowledge required for military members to be intercultural competent. These principles focus on the ways that teachers can promote learning and an effective learning environment, which promotes knowledge and skill building; however, they lack adequate examples of attitude shaping activities or exercises. Many of these activities involve engaging the soldiers, in this case, and applying the knowledge and skills that they are being given to real world scenarios. Then, through careful and steady escalation, the soldiers begin having more intricate and challenging scenarios that they must successfully handle, success being mission completion. This training program, while successful in certain areas lacks the capacity to 'train' soldiers on how to have the right attitude towards people from other cultures, however, the United States Army is attempting to bridge that gap.

Leslie (2007, p. 63) discusses how the "Training Doctrine Command" (TRADOC) for the United States Army has begun changing doctrine and outlining requirements for those in leadership positions that are more inclusive of cultural awareness. The United States Army outlines their leaders as being able to "understand and apply knowledge of other cultures," which sets the standard in their branch as requiring their leadership to be intercultural competent (Leslie, 2007, p. 63). They are accomplishing this goal through adding "cultural training as a Common Core for all levels of PME (Professional Military Education) and directed an emphasis

on the instruction in all NCOES (Non-Commissioned Officer Education System) and company-grade officer PME courses” (Leslie, 2007, p. 63). Attitude, as discussed earlier, is vital to the success of any intercultural training program, and requires an institutional level of action, rather than an individual for the broader impact to be made.

Previously Used Techniques. Abbe and Gouge (2012) discuss Vietnam-era programs that were initiated to help train military members prior to deploying, however, these programs were halted for a time and were re-established after the events of 9/11. The authors laid out the five core principles that guided this new wave of instruction, which discussed how learning was best promoted when teaching intercultural communication and cultural sensitivity (Abbe & Gouge, 2012). The first states “learning is promoted when learners are engaged in solving real-world problems,” essentially detailing that the instructors would provide real-world scenarios for members to participate in, such as eating a meal with a member of another culture (Abbe & Gouge, 2012, p. 10). The second method elaborates on how “learning is promoted when relevant previous experience is activated” (Abbe & Gouge, 2012, p. 11). This was implemented using role-play and lecture to break down personally held assumptions that were culturally conditioned into oneself. In order to do this, the participants would act as though they were a member of the other culture in order to experience the differences (Abbe & Gouge, 2012, p. 11). The third method describes how “learning is promoted when the instruction demonstrates what is to be learned rather than merely telling information about what is to be learned” (Abbe & Gouge, 2012, p. 11). The authors described this as showing trainees an example of a real-world scenario going poorly due to a lack of cultural sensitivity, then going exceedingly well when they implement what they are taught (Abbe & Gouge, 2012, p. 11). Once the trainees have a basic understanding, the fourth principle is implemented, “learning is promoted when learners are

required to use their new knowledge or skill to solve problems” (Abbe & Gouge, 2012, p. 12). In these scenarios, trainees are given options on how to approach situations and must appropriately solve difficult tasks, such as solving negotiations or giving feedback (Abbe & Gouge, 2012, p. 13). Finally, the fifth core principle which is “learning is promoted when learners are encouraged to integrate (transfer) the new knowledge or skill into their everyday life” is implemented once the trainees have reached the conclusion of their training (Abbe & Gouge, 2012, p. 13). The authors suggested, in order to accomplish this task, that the trainees then teach others about their newfound skills, thus solidifying their new knowledge (Abbe & Gouge, 2012, p. 13). This system has yet to prove successful, as it is challenging to mark whether or not the information is retained over the course of a few months or years. “Evaluation of training did occur in certain instances, showing that training had a positive effect on cultural learning in the short term” (Abbe & Gouge, 2012, p. 16). This system, despite its possibly poor lasting results however, has paved the way for future improvements to be made. Now that the current best practices for intercultural training have been discussed, the current intercultural training provided to Air Force cadets will be discussed.

What is Currently Provided through the Air Force ROTC

According to the Air University Quality Enhancement Plan (2009), six academic units were selected to have an established installment of cultural competency training. These academic units include the Community College of the Air Force, Officer Training School, Squadron Officer College, Senior Noncommissioned Officer Academy, Air Command and Staff College, and the Air War College (Air University Quality Enhancement Plan, 2009, pp. 7-9). These institutions are various means through which members of the Air Force are able to achieve higher education (Community College of the Air Force and Air War College), qualifications for

promotion (Squadron Officer College, Senior Noncommissioned Officer Academy, and Air Command and Staff College), or a commission as an officer in the United States Air Force (Officer Training School). This education and training provides members of the Air Force with a training regimen that gives them basic competencies when interacting with members of foreign cultures. These various programs last anywhere from 33 days to two years, depending on the level of education that is attempting to be achieved, thus resulting in differing levels of training and preparedness. With the exception of Officer Training School, all other sources of training are provided to Air Force members who have been in the service for at least two years, most of which require upwards of 12 years in service to attend (Air University Quality Enhancement Plan, 2009, p. 8).

