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Key culture-general interactional skills for military personnel

Aubrey Logan-Terry*, Rebecca Rubin Damari

Georgetown University, 3700 O St. NW, Washington DC 20057, USA

Abstract

There is increasing awareness in the U.S. Department of Defense and across the service branches that members of a twenty-first century military need to be able to communicate effectively with adversaries as well as allies, strangers as well as partners in multinational operations. We argue it is preferable to provide training that will be “culture-general,” preparing military personnel to succeed wherever they are deployed. Drawing on prior research findings and new field research at Army and Marine Corps role play-based training sites, this paper outlines interactional skills that are useful in any cross-cultural situation, but have particular utility in military contexts, across various cultures, languages, and contexts. We discuss three overarching sets of skills that aid military personnel in achieving more successful communication with counterparts from a different background: (1) observing and adapting to unfamiliar norms, (2) building rapport, and (3) recovering from trouble in interaction.

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1. Policy and training context

There is increasing awareness in the U.S. Department of Defense and across the service branches that members of a twenty-first century military need to be able to communicate effectively with adversaries as well as allies, strangers as well as partners in multinational operations. There is also increasing awareness that language skills alone are not sufficient to facilitate successful interaction. The current *Department of Defense strategic plan for language skills, regional expertise, and cultural capabilities* states that a Total Force needs not only language skills and regional expertise, but also cultural capabilities, including competency in cross-cultural communication [1].

* Corresponding author. Tel.: 703-608-2757.
E-mail: ael34@georgetown.edu

Currently, across the services, military personnel are given information about the region they expect to be deployed to, inclusive of the local “cultural norms.” There are a number of limitations to this approach. First, members of the military are not always deployed to the expected theater. Second, cultural information may be incomplete, out of date, or insufficient due to the presence of a variety of cultural groups in the Area of Operation. Finally, it is difficult to remember long lists of “dos and don’ts.” This is not to say that there is no benefit to educating service members as to the norms of the locations where they are expected to deploy, but this approach is limited. It is preferable to provide training that will be “culture-general,” preparing military personnel to succeed wherever they are deployed.

An appeal for culture-general training has been made in Department of Defense reports dating back several years [2,3,4]. Today, the culture-general approach is beginning to receive more traction in military policy [5,6]. Efforts are underway within the Department of Defense to implement new policies requiring military and select civilian personnel to be trained in a set of baseline cross-cultural competencies, conceptualized primarily at the cognitive level, that is, focusing on learning, self-awareness, and perspective taking (see Department of Defense Instruction 5160.70 [draft], cited in Greene-Sands [7]).

The goal of the present document is to outline *interactional* skills that are useful in any cross-cultural situation, but have particular usefulness in military contexts, across various cultures, languages, and contexts. We argue that mastery of these skills will allow military personnel to successfully interact with strangers in unfamiliar environments. Pilot research using publicly available data [8] and subsequent field research for this paper have shown that there are three overarching skills crucial for successful communication in unfamiliar situations:

1. Observing and adapting to unfamiliar norms
2. Building rapport
3. Recovering from trouble in interaction

What these look like will vary from context to context, but the skills themselves can be applied across a range of contexts. The rest of this article will provide specific information about these skills.

