The Impact of Culture Clash on Deployed Troops

Talya Greene, PhD†; Joshua Buckman, BSc†; Christopher Dandeker, PhD‡;  
Surg Cdr Neil Greenberg, MC RN†

ABSTRACT  Culture plays a crucial role in the military, helping the armed forces achieve their goals. However, cultural issues can negatively affect personnel’s well-being and effectiveness, especially when there is a “clash” between military and other cultures. The literature suggests there should be more training and education on individual service cultures, as well as other countries’ military cultures to improve cooperation and coordination during joint operations and working in multinational forces. A greater knowledge of local cultures may help avoid offending noncombatants. When deployment ends, service personnel need more support when they transition back to civilian culture.

INTRODUCTION
Culture can be defined as the collection of values, attitudes, and beliefs which provide people with a common way of interpreting events. Military culture is a result of a combination of the above factors and describes a shared institutional ethos that influences the expectations regarding behavior in areas such as discipline, teamwork, loyalty, and selfless duty for those in the armed forces. Military culture has many positive effects on personnel, including maintaining and potentially increasing operational effectiveness and morale. However, cultural issues can also negatively affect personnel’s well-being and effectiveness. This is especially problematic when the prevailing military culture of a deployed force clashes with other cultures with which its personnel interact.

There are many different potential “culture clashes” that deployed troops can experience. Such clashes include, but are not limited to, between military and civilian culture, including both the local population and nonmilitary personnel (such as journalists and employees of NGOs) who frequently deploy to operational theaters; between different services (such as Army and Air Force); and between various nations’ military forces during joint and multinational operations as well as private military and security companies. These culture clashes can impact both the mental health and the operational functioning of armed forces personnel.

This article reviews the literature on culture and the military. It focuses on the roots of military culture and the role it plays in the efficiency and well-being of military personnel. We postulate that potential culture clashes among deployed troops are an important deployment stressor affecting military personnel over and above other stressors encountered while carrying out warfighting and peacekeeping operations. This review identifies the major conditions associated with culture clashes in deployed personnel as cited in the literature and draws relevant conclusions to inform future training and research opportunities.

MILITARY CULTURE
Military culture exists by virtue of the use of specific language, symbols, and hierarchy present in formations of armed forces personnel; it has been described as “the bedrock of military effectiveness.” As Sarkesian and Connor have said, “The military profession stands and falls according to its ability to maintain and reinforce … military culture.” Central to military culture are loyalty, teamwork, leadership, obedience, and hierarchy, although these values can all be found, to some extent, within nonmilitary culture. However, military culture has an important distinctive feature: it demands subordination of the self to the group; military individuals must be willing to make sacrifices for others including, in extremis, giving their life if required. This is what Hackett called the contract of “unlimited liability,” and it is why, in a military environment, value is attached to physical and moral courage: conquering fear in the face of extreme danger, and being able to take difficult decisions, even though the cost of errors could be avoidable losses of other people’s lives. Although it is expected that service personnel will make such sacrifices voluntarily; should they not, then military culture dictates the use of coercion; discipline in the military is distinctive and different, in nature and intensity, from rules operated by other organizations. Such rules exist to allow military forces to achieve missions which in themselves are also very different from the aims and aspirations of nonmilitary organizations.

Although military culture is distinctive, it is not totally removed from civilian culture. In some militaries, conscription is still used; conscripts do not necessarily identify with the military mindset, and may even reject it. Even in the dominant military format among contemporary Western states—the all volunteer force (AVF), individuals who “join up” bring norms and behavioral expectations from their civilian lives. Controls on the use of violence and military aggression stem from democratic values and rule of law that come from the civilian arena. In addition, the U.K. armed forces have increasingly used civilians to do particular jobs (e.g., scientific advisors),
and contracted out work to nonmilitary agencies (e.g., some specialist nursing staff in field hospitals). This has had a somewhat “civilianizing” influence on the U.K. military.3

Culture helps armed forces achieve their goals, perhaps most importantly by promoting unit cohesion.7 The use of a shared language and clear group goals allows teams to work together within a general framework to achieve common aims. In addition, military culture values certain characteristics such as bravery, courage, impassivity, and hardiness while discouraging others such as overt displays of emotion.8 Dunivin describes these values as the “combat, masculine-warrior” paradigm of the military.9 While on operational duties, the consequential mindset has been described as a “battlemind.”10

Adopting an operational battlemind may well be a practical necessity allowing military units to function effectively within the challenging environments encountered during combat and other missions. Emphasizing bravery and courage helps to promote resilience and may reduce the likelihood of psychological breakdown.10

Soldiers carry out numerous duties that are distinct from those encountered in other professions. For instance, troops are required to take risks including risking the lives of themselves or others and to use lethal force. To function effectively, deployed troops have to overcome the moral and mental norms learnt from the civilian sphere, which would otherwise encourage them to flee from dangerous situations and prevent them from killing. Military training encourages troops to be emotionally distanced from their enemies to overcome their aversion to killing.11 Military culture provides a framework of clearly noncivilian norms partly so that troops can justify and interpret their actions in an alternative way.