In order to attain a commission as an officer in the United States Air Force, one must go through one of three main routes (excluding special exceptions), which includes the Air Force Academy, Officer Training School, and the Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps (AFROTC). According to the Air Force Personnel Center, only 18.8% of officers currently in the Air Force attained their commission through Officer Training School (Air Force Demographics, 2017). This means that the remaining 81.2% of Air Force officers do not receive the same training that is distributed to those who attend Officer Training School, and are not included in the plan to enhance the quality of cultural competence in new officers.

In AFROTC, the U. S. Air Force trains cadets over the course of four years, and in their fourth year they are given a one hour and 30 minute lesson on how to engage in intercultural interactions when they are deployed in a foreign country (Air University Quality Enhancement Plan, 2009). In that lesson it is explained that this is not the extent to which they are trained prior to deploying, but they will receive another, approximately two hour, training prior to their actual

deployment, and the responsibility falls upon the individual to either learn about the culture themselves or use the minimal knowledge that they are given. This information is significantly less inclusive and in depth than that which is given to officers that attended Officer Training School.

When looking at doctrine, this review looks specifically at Air Force doctrine, which directly states little about interacting with people from different cultures. When looking through the training curriculum for Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps (AFROTC) cadets, one can find two direct lessons on culture, cultural sensitivity, and why culture matters. Both lessons reference that a majority of their source material comes from doctrine, however, the references made to doctrine only dictate the warfighting capacities in other countries, not the intercultural interactions in other countries (U.S. Air Force Doctrine, n.d.). One lesson contains a commentary article by Dr. William L. Dulaney, a former member of the Air Force with a specialty in Human Communication Theory and Research, who talks about the importance of culture. This article however, is the closest to properly discussing cultural sensitivity that the AFROTC lessons get to, which is not a part of the Air Force doctrine.

This disconnect shows cadets that there is no current doctrine written that describes how to approach intercultural interactions, but rather mentions the slight importance of them amongst a multitude of other topics. This proves problematic, as the lessons cite doctrine, specifically volume 1 and annex 3-2, as sources for information, yet those have minimal reference to cultural sensitivity or competency and the degree to which it should or even an ideal measure to how it would play into certain scenarios (U.S. Air Force Doctrine). Volume 1 describes the purpose of doctrine, stating how “doctrine provides an informed starting point for the many decisions Airmen must make...Doctrine, properly applied, often can provide a 70-, 80-, or even 90-percent

solution to most questions...” (U.S. Air Force Doctrine, n.d.). This claim implies that what is currently written in doctrine should be able to either allow for Airmen to get a foothold in the situation, or even provide up to “90-percent” of the solution, yet it does neither.

How AFROTC’s Program Compares to Others

When looking comparatively at the U.S. Air Force’s doctrine and methods of intercultural training, it fails to meet the marks that were established earlier on in this evaluation as the current best practices. In regards to attitude, the lack of doctrine or branch-wide standards sets the status quo as being one of complacency towards the topic, setting it as undeserving of a place in doctrine. When leadership does not model the behavior or the attitude that they desire for their people to exemplify, then their people are not as inclined to meet their expectations (Gratton & Erickson, 2007). When discussing knowledge and skills, the U.S. Air Force attempts to train its young officers and future officers through providing them with small doses of generalized intercultural training, however, the methods through which these lessons are provided are not conducive for an effective learning environment as discussed earlier (Abbe & Gouge, 2012). In order for the training that is provided to be sufficient, the method and content of the lessons must be altered in order to be more reflective of previous training methods than the PowerPoint slideshow that it currently is. The lack of engagement with the students is the main cause for concern in these circumstances as it does not permit them to engage their newly gained knowledge and skills. Rather, students are subject to a lecture that spurs little learner engagement in recommended practices.

Despite the lack of best practices, the current training program does acknowledge the information that is currently seen as most relevant and important to successfully communicating interculturality. This information falls in line with much refereed research in communication,

citing factors such as haptics, proxemics, chronemics, and kinesics as means of communicating nonverbally (Air University Quality Enhancement Plan, 2009). While the lesson contains information that is helpful in generally communicating interculturally, the most basic forms and definitions of these terms, as well as others, are all that is provided to trainees. The information itself is also taught to trainees through active duty military personnel who are not guaranteed to specialize in the field of communication, thus leaving much room for possible miscommunication or misinterpretation. With this information in mind, the gaps and areas of improvement will be addressed with potential program reworks.