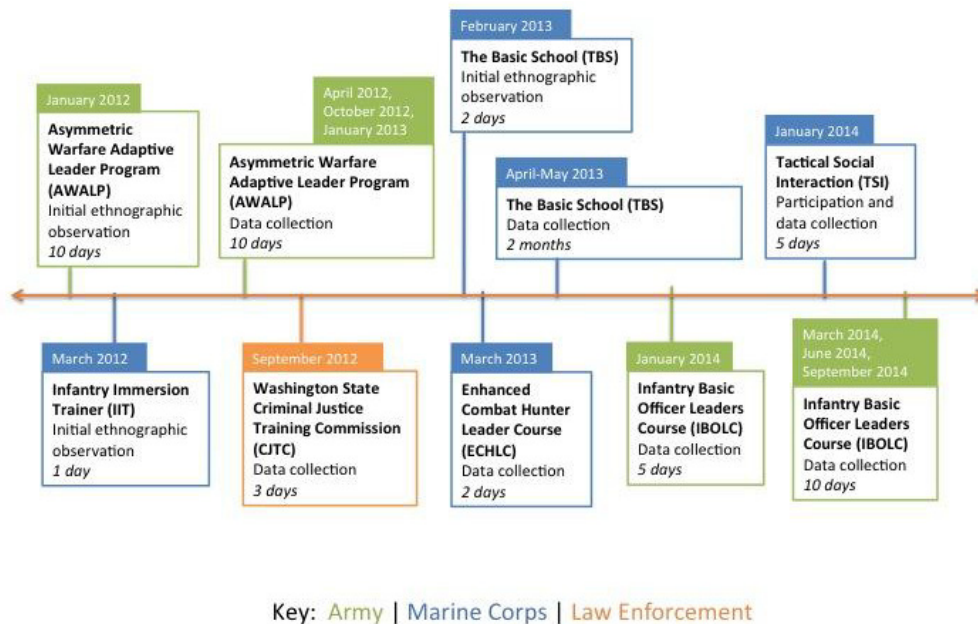


Fig. 1. Timeline of fieldwork that led to the findings in this paper.



Fig. 2. Our team uses the tablet-based SPOTLITE technology to videorecord a Marine beckoning to a role player portraying an Afghan villager.

First, we provide some information about our research methodology. In addition to drawing on decades of prior research on interpersonal and cross-cultural communication, we conducted field research at Army and Marine Corps role play-based training sites over the course of two years (2012 and 2013), including mock villages representing a range of geographic locations (including Afghanistan, India, Philippines), as well as at a police training site.¹ Each of these trainings had role play components included as part of a larger training curriculum, often as field exercises including information-gathering tasks, with or without a kinetic component. Our data collection methods included video recording interactions among role players and Soldiers, Marines, or police recruits, taking notes during and after role play scenarios, and conducting informal interviews with participants in the trainings, many of them conducted by referring to videos of the interactions themselves. To videotape interactions, we used a tablet-based tool called SPOTLITE, developed by Aptima, Inc., which allows the user to tag a video while it is being recorded. We then showed tagged sections of the video to participants in the interaction and asked for their perspective on what was occurring [9]. By speaking not only with the trainers and trainees, but also with the role players, and by integrating the input from these interviews with our own perspective as analysts, we were able to form a well-rounded view of the interactions that took place in the role play scenarios.

Once data collection was complete, we conducted detailed multimodal qualitative discourse analysis on the corpus of data, examining interaction structure, spoken language, paralinguistic cues such as volume and pitch, as well as embodied elements of communication such as gestures and body formations. Our own analysis, as well as the insights of participants and subject matter experts on particular interactions, led to the identification of three overarching sets of skills that aid military personnel in achieving more successful communication with counterparts from a different background: 1) Observing and adapting to unfamiliar norms, 2) building rapport, and 3) recovering from trouble in interaction.

2. Observing and adapting to unfamiliar norms

Communicative norms are not universal; they vary across contexts, but it is impossible to predict the exact variations in norms across all contexts. Thus, observing and adapting to variations in communicative norms is an essential skill for interpersonal success. Not every behavior is appropriate to mirror—for example there can be differences in what behaviors are appropriate based on social standing. However, skilled communicators recognize that, even though this approach has its risks, it is nonetheless a crucial first step for orienting to an unfamiliar social

¹ Training sites included the Army's Asymmetric Warfare Adaptive Leader Program, the Marine Corps' The Basic School, and Enhanced Combat Hunter Leader Course, and the Basic Law Enforcement Academy at the Criminal Justice Training Commission in Washington State.

terrain. Non-verbal communication and non-content features of language are two areas that are particularly subject to cross-cultural variation in norms, and where it is therefore useful to be able to observe and adapt.

