Cultural Stress: How Interactions With and Among Foreign Populations Affect Military Personnel

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Abstract
The purpose of this article is to expand civil–military and military health research’s concepts of stress with the addition of a theoretical construct of the concept known as “cultural stress.” Military research often discusses combat and operational stress and its effect on soldiers but does not address unique culturally induced stressors created by the modern military’s interaction with indigenous populations. Civilian research discusses stress as it relates to “culture shock” but does not account for unique pressures facing servicemen in both peacetime and wartime environments. This article synthesizes these concepts to produce a new conceptual basis of “cultural stress” from which further empirical research can be conducted.

Keywords
combat and operational stress, culture shock, foreign cultures, modern military

Over 283,000 American troops are currently deployed overseas.1 Of these, approximately 31,400 are engaged in operations in Afghanistan and another 178,300 in Iraq.2 Since 2002, there have been over 5,000 U.S. fatalities for both theatres,3 with approximately 35,000 wounded.4 However, these figures do not include psychological casualties, as exemplified by a recent U.S. study that stated, simply, “Wounded in action does not include psychological trauma and stress.”5 Although there has been a substantial amount of research on combat related posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), deployed service personnel also have to contend with a range of other complex stressors. One of these, which has grown in significance, is interaction with foreign

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populations. In civilian health research, the stress induced by these interactions is referred to as “culture shock.” However, there is no exact equivalent in military health studies or civil–military research.

This article focuses on the military equivalent of “culture shock.” We refer to this as cultural stress, or the stress arising from interacting with foreign cultures. The concept of cultural stress applies to the stresses faced by military men and women deployed on operations away from their home countries. In the first half of the article, we develop an understanding of stress through military research on combat and operational stress (COS) and civilian research on culture shock. The framework that we use to analyze these two stresses addresses three questions: First, what causes these stresses in individuals? Second, what are the attributes of these stresses or indicators that they are affecting individuals? Third, what factors mitigate and/or contribute to these stresses? By answering these questions for preexisting military health and sociological research on COS and culture shock, we can proceed to use this construct to develop the theoretical concept of cultural stress. In the second half of the article, we describe the causes, attributes, and potential mitigating factors of cultural stress. We use historical examples of military interactions with foreign cultures as well as lessons learned from current U.S. engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan to analyze what stressors appear to be culturally related.

The intention of the article is to contribute a theoretical construct to civil–military research on an increasingly common stressor that has the potential to negatively affect more than a quarter million military servicemen and women currently serving overseas. We also hope to provide a conceptual basis for further empirical research into this important area of civil–military and military sociology issues.

Stress and the Military

The military profession is inherently stressful. Within a military context, stress can be best defined as “the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them.” Cultural contacts, during operations abroad, also have the potential to be “inherently stressful” albeit in a very different sense. The skill sets necessary to survive and thrive while conducting peace-support operations in a foreign environment require a mental rigor quite different from the mind-set required to wage war.

Individuals may initially be disoriented by divergent cultural values and socially excluded. Such difficulties may be accentuated by a soldier’s inability to communicate or identify with the local population. Overcoming such cultural differences requires personnel to step beyond their cultural comfort zone. Even perfunctory tasks such as shopping for meals or mailing letters facing unintelligible local culture add up to an experience captured in military strategist Carl von Clausewitz’s observation, “The simplest thing is difficult.”

Clausewitz intended his words to apply to war-fighting operations. He might have substituted the words foreign culture for war with equal validity. So what happens
When local culture collides with military culture? The pressures of adapting to the foreign environment can compound the everyday stresses of the military profession, and the result born of the marriage of combat operational stress and “culture shock” is cultural stress.