Findings and Discussion

In the literature, there is an agreement amongst many scholars that there is not enough training provided to military members. Despite that, there is no major action being taken to fill this void (Abbe & Gouge, 2012; Cepoi, 2012; Danielsen, 2011). Along with this information, it was found that 81.2% of future Air Force Officers do not receive the same training that their counterparts receive, which is entirely based on which school they attend (Air Force Demographics, 2017). This disparity leaves a majority of Air Force leaders lacking a skillset that many scholars find to be crucial in times of conflict (Cepoi, 2012; Crawley, 2004; Danielsen, 2011). While the military may not be in the process of developing an updated training regimen, other resources have been implemented in various settings with higher degrees of success than that of the current training regimen (Craig, 2006; Yates & Beech, 2006).

Areas of Improvement and Direction to Fill the Gaps

As has been noted earlier in this evaluation, there are many areas in the current training regimen that have gaps in their knowledge and skills training, as well as practical application of the information that is being taught, this section will address those areas. Craig (2006) touted the

benefits of using a new method of communicating cross-culturally. In the past, the communication model has always been the Source-Message-Channel-Receiver (SMCR) model due to its ability to quickly and concisely get the message across, which is usually the main goal of a military member (Craig, 2006, p.8). However, Craig proposes that this method is ineffective when communicating cross-culturally, as it fails to take into account the cultural codes that each involved culture has. One example of this that Craig (2006, p. 15) points out is how “the availability of Western newscasts has also increased, but most are not presented or even translated into Arabic. The major U.S. news web sites are not available in Arabic, with the exception of CNN.” This proves highly problematic because it sends the message that the U.S. does not care enough to translate their newscasts so the local population can understand. Rather than the SMCR model, Craig (2006) proposes a model that focuses on the audience, rather than the message. This model would allow for those who wish to watch and understand what the U.S. is doing can, and the population may in turn feel less disrespectful towards those who live where we are going.

Yates and Beech (2006) further suggest six steps to forming effective global communication. These steps are 1. Getting global participation 2. Making global teams effective 3. Creating messages with global appeal 4. Training local managers to communicate 5. Choosing the right delivery mechanisms and 6. Measuring success. These six steps are built to work together into a corporation to ensure that it works well around the world and navigates various cultures effectively. The first two focus on gathering the collective that is intended to be the group or team for the job, then once they are acquired and together, they must be made effective through various training programs and integrating the value systems of the various groups. The next step involves creating messages that will be accepted by the people within the culture that

needs to be communicated to, and with a group from that culture developing the message, it would be most appropriate for each culture. Then with the fourth and fifth steps, the managers of the groups, the leaders of the groups, are taught how to deliver that message in the most effective manner and using the most effective medium. Finally, measuring the success, or lack thereof, and evaluating what went well and what did not, then recreating the system with a new message. The fourth step in this process is the most applicable to this specific study, as it provides a means by which 'local managers' are able to adequately convey messages to other locals. These local managers, if transposed to a military setting, would be the junior grade officers who are provided with the least amount of training on this subject, relative to the other grades. This method could easily be taken and utilized in a military environment, by coordinating with local news sources, military officials, political figures, or other such players.

Through the careful reframing of this dilemma, a new form of training could be engaged, which could greatly increase the success and effectiveness of our military members in intercultural scenarios. This reframing would push the focus towards interpersonal relationships; training young officers to build interpersonal connections through intercultural interactions with people in the local areas. In working to build these relationships, young officers would be able to not only foster good relations with the host country and the people that live there, but also create high-functioning and effective work teams by collaborating with the local citizens. In training future officers to be effective interpersonal and intercultural communicators, bonds could be formed and maintained for many years to come. In creating these intercultural work teams between military personnel and local citizens, the military personnel would act as 'local managers' and work as a unifying aspect of the teams rather than just a liaison between the two cultures. In being trained for interpersonal and intercultural relationship constructing, young

officers would be appropriately prepared to form and manage multi-cultural work teams that, together, are able to greater accomplish the tasks before them, than previously possible. As time continues to grow, these work teams that are created can be re-utilized as persistent assets as the Air Force's officers rotate through deployment cycles.

Future Direction and Conclusion

Overall, the literature offers only limited examinations of intercultural and cultural sensitivity training in a military context. With articles that have not been pursued since the early 2000s, this field proves to be continually more outdated and consequently less applicable to contemporary issues. This specific critique applies to the military articles, as they have yet to be updated since the United States has entered the Middle East initially. Air Force doctrine also promises more than it currently is able to uphold. As stated earlier, Air Force doctrine, properly applied, should "provide a 70-, 80-, or even 90-percent solution to most questions," yet it fails to provide even "an informed starting point for the many decisions Airmen must make" (U.S. Air Force Doctrine, n.d.).

With these challenges and strong starting points in mind, this evaluation suggests that a more cohesive and organized training program is overdue to be implemented throughout the programs that train young Air Force officers, including one that includes a focus on building and managing intercultural teams in military environments. The current shortcomings in doctrine and training programs for young military leaders reveal significant areas for growth in preparing for an intercultural communication environment.

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