Non-verbal communication includes hand gestures, eye contact and eye gaze, and body positioning, among other embodied elements of communication. Gestures can be used in order to aid or enhance comprehension, indicate the topic of conversation, signal an addressee, and convey meaning. Research has shown that gestures can inform, add emphasis, and function as part of situationally appropriate rituals such as greeting or departing rituals [10,11,12,13]. Eye contact is crucial for determining addressivity and engagement [14,15]. Body positioning and movement can indicate degrees of intimacy and relative affiliations of participants [16]. Observing and mirroring non-verbal communicative behaviors, especially in situations with varying norms, can be instrumental in the creation of rapport and interpersonal involvement, which contribute to successful interaction [17,18].

Role play trainings provide many examples of interactants using non-verbal communication to help overcome language barriers, using gestures to represent concepts such as money, time, numbers, actions, directions, people, objects, and so forth. There are also excellent examples of Soldiers and Marines adapting their non-verbal behavior to the local norms. In one example, a Soldier's attempted handshake was rebuffed by a role player portraying an Indian village elder, who instead expressed his farewell by putting his hands together and bowing his head in a "namaste" gesture. The Soldier then mirrored the "namaste" gesture. The next day when the Soldier came to meet the elders again, he greeted them with a "namaste" gesture rather than a handshake, demonstrating that he had incorporated this gesture into his repertoire and was able to use it in the appropriate context. In other examples, trainees have altered their body orientation and eye gaze when role players have criticized them for looking at their interpreter rather than at the role players.

Non-content features of language include aspects of speech such as turn-taking, volume, and prosody. Generally, across cultures and contexts, one person speaks at a time and there is minimal pause and minimal overlap [19].

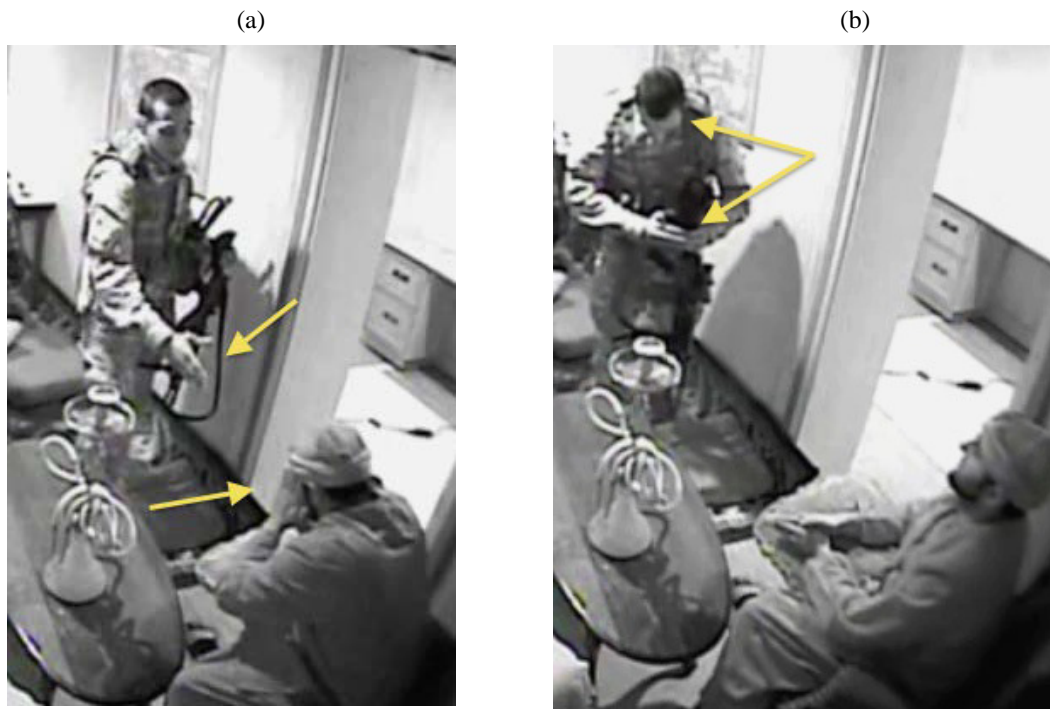


Fig. 3. (a) A soldier reaches out to shake the hand of a role player portraying the elder of an Indian village. When he sees the elder bow his head and bring his hands together instead, (b) the soldier also bows his head with his hands together.

