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# **Building Relations in Cross Cultural Contexts: The Role of Cultural Awareness**

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#### Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to determine the role of cultural awareness in building relations within cross-cultural contexts. In accordance with research methodology, peacekeeping operations were determined as case for cross-cultural context. The data were collected by means of face-to-face structured interviews from 34 participants, who served in Turkish contingents of various international peace operations. The qualitative data were analysed according to content analysis method. Findings indicate that cultural awareness on several topics has significant contributions and pays dividends, when peacekeepers tend to build relations with local and international military personnel, local people and personnel of international organizations.

Keywords: Cross-cultural context, Culture, Cultural awareness, Building relations, Peacekeeping

#### 1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to determine the role of cultural awareness in building relations within cross-cultural contexts. Although the notion of culture has too many descriptions, it is possible to define it simply as everything that people, who belong to same society, have, think and do, such as attitudes, behaviours, ideas, values and norms (Adekola & Sergi, 2007, p. 163). Therefore when acting in cross cultural contexts, building sustainable and sincere relations with locals, colleagues from other nationalities and members of international organizations may open many doors and ease a great deal of obstacles. In this case cultural awareness of individuals may play indispensible roles. Cultural awareness covers understanding and comprehending the sociocultural context and sociocultural norms of all facts, with which relations were built (Baker, 2011, p. 64).

Peacekeeping operations host many characteristics of cross-cultural contexts, such as participants from different nationalities, people of host country, existence of several international organizations, in which possession of cultural awareness can provide advantage for individuals. Peacekeeping operations, of which aim is keeping on predetermined peace process or ceasefire and prevention, moderation and termination of hostilities between or within states, are undertaken by multinational coalitions, sometimes with warring sides' approval and conducted neutrally, in accordance with international legislation (David, 1995, p. 188). Peacekeeping operations can be explained within three generations throughout history. The mission of first generation of peacekeeping operations was basically separation of conflicting parties with lightly armed peacekeepers. Following the end of Cold War second generation of peacekeeping operations emerged, of which mission was striving for solving conflicts between disputed parties and removing the reasons of their presence in addition to previous separation role. In course of time, the rule of non-use of weapons by peacekeepers was changed with chapter seven of UN charter. In this way third generation of peacekeeping operations began, such as United Nations Protection Force and United Nations Mission in Haiti (Kühne, 1999, p. 359). In line with evolution of peacekeeping operations, Turkish military took part and succeeded in several peace operations throughout history in order to keep and sustain peaceful environment.

In this article, initially, the notions of cultural awareness and cross-cultural context of peacekeeping operations are described. Following that contributions of Turkish military to international peace operations are explained. In order to determine role of cultural awareness in building relations, research data are gathered qualitatively by means of face-to-face structured interviews from 34 Turkish peacekeepers, who voluntarily participate. Findings indicate that cultural awareness on several topics has significant contributions and pays dividends, when peacekeepers tend to build relations with local and international military personnel, local people and personnel of international organizations, such as saving time, establishing mutual trust, providing long term and sustainable friendships, enabling politeness, collaboration and mutual respect.