Military culture shapes how military personnel perceive, think about, and feel about war and their part in it. Burk proposes that military culture provides personnel with a means of coping with the uncertainty of war.12 He claims that by the imposition of patterns and rituals, military culture helps service personnel experience a degree of control over an otherwise complex occupation. It also helps give meaning or significance to their role in a war.

Thus we argue that the culture of the military is distinct from civilian life and from nonmilitary organizational culture. It serves to bond military personnel together and allows them to operate in challenging environments and, at times, provides them with the framework to carry out acts which otherwise might be abhorrent. However, as the following sections show military culture can, at times, cause difficulties for personnel; in particular such difficulties occur when there is a clash of cultures as described below.

MILITARY CULTURE AND FAMILIES

The needs of the military are often at odds with the demands of family life. Studies suggest that there have been numerous distinct cultural changes over the last two generations regarding the expected contribution of the father in childrearing.13 This has led to male military personnel being less willing to prioritize their military careers over their family and personal life.14 However, military life still demands that armed forces personnel prioritize the military above everything else.

This clash is particularly problematic during deployments. When military fathers from the United States and the United Kingdom deploy, their absence from the family contrasts sharply with civilian culture, where fathers are becoming more “hands-on” with their children.15 An even stronger clash is felt when mothers are deployed, as they are traditionally seen as the primary caregivers in the family in Western culture.16 When women leave their families for long deployments, it can negatively affect their well-being. Deployed U.S. Navy mothers reported experiencing separation anxiety in leaving their children.16 Research by Kelley et al. on deployed U.S. Navy personnel found that single mothers were particularly at risk for depressive symptomatology while on deployment.17

In addition, more policy and research is required to reflect the diversity of family forms including homosexual couples, singles with elderly parents, and unmarried couples.

Another potential problem for troops and their families occurs when troops return home. The transitional “culture shock” that some personnel experience on returning from theater can create an added strain on already difficult family relationships.18 This is particularly problematic where the expectation of a soldier’s family about the homecoming period is at odds with the soldier’s expectations. Readapting to home routines and adopting a “homefront” mindset has been associated with adjustment and behavioral health problems for troops returning from deployment.18–20 Common problems that personnel display having returned home include risky driving, substance (including alcohol) abuse, and, for ex-service members, higher rates of homelessness.8,21–28

MILITARY CULTURE AND THE LOCAL CIVILIAN POPULATION

In many cases, there is a culture clash between deployed troops and the local civilian population.29 This can exacerbate tensions and have negative consequences strategically, operationally, and tactically.30 McFate argued that U.S. forces’ misunderstanding of Iraqi culture when they first entered into the region meant that troops found it difficult to develop one-to-one relationships with Iraqis, necessary both for information purposes, and for “winning hearts and minds.”30 Accounts from troops told of the difficulties encountered as a result of this lack of local cultural knowledge. For example, misunderstandings are reported to have occurred at roadside checkpoints where the Western hand signal for “stop” (an outstretched arm with palm out) was interpreted in terms of local cultural signals for go, and conversely, the Western signal for “go” (arm straight palm down) was interpreted by locals as meaning stop. This reportedly led to several shootings of local noncombatants and damaged the trust between the local population and the U.S. forces.30

There were further examples of culture clash which hindered the U.S. humanitarian mission in Somalia. Soldiers...
reported that Somalis refused food packages the soldiers had distributed and interpreted this as resistance to the U.S. presence. Miller and Moskos suggest, however, that more understanding of the local population would have changed this interpretation; some of the food packages contained pork, which offended the Muslim Somalis. Miller and Moskos argue that more training and education would have helped mitigate some of the negative attitudes held toward the Somalis. Furthermore, those soldiers who did learn about the local culture found that this information enabled them to distinguish between clan warriors and refugees in genuine need of help.

Knowledge of local culture can be used to achieve mission success. A good understanding of the Iraqi tribal network was utilized by U.S. forces to find Saddam Hussein and eventually led to his capture. British forces, who operated in southern Iraq, were reported to have had a good understanding of local culture. Using pre-existing local systems and customs gave several British-led decisions legitimacy from the local population, notwithstanding the subsequent difficulties encountered by British forces in southern Iraq.