However, in some contexts, overlapping speech can be a sign of interest and involvement in the conversation rather than interruption or evidence of a conflict of conversational interests [20,21]. Some people use backchannels, such as nodding or shaking one's head or saying "uh-huh," to demonstrate listenership while others expect these cues to signify agreement, which can lead to variation in how much backchanneling is expected in a given context [22]. Speech loudness and intonation can also vary across contexts and lead to miscommunication when one speaker's loudness or intonation is different than what is expected by another speaker [23,24].

Role play scenario data collected over the course of this study show variation in turn-taking norms, loudness and intonation. In one role play scenario, elders in a key leader engagement (a meeting between US Soldiers and important local officials) demonstrated overlapping speech—talking at the same time as each other. While we are aware of the risk in advising service members to mirror the behavior of elders speaking to each other, this example serves primarily to show that the Soldiers in this scenario learned not to take offense when an elder spoke at the same time as them since it seemed to be considered appropriate according to the local communicative norms.

In this way, this study has found that adapting to different norms in non-verbal communication and non-content features of language can help avoid causing offense to one's counterpart in interaction; it also sends the message that the participant is paying attention to the social environment and is willing to alter his or her behavior.

3. Building rapport

A second skill that this study has identified as essential in facilitating successful interaction is rapport building, the ways in which we establish positive relationships. It can lead to a successful interaction, a positive perception of one's conversational partner, and an overall successful mission. Building rapport has been shown to be associated with receiving more accurate pieces of information in forensic interviewing, better sales results, succeeding in job interviews, and gaining cooperation in conflict situations [25,26,27,28,29,30]. Many of these are directly applicable to military missions. Other research on military role play training has shown ways that body movement and vocal activity are associated with rapport building [31]. The present research project has identified a range of rapport building strategies, many of which can be implemented even without shared language. These include rapport-building rituals and the use of framing.

Rapport-building rituals include interactional moves associated with different phases of the encounter, such as greetings, introductions, explanations of purpose, gratitude, and farewells. Rituals associated with encounter phases can be verbal and nonverbal, and can affect the way the encounter unfolds, implicitly or explicitly suggesting an approach to the task at hand and the relationships being built in the encounter. Rapport-building rituals also include actions like reassuring, complimenting, small talk, and humor that can create goodwill and mission success. This study has found that the use of these types of rituals leads to more positive end states and evaluations of the interaction as successful.

In one example of the use of humor, a Marine, who is Latino, relates to the Hispanic names of many of the Filipino villagers in the role play scenario, joking upon learning that the police officer's name is Juan: "Juan? So we got Juan, not Juanito, Juan, Jose. I think I'm in the wrong country. [civilian laughter] Yeah did I go to a family reunion or something?" In this way, the Marine is able to reference similarities between Filipino and Hispanic people in a humorous manner in order to build rapport with the local police officer role player.

The way interlocutors *frame* an interaction can also contribute to rapport building. Framing refers to the lens through which we view and act within an interaction [32,33]. In order to interpret conversation the way it is intended, each participant must understand what "frame" they are in, whether it is joking, fighting, lecturing, and so forth. Framing an interaction as "help" (either providing help or seeking help) can engender goodwill among the civilian population and aid in achieving cooperation. When participants asked civilians about their problems and offered help and protection—rather than just asking questions, which can feel like an interrogation frame—they were more likely to receive cooperation.

In sum, this study found that the methods of rapport building overviewed in this section may be used to create a human connection within the larger context of tactically motivated interactions. For a discussion of rapport-building in the context of asking questions, see Damari, Rubin, and Logan-Terry [34].