Traditionally, studies on stress and the military have focused on coping with physical stressors (enduring extreme temperatures and sleep deprivation) and psychological stresses (coping with the death of a friend, having to kill, and fear of dying). Early research into the effects of combat on soldiers, from the American Civil War (1863), observed the physical condition of “soldier’s heart” and a mental condition termed at the time “nostalgia.” However, it was during World War I that researchers first properly examined troops who exhibited extreme physical reactions to combat such as amnesia and paralysis. These effects were initially attributed to the effect of shockwaves produced by falling artillery shells literally “rattling the brains” of soldiers and causing physical impairments. However, further research demonstrated that “shell shock” was not a result of physical distress but of cognitive and emotional overload. This finding led to a shift in treating the intangible emotional well-being of troops rather than attempting to cure a physical illness. Further research into the effect of combat on troops’ mental health was undertaken during World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the first Gulf War, and more recent conflicts. Today, stress-related research in the military has drilled down to even more specific dynamics to include research on how military men are differently affected by stressors than are women and how ethnicity plays a role in mitigating stress for military families.

The US military’s Combat and Operational Stress Control (COSC) field manual defines stress as “the expected, predictable, emotional, intellectual, physical and/or behavioural reactions of service members who have been exposed to stressful events in combat or military operations other than war.” It encompasses not only combat but also non-combat-related activities, such as humanitarian missions, nation assistance and/or support to counterinsurgency (including foreign internal defense), and peace operations. Together, COSs characterize the pressures facing service members in wartime.

Preventing and managing stress brings highlights two questions: First, what stressors elicit the “emotional, intellectual, physical, and/or behavioral reactions” within the military? Second, what activities are the most stressful? More simply, what are the causes of stress and their resultant attributes? The next section examines these more closely.

Causes of COS

Bray et al. describe the variables involved in stress. The type of stressor and specific environment will meet with “psychosocial moderators and mediators” of those stressors and result in specific behaviors of the individuals affected. Using this general model of the relationship between stress and individuals’ responses, we can look more closely at each of these three components as causes and attributes of stress. Recognizing the attributes of a stress allows us to use the visible signs and manifestations an
individual exhibits as an alert that there is a problem that needs to be addressed. Understanding the causes of a stress allows us to examine what conditions are affecting an individual and what can be done to mitigate—if not completely fix—the problem.

There are numerous stressors affecting military personnel in both peacetime and wartime environments. The COSC field manual pinpoints four chief stressors for soldiers during combat and other operations: environmental (heat and cold and physical work), physiological (sleep deprivation and malnutrition), cognitive (sensory overload and ambiguity), and emotional (isolation and home front concerns). Former COSC Coordinator, U.S. Navy Captain William P. Nash, adds spiritual stressors (loss of faith) to this list as one of five key stressors specifically observed in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Both Nash and the U.S. Army field manual concede that the complexity of stressors makes classification exceedingly difficult. For example, an individual in combat may become increasingly irritable and short tempered. These attributes may indicate an underlying physiological stress (induced by a lack of sleep), an emotional stress (induced by spousal problems), or an environmental stress (induced by general fatigue). In this way, stress attributes could point to a variety of causes, and alternately, causes of stress may manifest themselves in similar ways.

U.S. Army Major Steve J. Lewis supports the Army’s premise that there are universal combat operational stress reactions (COSRs), categorized as emotional, physical, behavioral, and cognitive reactions. He adds that reactions can be mitigated through a combination of three factors: individual factors (personality, hardiness, and deployment experience), unit factors (leadership, cohesion, and command environment), and factors relating to the battlefield or peacekeeping environment. This triadic interaction of individual, unit, and battlefield elements can help predict those more susceptible to COSRs and enable prevention or intervention for the affected servicemen.

Lewis’s model provides a basis from which to analyze what a 2005 RAND report called “precipitants of acute stress reactions or battle fatigue.” For our purposes, the terms individual, unit, and environmental factors are used. Individual factors refer to a service member’s background and personality. Unit factors encompass both aspects of military organizational culture as well as unit cohesion. Environmental factors replace “battlefield or peacekeeping environment” factors to include environments that might not be ones of either combat or peacekeeping, such as advising foreign troops during times of peace.