Troops’ high levels of vigilance and their state of battle-mind may lead them to treat the local population with suspicion and a lack of empathy. This is compounded by the fact that in Iraq and Afghanistan, troops face high degrees of uncertainty in identifying the enemy. Insurgents using non-conventional methods of warfare reportedly dressed as civilians (often as women); they are reported to use women and children to gather useful intelligence and at times, to carry out attacks. These combat methodologies have changed the way troops interact with local populations and have made it more difficult to target insurgents; troops may be uncertain of what actions to take because of moral difficulty in engaging enemies who are not wearing a distinctive uniform.

Consequently, troops’ attitudes toward the local population encountered on deployment have reportedly changed. A 2007 survey of U.S. troops suggests only 38–47% of troops felt it necessary to treat noncombatants with respect. The altered perceptions of noncombatants in the local population due to the changing nature of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have given rise to reports of unethical behavior by military personnel in the U.S. and U.K. forces.

However, troops who have knowingly or unknowingly killed noncombatants or civilians are reported to suffer higher rates of mental health problems including more severe PTSD symptoms when they have returned home. U.S. clinicians suggest that this is particularly the case when troops have had a chance to change from their battlemind mindset to a home-front mindset and begin to engage in more “human” activities such as caring for their children or engaging in their family life.

**MILITARY CULTURE AND ETHNIC DIFFERENCES**

Fear of the enemy can become so entrenched that people in wider society with ethnicity similar to “the enemy” are sometimes treated with suspicion. This was seen, for example, in World War II, where there was mass internment of Japanese Americans. This issue is particularly problematic for service personnel with ethnicity that is either similar, or perceived as similar to the local population at the deployment location. Black U.S. soldiers deployed to Somalia reported finding it confusing and difficult to be posted to Africa. Black soldiers were shocked to find that some Somalis mocked them, calling them “nigger” or “adoorn,” meaning slave. Furthermore, Black soldiers often felt uncomfortable at the racist attitudes held by some U.S. troops toward Somalis, believing they reflected underlying racist attitudes toward Black people in general.

Racist attitudes toward Black soldiers were exposed in the Canadian Airborne Regiment in Somalia, who were disbanded following the brutal murder carried out by some of its soldiers of a 16-year-old boy suspected of stealing and also the release of videos showing shocking racist and bullying incidents among the troops. In one video, a Black soldier is shown with the words “I love KKK” written on his back. In other incidents, Black soldiers were urinated upon or tied on a leash. This occurred in the context of many different brutal and humiliating incidents that occurred during hazing of the new recruits, not only directed at the Black soldiers. However, Black soldiers were singled out for particularly harsh treatment, and the Klu Klux Klan reference suggests that there was a racist undertone to these actions.

During the Vietnam War, Asian American soldiers were regularly mistaken for enemy combatants by their comrades in the U.S. forces and mistaken for traitors by the Vietcong. These service members suffered not only from the stressors they were exposed to as combat personnel but these added stressors unique to personnel in their positions. Consequently, the Asian-American soldiers who fought in Vietnam were subject to greater risks of developing mental health problems resulting from their deployments and were found to have reported more severe symptoms of PTSD in particular.

These findings highlight the issue of how personnel from certain ethnic minority backgrounds are being and will be viewed by their military colleagues, and how they will react to being in theaters where the local population are perceived to have similar cultural backgrounds as themselves. In particular more research is required on how Muslim soldiers and soldiers with Middle Eastern ethnicities have coped in the recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

**CULTURE CLASHES WITHIN THE ARMED FORCES**

One aspect of cultural tensions derives from the differences between one individual service environment and another. The literature commonly refers to problems of technical and non-technical “interoperability” between the services. Joint operations, in which the services work together to achieve mission success, have typically faced problems due to incompatible technical equipment such as radios and computer systems, a lack of knowledge of operating procedures and roles of each service, and the use of service-specific vocabulary.
Moreover, members of one service may mistrust members of the other services because of a lack of understanding of each service’s culture. The introduction of joint training bases and exercises may increase understanding and cooperation between the services, so that they can operate together more effectively once in theater.

In addition, the armed forces also need to learn to work successfully with nonmilitary agencies that support the rebuilding efforts postbattle. These can include local organizations, non-governmental organizations, and international charities. These complex partnerships present many problems in balancing the political–strategic requirements for multinationality of these coalitions, with the practical operational requirements for achieving mission success. The language barriers between personnel in such coalitions and the different cultural concepts of command and control need to be carefully understood and accounted for or it can adversely affect the speed and success of military missions.

Military personnel require further education and training to better understand the socio-cultural norms, working practices, and cultural sensitivities of the partners they work with in these coalition forces to avoid offending them and to improve working relationships.

There can also be a clash between the organizational culture of the military and the culture of reservists. In wars, reservists are known to be particularly at risk. It has been argued that reservists maintain ideas of fairness and equality that they have learned from their civilian culture, whereas regulars tend to use military concepts. This results in differences in the way regular and reserve personnel perceive particular events. Reservists experience sudden changes of cultural context, which may have a negative impact on their mental health. The organizational culture for regulars favors total immersion. For reservists, who are only partly immersed in military culture, integration can be more difficult. Military culture therefore favors regular personnel over reservists. These issues can also apply to conscripts, who may not identify with military culture as readily as volunteers.