#### 2. Cultural Awareness

The notion of cultural awareness refers to be informed of specific characteristics and differences of other cultures with which interactions will occur in any way and for any reasons (Bonvillian & Nowlin, 1994, p. 45). For all that without sensation of own culture, awareness about others results ineffectively. Setting off from one's own culture would ease understanding of other cultures and determining of proper types of actions and discourses (Odoi, 2005, p. 17). Cultural awareness develops through phases, which are the understanding of own culture, understanding of target culture and realizing and overcoming of cultural differences, which derives from cultural characteristics respectively (Julardzija, 2011, p. 14). Cultural characteristics can be classified under aesthetics, time orientation, social institutions, religion, personal space and social behaviours (Bonvillian & Nowlin, 1994, p. 45). Individuals become aware of other parties' feelings, desires, tastes, sense of favour and talents by understanding their aesthetics values (Mack, 2012, p. 287). Apart from aesthetics, people's time orientations vary across cultures. That is, the saying of "time is money" can be perceived differently by different cultures, which indicates differences in usage and perception of time (Kaynak, Kara & Apil, 2011, p. 433). For example while in United States high importance is given to punctuality and keeping somebody waiting may be perceived as a sign of ignorance, in the Middle East it can be attributed to busyness (Bonvillian & Nowlin, 1994, p. 46). Social institutions are another cultural factor, of which awareness pays dividend. Social institutions, such as families, schools, companies and social classes in which people take place somehow, shape people's attitudes and behaviours (Prodanciuc, 2012, p. 237). For example while treating specially to a family member in organizational context is perceived as nepotism in United States, it can be perceived as an obligation in Arab countries (Bonvillian & Nowlin, 1994, p. 47). Individuals' religious beliefs also have importance in social context of people's lives. That is, cultural norms, behaviours and values as well as people's way of lives are affected by religions (Tarakeshwar, Stanton & Pargament, 2003, p. 381). That's why people, who work in cross-cultural context, have to pay attention to all religious rituals, behaviours, attitudes and discourses. For example while in some Muslim cultures men don't touch women when they greet each other, in some Christian cultures apart from gender people hug and kiss each other on the cheek. Beside that individuals have personal spaces around them, that they feel uncomfortable when others invade. Dimension of this space vary across gender, context and culture (Khan & Kamal, 2010, p. 80). For example while Americans feel uncomfortable in case of close personal distance, Africans feel amicable. Social behaviour types also vary across cultures. Namely, there are some behaviours, which have different meanings in different cultures. For example mounding food on a plate and making noises during meal can be considered impolite in United States, on the other hand the same behaviour can be considered as a sign of admiration in China (Bonvillian & Nowlin, 1994, p. 48). In light of these explanations it can be concluded that evaluating and behaving others according to one's own judgement may harm building relations in cross cultural contexts. In all these circumstances cultural awareness, which causes comprehension of differences, toleration of conflicts and mutual respect, benefits both individuals and organizations (Vigier and Le Floch, 2011, p. 44).

# 3. Cross-Cultural Context of Peacekeeping Operations

Peacekeeping operations, according to their nature, consist of several different elements from various countries. Military personnel from different ranks, services and countries, members of nongovernmental organizations, diplomats and citizens of host country constitute diversity of typical peacekeeping operations (Rubinstein, 2003, p. 29). This multicultural team undertakes several tasks such as, monitoring human rights enforcement, administrating, providing humanitarian aid and training, many of which necessitate cultural sensitivity toward differences and self awareness (Leeds, 2001, p. 92). In this case soldiers taking part in peacekeeping operations have to cop with problems of cultural differences. Various national interpretations of mission specific rules, differences in decision making and planning processes cause disharmony among multinational context of peacekeeping operations. In addition, problems and conflicts may arise between peacekeepers due to subordination to another nation's command as well. Shortcomings in execution of logistics systems also appear. Relations between peacekeepers deteriorate due to lack of cultural awareness and understanding. Therefore cultural interoperability must be the aim of all participating countries (Duffey, 2000, p. 147). Another dimension of cultural challenges that peacekeepers face is building relations with local populations, of which collapse may cause complete failure of entire mission. Dependence of peacekeepers on relations with local populations mostly derives from their own security concerns and success of operation. (Obilisteanu, 2011, p. 164; Rubinstein, 2005, p. 528). Therefore cooperation with local populations is one of indispensable factors of successful peacekeeping operations. Peacekeepers have to adapt local traditions, rituals, behaviours and avoid misjudgement of them in order to build long term and stable relations, which later on ease accomplishment of mission end state (Tomforde, 2010, p. 451). At the same time building sustainable relations with personnel of international organizations helps winning hearts and minds of local populations (Franke, 2006, p. 10). These civilian organizations have many capabilities, which generally provide a great number of services to local populations, such as food and shelter, creating employment, nurturing stable government. That's why peacekeepers tend to interact and construct sustainable relations with civilian organizations in order to benefit their capabilities and by this means ease accomplishment of operation (Pollick, 2000, p. 57). However building relations with personnel of international organizations comprises challenges that peacekeepers have to overcome. Similar to challenges experienced in relations with other military personnel, national and organizational cultural differences, coordination problems, communication difficulties and unclear mandates complicate building relations with personnel of international organizations, which can be overcame with cultural awareness (Aniola, 2007, p. 46).