Each of these factors greatly affects how individuals respond to stressors during a mission. First, individuals’ capabilities and mental flexibility directly influence their ability to process and adapt to stressors. This resilience is often referred to as “hardiness,” or a strong sense of commitment, and acceptance of change and challenges and self-efficacy all influence the extent to which an individuals suffer from stress. Service members’ recognition of their ability to harm other individuals, fear of failing their unit, and uncertainty about roles also affect their ability to perform on a mission. Moreover, military-specific factors such as being on active duty (or as a reservist), age, previous deployment experience, and length of tour affect service members’ ability to handle stress.
Unit cohesion, military culture, and training are also important factors, and to some extent they are controllable by military commanders. Several studies detail the relationship between strong group cohesion and individuals’ good psychological health.\textsuperscript{27} Strong rapport between military leaders and their units is also critical to keep morale and confidence of their troops high in stressful situations.\textsuperscript{28} This is also true of soldiers. Furthermore, unit cohesion and esprit de corps boost morale and help protect soldiers from stress.\textsuperscript{29}

Other factors also play a substantial role in determining how stress affects troops. For instance, the recent focus on current operations has examined the impact of increased operational tempo—the increase in the number of missions with a simultaneous decrease in the number of military personnel available to perform them, leading to a high frequency of military deployments for servicemen—and consequent stresses of reduced time available for family and personal interests.\textsuperscript{30} In addition, the types of missions have extended beyond combat and war fighting to include peacekeeping, peacemaking, and humanitarian and disaster relief missions.\textsuperscript{31} Similarly, Langston et al. describe the complexity of the current battlefield for military personnel, requiring a protean ability to adapt to a multitude of potential tasks.\textsuperscript{32} Specifically in peace support operations, roles and rules of engagement ambiguity can lead to increased feelings of frustration and helplessness.\textsuperscript{33} The uncertainty and the complex decision-making environment led a recent study by the King’s Centre for Military Health Research to assert that “PTSD is as common after peacekeeping missions as it is after more traditional war fighting.”\textsuperscript{34}

It is crucial that we explore the above factors as we develop the concept of cultural stress. Each factor will help determine how individuals cope with facing stresses brought on by constantly working with and among foreign cultures. It will also help differentiate those stresses that are unique to cultural exchanges rather than stresses that may result simply from being deployed and separated from family or facing the pressures of combat.

As we have demonstrated, military health research has generally focused on soldiers’ stress as it relates to COS. These stressors are attributed to extreme physical environments, taxing mental conditions of fatigue, trying emotional conditions related to risk of (or actual) injury or loss of life or limb, and spiritual dilemmas brought on by the loss of fellow soldiers. What is absent in these discussions is the role of interaction with foreign cultures in creating another stress affecting military personnel. We next discuss civilian research on culturally induced stresses—often referred to as “culture shock”—before we synthesize how culture and combat create unique pressure on the modern service member.

**Causes of Culture Shock**

It requires great effort to live within a culture that is foreign to one’s own. (Major David L. Shelton)\textsuperscript{35}
As armed forces work more closely with foreign populations, they experience new stressors. The revered British advisor T. E. Lawrence was an early observer of the colossal task that military personnel face in working with foreign cultures, basing his twenty-seven articles on his experiences with the Bedu Arabs. After offering pragmatic suggestions for building rapport with the population, he also highlights

the strain of living and thinking in a foreign and half-understood language, the savage food, strange clothes, and stranger ways, with the complete loss of privacy and quiet, and the impossibility of ever relaxing your watchful imitation of the others for months on end, provide . . . an added stress to the ordinary difficulties of dealing with the Bedu.36

Lawrence’s descriptions of the unfamiliarity of food, clothing, and language and loss of personal space in the foreign environment highlight a source of stress produced by exposure to foreign cultures.

Hofstede defines culture as “the collective programming of the human mind that distinguishes one category of people from another.”37 It is no secret that when a member of one culture lives among or interacts with members of a different culture, tensions, misunderstandings, and frustrations can arise.

