The Army’s Take on Culture

David Price

American negotiators should plan first to engage in small-talk. Subjects such as politics, race, religion, and gender issues should be avoided. These topics seldom help to build relationships between strangers. Instead, American negotiators should try discussing the foreign country’s history, cultural heritage, traditions, beautiful countryside, contribution to the arts, economic successes, and popular sports. . . Negotiators must be prepared to discuss typical American traditions, sports, and cultural heritage; however, they must be careful not to go overboard with talk about America. It may come across as pompous and overbearing (U.S. Army 2008: 4–23).

The U.S. Army’s recently leaked Special Forces Advisor Guide notes that, “as the world becomes increasingly more accessible, [Special Operations] are becoming more dependent on the ability of the special advisor to demonstrate an understanding of the rest of the world” (2–18). To solve this dilemma, the Army has developed a how-to manual that instructs its personnel on how to successfully operate in foreign environments.

The Guide’s information is ostensibly designed to help Special Forces personnel overcome intercultural issues so that they may more easily achieve mission objectives. Most of the Guide contains the type of common-sense advice that might be condensed in a paragraph or two in a Frommer’s travel guide. Military personnel are warned that the whole world isn’t just like the United States, and if they don’t alter their approach to other cultures, they will have problems. The Guide discusses issues ranging from cross-cultural negotiations to counterinsurgency. Its primary purpose is to instruct personnel how to best interact with other cultures as advisors, occupiers, or visitors. At times this surreal foray into cultural understanding reads like Emily Post’s “Etiquette of Counterinsurgency.” Rather than providing army personnel with fresh new insights, however, the Guide exemplifies how the U.S. military seeks and uses specific anthropological data and a narrow view of culture to reaffirm rather than enhance institutional knowledge.

The Guide’s view of culture resurrects what was state of the art psychological anthropology in the 1950s and 1960s. It relies on notions of “culture and personality areas” that have not been a tool in anthropological research for decades. These antiquated views simplify broad spectrums of
cultural traits using metaphors. The models created by culture and personality theorists were widely rejected by anthropologists in the 1960s because their renderings of complex cultural phenomena glossed over vital complexities with stereotypes. This military predilection for the antique is not accidental. Discarded notions of culture fit the military’s aim to interpret and control environments where they operate. These crude cultural characterizations likewise fit the military’s desire to access ethnographic data through standardized categories of uniform cultural databases.

The Guide reduces this “rest of the world” into seven cultural regions consisting of: “North America and Europe (including Australia and New Zealand), Southwest Asia and North Africa, South and Central America (including Mexico), Sub-Saharan Africa, Pacific Rim (excluding the Americas), Russia and the Independent Republics, Oceania (the Pacific islands)” (2–17).

The Guide draws heavily on the Values Orientation Model created by anthropologist Florence Kluckhohn and social psychologist Fred Strodtbeck to present cartoonish representations of regional cultural stereotypes. The Values Orientation Model was developed at Harvard’s Laboratory of Social Relations during the 1950s based on the premise that all cultures have “a central core of meaning—basic values.” These core values are measured using a series of standardized questions, with the goal of understanding the root values of a given culture (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck 1961:2). The model maintains that large cultural regions are dominated by values that can be charted on a simple scale expressing tendencies related to five cultural elements, each of which has three possible descriptors. The elements and their descriptors are as follows:

1. “human nature” (evil, mixed, good).
2. relationships of people to nature (e.g., subjugation-to-nature, harmony-with-nature, or mastery-over-nature).
3. temporal focus (past, present, or future orientation).
4. human activities (being, becoming, doing).
5. social relations between “men” (hierarchical, collateral, individual).

Using the Values Orientation Model’s rubrics, a specific culture might have a collective outlook that conceived of human nature as either good, evil, or mixed, and so on. The combination of the three possible descriptors for each of the five cultural elements was claimed to produce concise descriptors of culture groups (Kluckhohn Center 1995).

This model is one among numerous efforts by anthropologists to characterize or describe identifiable personality traits of en-
tire cultures. In the early twentieth century (1934), Ruth Benedict’s book *Patterns of Culture* poetically used Nietzsche’s description of “Apollonian” and “Dionysian” to illustrate the power of enculturation. Benedict described individuals raised in Apollonian cultures (e.g., Zuni) as having subdued and restrained personality types, while those raised in Dionysian cultures (e.g., Kwakiutl) exhibited cultural values of excess and disruption. She believed that “a culture, like an individual, is a more or less consistent pattern of thought and action” (1934, 46). During the Second World War, anthropologists influenced by Benedict’s theories conducted national character studies which reduced the complexities of other nations into simplified and often pseudo-psychological profiles. These profiles were intended to help U.S. forces understand their enemies. In the Cold War era, Margaret Mead produced a RAND report describing what she believed to be uniform features of the Soviet national character (Mead 1951).

Most anthropologists came to reject efforts to identify broad culture and personality types for several reasons. First, when generalizing diverse societies as unitary types, anthropologists ignored more behaviors and beliefs than they explained. Second, although the models provide statistical assessments of normative cultural values or behaviors, they ignore the significant variation among individuals in any society. Personality is not static—just as individuals have broad ranges of responses to situations, so do cultures. Few anthropologists today would be comfortable with the generalizations that are the basis of Kluckhohn’s work.