Reserve personnel have been found to have higher rates of mental health and behavioral problems than their regular personnel peers when returning home from deployment. In one study, reservists complained of unfair treatment and discrimination more often than the regulars did, especially in relation to being separated from their unit, being given different kinds of missions to the regulars, and being given less access to rest and recuperation (R&R) and welfare assets.

It may be the case that their perceptions of being discriminated against are due to the subcultural differences between reserve personnel and regular personnel. These differing perceptions may play some part in explaining the differences in the reported rates of mental and behavioral health problems between these types of personnel.

Some culture clashes have actually been improved by deployment. In particular, gender clashes in the military have been reduced. The U.K. Army has brought many women into important positions in Afghanistan and the U.S. military has done the same in Iraq. For example, the role that women have played in search and intelligence operations extends the role they have previously performed in peacekeeping. This has led to a re-examination of the employment restrictions and the formal status of women in the U.K. armed forces. There has been increased acceptance that in many different positions, women can perform as well as men. Furthermore, some qualities perceived as “female” such as nurturing, etc., may actually mean that women perform some jobs better than men. For example, in many Islamic countries, women do not traditionally interact with men. Therefore, there is a need for female soldiers on the ground to talk with the local female population; a crucial part of the approach in winning over hearts and minds.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Military culture differs from civilian culture in the expectations it places on individuals; service personnel use lethal force against others and make extensive sacrifices, which might lead to their death. We argue that military culture is quite different from that which most civilians experience; it has a distinct language, distinct symbols, rituals, and practices. While military culture has various benefits including individual resilience and unit morale, when it is exaggerated, however, it can cause problems.

This distinctive military culture can sometimes clash with other cultures, most notably with the civilian culture in which military personnel were immersed, remain connected with to some extent while serving and return to after their military careers, with the local civilian culture in theater of operations to which they are deployed, with personnel from the different services, and with service personnel from ethnic minority backgrounds. These clashes act as additional stressors for service personnel, particularly while on deployment, and can cause or compound mental health problems. We argue that military commanders must fully understand the nature of the culture in which they work, so they can utilize its strengths and minimize its ill effects.

There are a number of areas where it may be possible for the military to mitigate the effects of culture clashes. Ensuring regular and reserve personnel are treated similarly in theater and ensuring that reservists are as well prepared as regulars are for deployment may reduce reservists’ risk of mental health problems. Shared training facilities and training exercises for all armed forces personnel, combined with education about each service’s culture, may help improve the cooperation and coordination during joint operations, thus increasing their efficacy. Training and education regarding the cultural values and practices of personnel in multinational forces and from nonmilitary organizations, along with training to improve the way in which language barriers can be crossed and communication can be more effective, may help remove some of the causes of “mission drag” experienced in multinational coalition operations. However, reducing interservice and interunit culture clashes may be difficult as there is an inherent conflict.
between units’ self-beliefs that they are “the best” and their capability of accepting the cultures of others.

There is also scope for ensuring that military personnel have a greater local knowledge of customs and cultures to help avoid offending noncombatants, which may lead to a reduction in the number of noncombatant deaths. This may reduce the negative perceptions of the Western militaries and help win hearts and minds as opposed to driving recruitment for insurgents. Indeed U.K. preparation for deployments now includes mandatory training about the culture of the country to which they are about to deploy. However, predeployment training may have only a limited effect as the process of developing an operational mindset may not be well suited to also gaining a deep understanding of another nation’s culture.

We also argue that there is a need for more research into the specific effects of military culture. For instance we suggest that further research is required to better understand the effects of deployment upon military personnel who originate from similar cultural backgrounds to enemy combatants. Research is also required on how best to support troops on their return from deployment and when they leave the services as culture clashes of the kind discussed here have complex positive and negative effects on the successful readjustment of service personnel to civilian society.

In conclusion, the literature on culture as it relates to the military broadly suggests that although more can be done to understand the effects of culture on personnel, on military organizations, and on individual deployments, the effects of culture are complex. In some ways culture acts as a barrier to establishing effective working relationships between friendly forces but it also acts, in some cases, to increase unit cohesion, which in itself is a useful factor supporting efficiency and mental health. We suggest that armed forces should ensure that their personnel receive sufficient training aimed at understanding and appreciating cultural differences existing between themselves and all others who they come into contact with during their military work. However, this review shows that it is equally important for commanders to understand and plan for culture clashes, which we postulate are to some extent inevitable.

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REFERENCES

The Impact of Culture Clash on Deployed Troops