In civilian research, the frustrations and tensions that arise from this exposure are referred to as “culture shock.”38 Sociologist Kalervo Oberg originally used the term to refer to an “anxiety” at losing a familiar environment and its social “signs and symbols,” such as language, norms, and customs.39 Spradley and Phillips expanded the concept by proposing the new cultural environment itself might be a “stressor” that generates visible stress responses.40 Lundstedt developed the concept of culture shock to include tension produced by cultural interplay, calling it a stress reaction manifested both psychologically and physically.41 This description proposes that culturally related stress reactions are induced in a similar fashion to those COS reactions discussed above.

Sociologists have proposed that individuals pass through emotional and mental stages of culture shock. Though there is little consensus as to the number and nature of these stages, there is agreement that an individual will experience progressive reactions to foreign culture.42 Current research on initial stages, which often supports Oberg’s assumption that first impressions of foreign cultures are “honeymoon” periods, are not applicable to military life.43 For military personnel arriving in dangerous and ambiguous situations, the initial reaction to the culture may be neutral or possibly suspicious. Similarly, intermediate and end stages for civilians will likely differ from servicemen. McPherson discards the notion of transitions altogether. She argues that culture shock is no “initial, isolated event,” rather an ongoing occurrence in which “one is constantly learning anew, adjusting and readjusting to the cultural environment.”44 Because the military environment is characterized by constantly changing on-the-ground circumstances, we use McPherson’s description of culture shock as a process of cyclical adaptation.
There are both mitigating and contributory factors for cultural stress. In the contemporary warfighting environment, ambiguity and unpredictability have become key stressors for military personnel. These are also leading stressors experienced by individuals in foreign environments. Taveggia and Santos describe their impact on individuals in intercultural settings, noting uncertainty reduction is believed to be one of, if not the principal casual factor underlying expatriates’ intercultural affective adjustment experiences. That is, anything that reduces a person’s uncertainty in a new cultural environment will (or should) contribute to his or her satisfaction, sense of well-being or comfort.

. . . This is the uncertainty reduction principle.

What reduces this uncertainty, thus increasing chances of successfully acclimatizing to new environments? There are four factors, all of which coincide with features relevant to military adaptation: prior international experience, cross-cultural training, host-country tenure, and frequency of nonwork interaction with home country nationals.

The characteristics of unfamiliarity, ambiguity, and uncertainty surrounding individuals immersed in a foreign culture can clearly have both positive and negative impacts. While the novelty of different languages, food, and architecture leads individuals to want to travel and experience life overseas, too much ambiguity and unfamiliarity can create new stresses and a desire to return to the familiar home culture. For civilians, it is easy to overcome these stresses by either scheduling a short stay in country—such as for a vacation—or flying home if they discover life overseas is too demanding. For military personnel, culturally related stressors are not as easily dismissed. Culture shock becomes exacerbated through the duration of deployment and unique combat-related stressors. It is here that we must move to a more advanced concept of the combination of pressures facing deployed service members: cultural stress.

Causes of Cultural Stress

Neither combat operational stress nor culture shock in and of itself can fully explain the stresses facing military personnel today. As we previously described, combat-related stressors ignore the role of culture and language as now inherent aspects of many soldiers’ experiences working overseas—whether as advisers to indigenous forces, as peacekeepers, or simply as “boots on the ground” patrolling streets and interacting with local nationals. Culture shock, on the other hand, fails to embrace the unique and extreme pressures of combat. Furthermore, culture “shock” implies an experience that is temporary rather than ongoing. Both stresses contain attributes that overlap with other forms of stress, making it difficult to distinguish whether the stress affecting an individual is actually culturally related or is attributable to other factors. The stresses of combat—combined with the difficulties in performing day-to-day
tasks—can exacerbate cultural tensions. A new concept is needed to blend aspects of both of these stresses. This new operating concept is defined here as cultural stress, or the adverse reaction to the pressures of interaction with foreign populations in operational settings.

