

Behavioral Framework for Effective Intercultural Interactions

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Abstract

Commonly, cross-cultural competence (3C) is conceptualized in terms of antecedents to mission performance within the military context. As a counterpoint to this common approach, this paper explores the implications of conceptualizing 3C as behavior that constitutes mission performance. To this end, an overview is provided of a framework of behaviors that have been noted to contribute to effective intercultural interactions within peacekeeping contexts. Additionally, a discussion is provided of the implications of this approach to defining 3C.

The findings in this report are not to be construed as an official DEOMI, U.S. military services, or Department of Defense position, unless designated by other authorized documents.

Cross-cultural competence (3C) is commonly described as a set of personal attributes that are predictive of successful intercultural interactions. Frameworks that describe such personal attributes are common in the empirical literature (Thomas and Fitzsimmons, 2008) as well as throughout the Department of Defense (DOD; McDonald, McGuire, Johnston, Selmeski, & Abbe, 2008). Although approaching 3C from a predictive perspective is useful, particularly as it can yield insights regarding the likelihood with which individuals will succeed in intercultural environments, there is also much that can be gained from approaching 3C from a behavioral perspective.

In most definitions of 3C of individuals, antecedents of performance are inextricably linked to performance. For instance, Fantini (2006) defined 3C as “a complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself” (p. 12). Although the distinction between attributes that facilitate outcomes is unclear in definitions of 3C, the extant literature approaches 3C (Thomas and Fitzsimmons, 2008) as an antecedent to a variety of criteria such as performance, adaptability, and adjustment across different contexts and situations. Despite the prevalence of this line of research, there have also been calls to define 3C in terms of performance. Arguably, Klemp (1979) first introduced the idea of approaching 3C as a behavioral (i.e., performance) oriented phenomenon for individuals. This approach was later endorsed by other theoreticians (Dinges, 1983; Thomas & Fitzsimmons, 2008).

The distinction of 3C as antecedents to behavior (i.e., performance) and 3C as behavior is an important one. Campbell, Oswald, & Gasser (1996) indicate that for individuals, performance is synonymous with behavior. It is something that people do, and it can be observed. Conversely, Campbell et al. (1996) argue that among the determinants of performance are individual

attributes such as declarative knowledge, procedural knowledge, skills, and motivation, as well as organizational attributes such as reward systems and management practices.

The benefit of approaching 3C from a behavioral or performance perspective is that the underlying competencies inherent to 3C are described via observable behaviors that constitute performance, rather than underlying competencies that are suspected to have, or have been shown to have, a relationship with relevant performance. Conceptualizing 3C from this perspective is more challenging, due to the situational dependency of performance (i.e., one situation may dictate a certain type of performance, while another situation may dictate a different type of performance).

The inherent dependence of performance on situational requirements makes this a difficult way to conceptualize 3C. However, attempts have been made to identify aspects of performance that transcend specific situations. For instance, Elron, Halevy, Ben-Ari, & Shamir (2003), indicated that a number of behaviors of peacekeepers constitute functioning in a cross-culturally competent manner in a variety of peacekeeping contexts. The remainder of this paper provides an overview of the findings provided by Elron et al. (2003) and thereby yields an alternate point of view from the dominant perspectives regarding 3C in the military.

3C and Peacekeeping

In all peacekeeping environments, cultural diversity poses challenges for both researchers and military personnel (Elron et al., 2003; Elron, 1997; Knouse & Dansby, 1999; Meschi, 1997; Solomon, 1996). The importance of cultural diversity stems from the inherent multinational, and therefore multicultural, nature of peacekeeping missions (Elron et al., 2003). In all peacekeeping forces, multiple countries' military services are represented. Therefore, a prerequisite for success

in peacekeeping endeavors is coming to terms with the cultural diversity contained within a particular peacekeeping force as well as that of the individuals within the host country.