Because Kluckhohn’s simplistic model has been rejected by most anthropologists, it might be surprising to find it so prominently guiding the ethos of the *Special Forces Guide*. Yet the mechanistic conception of culture dovetails nicely with existing military world views. It makes sense that a regimented military culture that seeks engineered solutions would be attracted to a “rank-order principles” model. When the military wants to embrace something as potentially soft as anthropology, it is often drawn to fantasies of hard science. The military likes instruments that are quantifiable, and *science-like*, to collect standardized data that can be statistically analyzed and scaled in relatively sophisticated ways. These trappings of science, with complex graphs, data tables, equations, and multidimensional models, make it seem as though values orientation does something more than express stereotypes. Quantitative data, however, is merely camouflage for elaborately delineated stereotypes.

The *Guide* downplays the problems of Kluckhohn and Strodth beck’s generalizations with a disclaimer: its summaries “represent sweeping generalizations about very large regions. They are deliberate simplifications, intended only to capture some of the basic cultural differences and similarities among cultural regions” (2–19). Yet the illustration that accompanies this disclaimer belies it. It states that North Americans, Europeans and Australians all share a belief that human na-
The stereotypes in the Guide are selected not because they educate but because they reaffirm what the military already knows.

In the Guide’s section on negotiations and “relationship building,” the essentialized representations of entire regions are used to suggest how the stereotypical personality traits dominating each region can be used to maximize the American advantage.

For example: This advice would be useful only to the extent that those reading it were truly culturally insensitive; although I would question the wisdom of recommending that representatives of U.S. armed forces discuss “the foreign country’s history” given the likelihood that the U.S. presence in a given nation is part of a long history of foreign occupation, neocolonial extraction of wealth, or subversion of democratic self-rule.

Today the military seeks these absurd reductions of culture and personality as part of a template they hope will allow them to quickly shift their theater of operations effectively and with little preparation. Their ideal world might be something like The Matrix: Special Forces would be able to download some sort of “culture-patch,” filling them with specific data on mores, manners, and cultural context for a given theater of operations. These desires can be seen in
such documents as the leaked *Human Terrain Systems Handbook*, which describes plans to produce human-relations data that can be accessed by handheld computers in the field (see Gonzales 2009, Price 2008b, Stanton 2008). That cultural knowledge is not simple and won’t lead to engineered culture change in ways the military might hope does not prevent opportunistic anthropologists from selling dreams of cultural understanding and manipulation.

Some argue that the military needs good anthropologists to improve its understanding of other cultures.¹ But this view misunderstands the military’s intentions. The military adopts inadequate culture models because they comfortably echo the military’s own worldview. The *Guide* is just the latest installment in a history of failures to get military bureaucrats to challenge their own assumptions and adopt anthropologically informed perspectives (Gordon 1987, Price 2008a). Since the Second World War, we see that the military tends to ignore independent academic research in favor of racially essentialized just-so stories like Kluckhohn’s Values Orientation Model. Given this tendency, Kluckhohn’s model is exactly the sort of theoretical orientation that we should expect the military to select.

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Even when the U.S. Department of
Defense (DOD) tries to fund independent aca-
demic research, it selects ridiculous pseudo-
scientific projects. The DOD-sponsored
Minerva Initiative directs nearly two million
dollars to psychologist David Matsumoto’s
efforts to identify potentially violent individ-
uals by scrutinizing their facial expressions.
Anthropologists know that Matsumoto’s ef-
forts to study “video and transcripts from fig-
ures such as Osama bin Laden, Adolf Hitler,
Benito Mussolini, Josef Stalin, Saddam Hus-
sein, and Ted Kaczynski, among many oth-
ers” in an effort to find identifiable faces of
evil is a high-priced fools’ errand (Bohan
2009). But this is exactly the sort of neo-
phrenological “science” that the military
continually seeks, despite the groans from
academics who know that at best such ef-
forts will quietly fail, and at worst, will be
weaponized to harass minority populations.
The military appears bound to reproduce its
own blindness even as it flails to reach out-
side its institutional borders for “new” ideas.
The military recognizes its shortcomings in
anthropological understandings of culture,
but its own limitations, including predilec-
tions to support neocolonial missions, hin-
der its ability to incorporate rigorous anthrop-
ological analyses.

Notes

1. There are other serious problems with the
Guide’s scholarship. Like other military hand-
books, the Guide “commandeers” the work of
unacknowledged scholars. Sections describing
basic descriptions of culture and enculturation
processes are only slightly modified liftings of
text appearing on the Websites of Washington
State University and the Consortium, the
Women’s College’s site, and an online site selling
prewritten college papers to cheating students.
For example, compare Guide sections 2-20, 2-21
and 2-22 with the following: http://www.wsu.
edu/gened/learn-modules/top_culture/
behaviors/learned-behaviors-intro.html. See also
http://cwcinterculturalcomm.wikispaces.com/
M1T03?responseToken=9b3c4b1c1a505e97bacb
98b346c67fac. This is only slightly modified
from the text appearing at WSU, CWC, and a pa-
er mill’s website http://www.collegeresearch.us/
show_essay/4604.html.

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David Price is professor of anthropology at St. Martin’s University. His research uses the Freedom of Information Act, archives, and interviews to document historical interactions between anthropologists and intelligence agencies. He is the author of *Threatening Anthropology* (Duke, 2004), and *Anthropological Intelligence: The Deployment and Neglect of American Anthropology during the Second World War* (Duke, April 2008).