Similar to COS and culture shock, the two key aspects in the pathology of cultural stress are its causes and attributes. Cultural stress can be analyzed even more specifically in terms of acute or chronic stressors. Acute stressors relate to specific incidents, such as a soldier inadvertently offending a local authority figure by making a cultural gaff. Chronic stressors relate to continual stressors, such as constant communication in a foreign language. Together, the episodic and lasting culturally related stresses form the basis for cultural stress. While Lewis’s three factors help to identify principal causes of cultural stress, the symptoms or stress reactions are particularly difficult to establish. As discussed above, an attribute apparently indicating cultural stress may also indicate other stressors that are not culturally relevant. In Table 1, we provide a comparison of the causes of each type of stress we have discussed: COS, culture shock, and cultural stress.

Causal Factors

It is evident when comparing causal factors that all three types of stress share common factors that help determine how well an individual will cope. To start, an individual’s background and personality clearly predispose him or her to suffering from stress reactions when exposed to unusual cultural environments. An additional factor contributing to a service member’s ability to handle cultural stressors is whether his or her MOS and related job training involves interaction with indigenous cultures. Service members involved in jobs such as civil affairs know they will be working with and among the population, while infantrymen and artillerymen have historically not been expected to have the same degree of interaction (though in the modern military environment, the truth on the ground is very different).

Unsurprisingly, this also means the same traits that safeguard an infantryman against combat stressors might be the exact opposite qualities necessary to mitigate cultural stressors. As USMC officers Millburn and Lombard explained, “Good Marines do not invariably make good advisors . . . [because many] lacked the patience to work with a culture that places little emphasis on qualities that we regard as . . . indispensable to military life.”48 Personality traits such as extroversion, maturity, optimism, and patience may enable individuals to more easily interact with foreign populations. In a study on American military advisors to the armed forces of the Republic of Korea produced in 1957, it was recognized that advising duty in a tactical unit of a local national army, particularly under combat conditions, is exceedingly difficult and frequently frustrating and personnel selected for such duty must be temperamentally and physically able to withstand these stresses.49
This study thus recommended advisors possess temperamental traits, including tact, patience, emotional stability, self-sufficiency, and self-discipline in addition to professional competency. A similar assessment was made in Vietnam, where advisors observed “determination, patience and perseverance were . . . virtues demanded of advisors . . . more important than the ability to face danger when working through daily frustrations and inevitable misunderstandings.”

Role clarity and sense of purpose were found to be of primary importance for all three types of stresses. For service members, these two facts can affect their adjustment to foreign environments. In writing about the primary stresses of the current
operating environment, Bartone puts role confusion, uncertainty of the mission’s objectives, and uncertainty about local norms and rules of behavior as part of overarching stress caused by “ambiguity”; such situations are common within the peacekeeping community. Where there is a lack of clear guidelines and managed expectations of what troops will encounter overseas, there is greater cause for cultural stress.

Expectations of the foreign culture also assume greater importance. In theatres such as Iraq and Afghanistan—where service personnel can be on their third, fourth, or even fifth deployments—previous experiences will greatly affect their views of the local population, its trustworthiness, and negative or positive associations. A soldier with 1-25 Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT) related the difference in his expectations of the population during three tours in Iraq (2003–4, 2005–6, 2008–present) as mixed. During his first tour, he explained he expected to

shoot, shoot, shoot. That was my mission. I hadn’t had much interaction with the people. The second time [in Iraq], the mission was the same. Before I got here, I didn’t expect people to open their arms and welcome me into their house. We’re Westerners, infidels, we didn’t fit into their scheme of life. [On the third deployment], I had been in this area before. I thought they would be hostile.

Having minimal interaction with the population in his first deployment, the soldier’s expectations of the population before returning to theater were that the population would not receive the military openly because of cultural differences in a time of combat. Interactions with the population during the soldier’s second deployment left impressions that the population would remain negative toward the military on their return. Expectations in these instances can either better prepare soldiers or increase stress levels. Soldiers prepared to face an aggressive environment may be adverse to interaction with foreign populations and already facing stress prior to deploying. However, if the population is receptive and not as hostile as anticipated, soldiers may not experience as much stress when speaking with the population. Thus, expectations play an important role in mitigating stress for a deployed military.