4. Recovering from trouble

While adapting to differing norms and rapport building are associated with positive outcomes, trouble inevitably arises in interaction, even for skilled communicators. Interactional trouble can manifest in various ways, ranging from minor sources of trouble (such as problems with speaking, hearing, or understanding, getting someone’s name wrong, or committing a minor faux pas in nonverbal communication such as use of a handshake instead of a local greeting custom) to major ones (such as entering someone’s home without permission or using excessive physical force).

Many of the trouble sources that occur in data analyzed for this study are related to participants’ simultaneous attention to tactical or security issues along with the communicative event [35,36,37,38]. For example, members of the military may not maintain eye contact with their interlocutors if they are looking down at their notepad to write down information or looking around the room for security purposes. In many cases, civilians interpret this lack of eye contact as a sign of disengagement or lack of respect—a prominent trouble source that can inhibit interactional success. The recognition that interactional trouble has occurred and the identification of its source are important. Generally, it is preferred for the person who is responsible for the trouble to initiate and complete the recovery [39]. The analysis of military role play data conducted for this study has also shown that it is preferable for recovery to occur closer in time to the trouble source and in a relatively more explicit manner. Taking the case of lack of eye contact as an example, there are various types of recovery. Someone can explicitly address the trouble and apologize (e.g., “I’m sorry I have to keep writing while we’re talking”) or can recover by assigning a scribe (i.e. note taker) to take notes or a guardian angel to maintain security. This study has found recognition of and recovery from interactional trouble to be critical for accomplishing interactional success.

Some examples mentioned earlier also illustrate recovery from trouble. The Soldier learning the “namaste” gesture encountered and recovered from a trouble source when the elder whose hand he was trying to shake declined his handshake (see Figure 3, on page 4). The trainees who were looking at their interpreter rather than at the role players encountered trouble when this was brought to their attention by the people they were speaking with, at which point they changed their behavior.

In another example from the video corpus from this study, a Marine had been engaged in an interaction with a local police chief, but then became distracted looking around the room for his scribe. He excused himself abruptly, and called for his scribe, before conversing quickly with another Marine. He then recovered from this potential trouble source by saying “I’m sorry. I apologize,” and then picked back up on the conversation with the police chief.

In a final example, a group of Marines entered a village elder’s home without his permission. The elder was very upset, as witnessed by his raised volume, among other things. The Marines tried to recover from this interactional trouble, de-escalating the situation by framing their actions as help, and telling the elder that they need to be there to



Fig. 4. (a) A Marine turns his head and torso away from interacting with a role player portraying a local police chief in order to find his scribe. (b) He turns back to the role player with an apology acknowledging the trouble source.

watch the “bad guys.” Their de-escalation appeared successful, given that when the Marines asked whether they could stay up on the roof for another few minutes, the elder agreed. In this way, the observation and adaptation as well as the rapport building skill sets are intertwined with the ability to recover from inevitable interactional troubles. For more discussion of trouble recovery, see Logan-Terry [40].

5. Implications for training and operations

This paper has shown three broad sets of key interactional skills that can be applied to nearly any interactional context, and that are valuable for training in a culture-general approach:

1. Observing and adapting to unfamiliar norms
2. Building rapport
3. Recovering from trouble in interaction

We argue that these skills are best developed through practice. They can be integrated into existing small- or large-scale role play training, and can even be practiced in the classroom in small role play scenarios with fellow military personnel, without the fiscal and logistical burden of hiring contract role players (see Logan-Terry and Damari for an interactional analysis of various types of role play training) [41].

These skills can serve as tools to facilitate a successful interaction regardless of theater, culture, or context. At the same time, the framework presented here can also serve as a structure for organizing culture-specific training. These skills are also useful in situations that are not obviously “cross-cultural.” All individuals, regardless of “culture,” have unique sets of experiences accumulated during their lifetimes, and these experiences lead to the adoption of distinct expectations about how interaction works. Thus, in a sense, every interaction we have in our lives is cross-cultural, from a job interview after leaving the armed forces to speaking with a grocery clerk in an unfamiliar neighborhood. In all of these situations we can benefit from the ability to adapt to unfamiliar norms, built rapport, and recover from trouble.

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