Without coming to terms with cultural diversity, military organizations, just like their civilian counterparts, can face myriad problems. The most notable and often discussed of these problems include attributional disparities in terms of the cause and intent of behaviors, gaps in communication, stereotyping, ethnocentrism, prejudice, disparities in leadership styles, difficulty to coordinate and control organizational processes, misunderstandings, and the limited sharing of information between organizational members (Stening, 1979; Erez, 1993; Erez & Earley, 1987; Hui, 1999; Ghoshal & Whetstone, 1993; Fiol & Lyles, 1985). Despite these problems, harnessing cultural diversity can result in organizational assets and advantages. For instance, it has been noted that when cultural differences are managed strategically, culturally heterogeneous organizations can reach more creative solutions for complicated problems, excel when difficult decisions need to be made, and generally outperform similar culturally homogeneous organizations (Cox, Lobel, & McLeod, 1991; Earley & Mosakowski, 2000; Elron et al., 2003; Watson, Kumar, & Michaelsen, 1993).

Considering this brief discussion, it is clear that within peacekeeping contexts it is critical to maximize the gains while minimizing the complications associated with cultural differences.

A Qualitative Study of 3C Around the World

To assess how peacekeeping forces accomplish the successful integration of cultural differences, Elron et al. (2003) conducted a qualitative study in which they interviewed military service members located at the UNTSO (the UN observer's force headquartered in Jerusalem), UNIFIL (the UN force headquartered in Southern Lebanon), UNDOF (the UN force located in the Golan Heights), the Pearson Peacekeeping Center in Canada, the United Nations School in

the Irish army, the Italian army headquarters in Rome, and the liaison unit of the Israeli liaison force responsible for peacekeeping missions within and outside of Israel. Due to this wide sampling, the researchers were able to capture the viewpoints from service members representing organizations that varied in size and circumstances.

Findings: The Impact of Culture

One of the first issues that Elron et al. (2003) assessed is whether there is unity in peacekeeping forces. What they discovered was illuminating. In a broad sense, they discovered that there is generally unity within peacekeeping forces. However, there are often low level tensions that most frequently stem from task conflicts rather than process conflicts. Task conflict involves situations in which group members disagree about the content of a task, including its goals, key decisions, and the appropriate choice for action, while process conflict involves disagreements about how tasks should be accomplished, including the division of labor, roles, and resources (Elron et al., 2003). Furthermore, Elron et al. (2003) also discovered that military service members had a preference for working with members of other cultures most similar to their own.

Findings: Behaviors and Attitudes for Cooperation and Coordination

Within the context described above, Elron et al. (2003) discovered that a variety of behaviors and attitudes enable peacekeepers to successfully function within their multicultural contexts, and thereby enhance the cohesion of their units. Notably, Elron et al. (2003) use Ting Toomey's model of intercultural competence (1999) as the basis for organizing their findings.

Ting Toomey's model defines intercultural communication competence in terms of the acquisition and use of information regarding the important aspects of cultures, such as their values, language, verbal and nonverbal communication styles, internal fault lines, and the

processes for developing relationships as well as solving conflicts. Elron et al. (2003) argue that this is a skill set that has predominantly behavioral manifestations, which includes observation, listening, verbal empathy, nonverbal sensitivity, constructive conflict skills, and flexible adaptive skills). Furthermore, according to Ting Toomey (1999), another aspect that is central to intercultural communication competence is the motivation to monitor one’s own ethnocentric tendencies as well as the social identities of other parties.

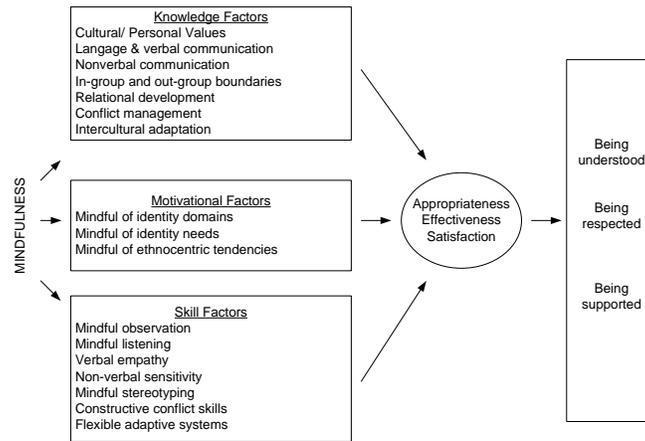


Figure 2: Ting Toomey (1999) mindful intercultural communication model

Interculturally Effective Behaviors

Elron et al. (2003) identified three sets of behaviors that reflect intercultural competence:

1. Integrating differences:
 - This dimension involves behaviors that allow different cultural perspectives to be brought together, resolving differences among these perspectives, and generating integrative solutions
2. Bridging differences
 - This dimension involves behaviors that allowed for the communication across cultural differences, making efforts to understand cultural differences, and building shared bases of understanding
3. Tolerating differences
 - This dimension involves behaviors, passive actions, or in some cases inactions, that allow members of other cultures to act freely according to their own cultural values, beliefs, and norms

Each of these sets of behaviors is discussed in greater detail in the following section.

Integrating Differences

A. Finding integrative solutions and compromises.

To find integrative solutions, it is critical to negotiate and mediate between different perspectives. Alternately, to diffuse conflict, compromises should be made in which concern is taken to pay deference to all parties involved. Ultimately, in all compromises, all parties should gain but also lose some of their interests.

B. Coordination of communication

Within peacekeeping missions, English is the most commonly spoken language. However, due to the different levels of English fluency that exist within peacekeeping forces, the meaning of communications provided in English can be lost or misinterpreted (Gass & Varonis, 1991; Hammerly, 1991; Scollon & Scollon, 1995). To overcome this challenge, individuals in peacekeeping missions can engage in two complimentary communication coordination initiatives. The first of these initiatives revolves around individual initiatives focused on promoting communication coordination, while the second involves establishing unofficial group norms for how to communicate in a multi-linguistic context.

Individual initiatives most frequently cited by service members who were more fluent in English involved active listening, focusing on the actual meaning of a message as it was intended rather than the spoken words, taking the other person's frame of reference, following up by repeating the communicator's words, and verifying that others understand messages relayed in English.

Service members indicated that establishing group norms such as using repetitions, slow pace of speech, and multiple verifications are important to ensure the communication of messages. Furthermore, it was also noted that establishing norms promoted the simultaneous use of both formal and informal channels of communication, the reading and rereading of protocols until they are understood, the considerate use of a common language, and the use of common military signs and symbols.

Bridging Differences

The two themes involved in bridging differences are seeking knowledge about other cultures and finding common bases. Central to these two themes is the concept of learning. Many of the skills that related to intercultural competence reflect the learning that is required in terms of one's own and other cultures, learning about new ways to communicate, suspend judgment, new patterns of perception as well as patterns of behavior. To facilitate this learning, the most common methods endorsed by the military service members who participated in the study were engaging in cultural comparisons and addressing cultural differences.

A. Seeking knowledge and mapping differences

By engaging in socially based cultural stories and comparisons, it is possible to learn about the habits and norms, and communicate with people about the uniqueness and similarities of their lives. Through exchanging these stories and making these comparisons, it is possible to learn about other cultures

B. Addressing task-specific cultural differences

It was discovered that military service members often found that by discussing the characteristics of tasks as well as the preferred methods of going about them, it is possible to learn about the cultural backgrounds of others in an efficient and non-threatening way.

C. Emphasizing and creating shared bases

The creation of shared bases is based on the famous similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971), which dictates that individuals will tend to prefer to interact with those who they perceive to be similar to themselves. Within the peacekeeping context, this paradigm can be leveraged to stress similarities relating to the mission at hand, military life, and social relationships.

D. Emphasizing superordinate goals

Emphasizing common goals is a common way to resolve conflicts (Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1988). Furthermore, the emphasis of common goals, interdependence, and collaboration over individual goals, self-sufficiency, and competition (Lepine, Hollenbeck, & Ilgen, 1997) can be highly beneficial in peacekeeping endeavors.