Soldiers’ sense of purpose in a country—that is, their perception of the worthwhileness of their efforts and mission overseas—is also closely tied to individual motivation. Civilians living overseas often have the luxury of selecting their country of work and residence—and the freedom to leave if they decide they do not like it. Thus, “culture shock” can be mitigated through the knowledge that the civilian is able to leave if and when he or she chooses. Military members do not share the freedom of choice for location, assignment, or duration of assignment. One key exception is servicemen and women have been able to volunteer for positions in military transition teams, or “MiTTs.” These teams, tasked to train, coach, and mentor indigenous Army and Police units in Iraq and Afghanistan, maintain daily contact with their counterparts. The importance of having service members as volunteers is they tend to perform better than their “volun-told” teammates—and, presumably having positive expectations of
their interactions with foreign populations, will handle cultural stressors differently than those who did not volunteer for the position. One anonymous MiTT officer bluntly stated, “If you get a bunch of volunteers, then the teams are normally good (rare). If a battalion has been tagged to cough up people, then the teams usually suck (the norm).” A senior service member at the Joint Center for International Security Force Assistance affirmed that in discussions with several thousand returning advisors, volunteers and individuals serving in a billet directly related to the mission (civil affairs) studied the language and culture “much more in depth and with interest than those randomly selected for the mission.”

In addition, soldiers’ motivations for deploying overseas can help manage or prevent cultural stress. In a well-known work on motivations of the Italian peacekeepers in Bosnia, Battistelli et al. described how the “fuzzy logic” of contemporary peace support operations might provide positive albeit stressful conditions for soldiers who may have “postmodern” motives of self-fulfillment, self-exploration, and excitement. Thus, these soldiers, in their attempts to satisfy a sense of wanderlust, become what might be considered a sort of “war tourism.” These soldiers’ motivations are more similar to civilians travelling or living abroad out of a sense of adventure than they are to their compatriots who deploy overseas out of a sense of patriotism or pay. Similarly, these soldiers may experience different levels of cultural stress than other soldiers—and may likely be enthusiastic about the opportunity to deploy overseas.

Unit factors is the second category of causal factors of cultural stress. Owing to the fact that servicemen and women bond in units prior to entering foreign environments—unlike civilians who often move to a foreign country individually—the roles of units are almost identical to those found in COS. As with COS, the quality of predeployment training and the engagement of leadership are two key factors in maintaining morale and mitigating effects of cultural stress. However, there are also important differences in how these two factors specifically pertain to culturally related stressors.

First, traditional military MOS and combat training helps develop soldiers’ sense of professional competence and confidence in their ability to execute their mission under difficult physical and mental conditions. This training does not prepare them for the grind of cultural and linguistic difficulties faced in foreign environments. In summarizing the experiences of advisors in Korea, El Salvador, and Vietnam, Ramsey notes it is almost impossible to find a complaint by any advisor in the three experiences surveyed who felt tactically, technically, or militarily unprepared for his duties. . . However, almost to a man, advisors felt compelled to talk about the demanding challenges posed by language, cultural differences, and host-nation institutional barriers. It was in these areas—at the heart of an advisor’s effectiveness—that most felt inadequately prepared.

Thus, to guard against cultural stress, service members’ training must also include knowledge of the foreign culture and its language. The experiences of the advising
missions in Korea and Vietnam have provided some guidance to inform training about how to interact with foreign populations. Military training helps to mitigate stress in high-intensity situations; cultural training arms servicemen with reasonable expectations of what they might encounter in the foreign environment, helping to prevent cultural faux pas and to facilitate rapport building.

The extent to which American military culture conflicts with the culture of the host nation—in its values, ideals, and principles—will perhaps have a high correlation to signs of cultural stress. According to Dandeker and Gow, militaries have unique cultures that guide how they function. Military culture includes elements such as leadership, motivation, core values, and how individuals act within the greater military organisation.59 This has been most evident in research on militaries working together as part of multinational forces. Rubinstein et al. describe the difficulties arising from militaries working with each other as “horizontal interoperability” and how the dynamics of these unique interactions affect the local populations they are engaging (e.g., during integrated peacekeeping missions such as the NATO-led Stabilization Force (SFOR) in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo Force (KFOR) as “vertical interoperability.”60 Soeters and Manigart support the point that multinational military forces deal with the dual pressures of foreign cultures, coming both from the soldiers with whom they are working and then from the local populations they are serving.61 The unique cultural issues and stresses viewed within multinational forces have led to the discussion of “cultural interoperability” and barriers culture creates to common understandings and accomplishing the mission.62

Keeping in mind the importance of unit cohesion and clarity of purpose and role in discussions of stress mitigation, there is clearly the potential for culturally induced stressors affecting militaries working in this capacity.

Military culture will also affect the ease with which a military adapts to working with foreign populations or remains in a “garrison mentality”—that is, with an aversion to the population rather than acceptance, ultimately creating more tension and stress over the length of a deployment. Winslow’s classic work on the Canadian Airborne Regiment in Somalia provides an example of this mentality. She demonstrates how interactions with locals can become problematic when the Airborne Regiment’s macho culture met the local Somali population, leading to the soldiers looking down on the population.63 This case study of the Canadians in Somalia is one example of how military units of intervening states can view local populations as inferior because of differences in culture.

Soeters et al. argue that even among multinational peacekeeping forces, cultural differences that might appear to be “soft and intangible,” such as differences in food tastes, attitudes toward females, and preferences for sports can lead to divergences “hard in their consequences” such as lack of trust when working together in dangerous environments.64 In the case of Austrian peacekeepers, Colonel Franz Kernic writes that the challenge for soldiers was encountering “a complex cultural environment that was quite new and demanding.” He adds that because of the lack of war-fighting activities, the environment “challenged soldiers’ self-esteem as warriors.”65 On the other hand, militaries whose culture and heritage are more conducive to operating
among foreign populations inevitably experience reduced cultural stresses. Boëne explains the French gendarmerie built relationships with and fostered trust among the local population with ease, largely owing to its colonial past.66

The role of a cultural liaison—someone from the host nation acting as an intermediary for language, culture, or both—also becomes critical when handling cultural stress versus strictly combat-related stress. Operating without an intermediary and with little knowledge of the language or culture is akin to entering a firefight without a rifle, which inevitably can cause stress. The Canadian peacekeeping contingent in Bosnia, for example, emphasized as one of their greatest shortcomings in their mission a lack of cultural awareness training and knowledge of cultural differences.67

Of the three factors, the interaction of environmental factors with cultural stress is the most difficult. US Marine Corps General Charles Krulak’s prediction that the Marine Corps would no longer fight one-dimensional wars, determined by sheer domination of firepower, but be involved in three-dimensional engagements in which full-scale military operations, humanitarian aid, and peacekeeping occurred simultaneously has come true.68 He called this a “Three-Block War,” and the associated increases in patrolling, checkpoints, house searches, and other tasks in these iterations of war have translated into increased interaction with foreign populations.69 In a recent article, Mattis and coauthor Hoffman added a fourth block—psychological warfare and information operations. According to historian Max Boot, because “Marines will need to dramatically enhance their understanding of foreign cultures[,] Mattis has made that [understanding foreign cultures] a top priority.”70

As we discussed earlier, noncombat environments, particularly peacekeeping, have been described as stressful as combat environments because of the introduction of other stressors.71 As with individual and military sociological factors, it is difficult to discern which stressors are culturally related and which are not. The next section discusses attributes that can serve as markers for cultural stress.