E. Creating shared norms

Creating shared norms through what is known as recentring (Maznevski & di Stefano, 2000) can allow groups of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds to operate from the same frame of reference. Recentring can be described as providing a common ground upon which a shared basis for interaction can be built.

F. Emphasizing and creating mission-specific shared experiences

Many officers included in the study reported that they intentionally created opportunities for collaborative work with members of other military forces. By doing this, they not only provided learning opportunities, but also enhanced the relationships between the members of the cooperating military services.

G. Emphasizing a shared fate

One method noted for helping the enhancement of group cohesion is stressing the shared fate of multinational peacekeeping forces. This is an approach that is based on in-group/out-group perceptions as described in the group dynamics literature (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). By focusing in on the shared nature of peacekeeping missions, all individuals involved tend to identify more strongly with the other members of the peacekeeping force.

H. Emphasizing the common military background

Leveraging the commonality of military culture is one of the strongest common bases that can be emphasized in a peacekeeping situation. Even though members of the peacekeeping force come from different cultural backgrounds, they do tend to share a huge commonality in terms of the military background that they have. By stressing this commonality, it can serve as a powerful mechanism to integrate members of different military services into a cohesive unit.

I. Socializing together

Socializing together is likely one of the most basic, yet most important, aspects of creating feelings of cooperation and affiliation within military contexts. Socializing can range from eating, drinking, and partying together to doing other activities such as sitting in a sauna. Regardless of what specific activities are involved, as long as they exist, social bonds can be built, which will ultimately result in higher levels of cooperation and coordination when it comes to performing the tasks associated with the mission.

J. Engaging in self-monitoring

Self-monitoring, as defined by Snyder (1987), is reflected by individuals' tendency to regulate their behavior to meet the demands set forth by social situations. By engaging in self-monitoring, individuals within peacekeeping contexts often alter their behavior and their conversation style to fit with the social requirements dictated by cultural backgrounds of others.

Tolerating and Accepting Differences

Even though not an explicit outward behavior, the toleration and acceptance of other's cultural differences can help smooth cross-cultural interactions.

A. *Suspending Judgment*

Suspending judgment has been noted as the single most important predictor of effective communication in diverse teams (Maznevski & di Stefano, 2000). By suspending judgment about the causes of communication problems that result from cultural differences and avoiding stereotyping of cultural differences, these differences are respected and generalizations are avoided.

B. *Avoiding infringement upon cultural “comfort zones”*

Avoiding ethnocentric thinking enables peacekeepers to appreciate multiple ways of accomplishing a task, and also to avoid trampling the needs and perspectives of other peacekeepers from different cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, by avoiding ethnocentric thinking, it is possible to find ways to maximize performance while limiting, if not obviating, the need for individuals to violate their own cultural norms.

Leveraging behavioral frameworks for the assessment of 3C

Although approaches that focus on 3C as an antecedent to performance can be leveraged to develop skills, such approaches are more appropriate to use within selection contexts where it is possible to select individuals that are most suited to particular assignments. Within the military environment, and particularly in militaries with volunteer forces, selection is often a luxury that can only be employed in some contexts. Operating constraints such as the limited use of selection procedures imply that training and education are likely more appropriate means by which service members can be equipped with the requisite intercultural skills to succeed in performing their missions.

One of the main improvements of a behavioral focus regarding 3C is that by focusing on behavioral manifestations of 3C, it is possible to develop clear paths to the development of 3C-

related skills. By focusing on behaviors, service members can more easily grasp what types of skills they should develop to be able to act effectively in intercultural settings. Additionally, a behavioral focus on 3C can also aid in the construction of clear criteria for the purposes of evaluating learning and skill development within training programs as well as performance assessment.

Behavioral descriptions of 3C are inherently less abstract and more intuitive to understand. By conceptualizing 3C in behavioral terms, it is possible to describe what military service members should aim to do to facilitate effective intercultural interactions. This definitional shift constitutes a marked improvement over descriptions of 3C that focus on the attributes of individuals that contribute to successful cross-cultural interactions.

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