**Attributes**

Both causal and mitigating factors for cultural stress can influence military personnel individually, but their interplay also affects servicemen. For example, while hardiness might safeguard an individual against environmental-induced stress, a less-hardy individual who is part of close-knit unit might be equally protected from stress. An example of the importance of the relationship of factors is demonstrated by the case of the counterinsurgency effort in El Salvador (1981–93). Here it quickly became obvious that even if American military personnel knew how to speak the language of their counterparts, they did not automatically understand El Salvadoran culture and were thus not wholly effective advisors. As one retired senior Special Forces officer commented, the American Spanish-speaking DIs (drill instructors) brought to train El Salvadorian forces “failed miserably. They knew the material, they could speak the language, they just did not have the mental flexibility or the personality traits required to be able to work and live with indigenous forces and succeed in transmitting their knowledge. Not everyone can do this [job].”72
An imbalance of factors that might protect against cultural stress can lead to emotional and/or behavioral problems. Lieutenant Colonel Gary Brito observed outbursts of soldiers toward the indigenous population as resulting from “emotional stress.” He describes stress symptoms manifested as anger toward one’s peers and/or the Army, depression or numbed behavior, resentment, a loss of confidence, and a lack of support of or belief in the mission. These clearly invoke images of cultural stress. In Vietnam, American advisors often demonstrated hostility toward and verbal degradation of the people and its culture. Advisors considered the country “inferior,” described its inhabitants as “little people,” and complained of perceived Vietnamese qualities such as laziness and a backward adherence to tradition and ritual. Similarly, in Korea, advisors often demonstrated a refusal to interact with the foreign culture, “preferring to serve among their own troops where food, companionship, and chances of recognition were all considerably improved.”

Dr. Gerald C. Hickey’s 1965 report on the role of the American military advisor specifically commented on an advisor’s vulnerability to cultural stress. In laying out the necessary qualities of advisors, he commented that in addition to qualities such as “professional competence and experience, advisors needed to show an adaptability to foreign cultures, [and a] temperamental disposition to work with foreigners.” Hickey describes “the possibility of ‘cultural fatigue’ of personnel who are no longer enthusiastic about this work.” This description of a development of a physical and emotional exhaustion caused by cultural interaction is a clear signpost of cultural stress. The notion of “cultural fatigue” is supported by recent reports by former MiTT advisors to the Iraqi Army, making frequent reference to frustrations brought about by daily exchanges with their Iraqi counterparts. Major Jeff Weinhofer warns future advisors of the effect of the overall mission on team morale, explaining that as the deployment progresses, the frustration of working with Iraqis and the vast cultural differences take a toll on everyone. Each team will likely have one or two soldiers who do not like working with Iraqis and would much rather be a member of a coalition unit.

The author concludes that team leaders must devote time to managing the advisors as well as the Iraqis, as a failure to do so “will only exacerbate tension that will naturally develop among some advisors toward Iraqis.” The author suggests having separate living areas for Marines and Iraqi troops to “leave space to unwind and maintain our sanity.”

The most obvious recognition of cultural stressors is when servicemen have a general sense of cultural bombardment. Major Mark M. Weber, writing about U.S. military advisors in Iraq, references the aggregate effect of culture when he writes, “Although everyone seems to know what partnership [with Iraqi forces] means, the first six months in a culture as foreign as Iraq’s can make even the best advisor forget his task and purpose.” That the military advisor could have such a strong reaction to the foreign environment as to “forget his task and purpose” suggests a high impact of
what T. E. Lawrence had observed in 1917 with the combined strain of the foreign language, food, clothing, and ways. The U.S. Army Center for Military History’s publications on the history of the advisory effort in Vietnam put it simply: The advisors suffered from “culture shock” on arrival in the foreign country.82

Conclusion

We have demonstrated in this article that cultural stress affects military personnel. It is a distinctly different construct from COS or culture shock. Cultural stress operates where military personnel overseas interact with indigenous populations to achieve their mission objectives. Cultural stress is multifaceted but is strongly related to stressors arising from cultural and linguistic differences. Although this article provides only a preliminary analysis of the fundamentals of cultural stress, it is a concept military forces need to consider, and mitigate, to safeguard their personnel and be effective. While how best to manage the effects of cultural stress requires further research, we argue that military forces that ignore the difficulties posed by exposure to culture stress do so at their peril.

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Notes

2. Ibid.
5. Ibid
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22. Ibid., 125.
27. Lewis, “Combat Stress Control,” 129.
31. Ibid., S133.
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42. Zapf provides a detailed comparison of stages of culture shock in “Cross-Cultural Transitions,” 105-19.
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47. Ibid., 155-57.
50. Ibid.
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