# 4. Turkish Military and Peacekeeping Operations

Turkey is a secular republic, a regional industrial and military power and an independent and open society. Turkey tries to establish relations with the west and the east by creating strong bonds with both societies. Turkey also plays a "political third-party role" with a "balanced international policy" in her region (Cevik, 2005, p. 168). The Turkish military has been providing support for international peace operations beginning from its first contribution to Korea in the 1950s. Turkish military culture is

therefore influenced by the cultures of international peace missions and international organizations such as NATO, the UN and others (Varoglu, Sigri & Isin, 2005, pp. 557-563). The peacekeeping-related activities carried out by the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) currently fall under three main categories, namely unit-based peacekeeping operations, international monitoring missions and other international initiatives (Ibas, 2012).

As "Unit-Based Peacekeeping Operations", Turkey's first contribution was in the UN mission in Korea between 1950 and 1966. For the first 10 years of this period, a full brigade was deployed; thereafter, company sized units were contributed for the remaining six years. The Turkish brigade totalled approximately 5,450 personnel. The contingent had a full turnover after a period of one years' service in theatre. Between the years 1950 and 1953, a total of 15,000 Turkish military personnel served on a rotational basis. With the advent of the post-Cold War era, Turkey's involvement in peace support operations increased. The UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR), the Kosovo Force (KFOR), the Implementation Force (IFOR) and Stabilization Force (SFOR) operations in the Balkans followed. Since 1988, the TAF have actively engaged in various peace support operations led by the UN, NATO, EU, OSCE and other intergovernmental agencies in various units and scales, which are presented in Table 1 (TSK, 2012).

Balkans	UNPROFOR – Former Yugoslavia (1993-95) (UN)			
	UNPREDEP - Macedonia (1995-99) (UN)  IFOR - Bosnia and Herzegovina (1995-1996) (NATO)  SFOR- Bosnia and Herzegovina (1996 - 2005) (NATO)  Operation ALBA - Albania (1997)  Kosovo Verification Force and KFOR-Kosovo (1998- present)			
	(NATO) (law and order force)			
	EUFOR Althea - Bosnia and Herzegovina (2004- present) (EU)			
	(Separation of former warring parties and law and order force)			
Middle East	UNIIMOG - Iraq (1988-91) (UN) (Observer mission)			
	UNIKOM – Iraq, Kuwait (1991-2003) (UN) (Observer mission)			
	TIPH – Israel (1997- present) (Intergovernmental) (Observer mission)			
	UNIFIL – Lebanon (2006- present) (UN) (Reconstruction force)			
Other regions	UNOSOM-Somalia (1992-94) (UN) (Peace enforcement, reconstruction, Aid to the Civil Power)			
	OSCE Mission in Georgia - Georgia (1992-2008) (OSCE) (Observer mission)			
	UNOMIG - Georgia (1993-2009) (UN) (Observer mission)			
	UNTAET and UNMISET – East Timor (1999-2005) (UN) (Observer mission)			
	OEF – Afghanistan (2007) (NATO) (Military Assistant Mission)			
	ISAF – Afghanistan (2002-present) (NATO) (Peace enforcement, reconstruction, battle group)			
	UNMIS - Sudan (2005- present) (UN) (Observer mission)			

*Table 1: The Peacekeeping-related Activities of Turkey* 

Most of the Turkish contingents assigned to peace operations are generally composed of military and civilian elements mainly to perform logistical support, civil-military relations, civil engineering operations and humanitarian aid. On most occasions, Rules of Engagement (ROE) and national caveats permitted Turkish troops to use arms only in accordance with the principles of self-defence.

#### 4. Method

#### 4.1. Participants

A small but focused sample of 34 Turkish peacekeepers (31 Army, 3 Gendarmerie) was selected with regard to "purposive sampling" technique for our survey. All participants, who have experience of following missions; UNOMIG, ISAF, the OSCE Mission in Georgia, EUFOR Althea, KFOR, UNMIS, SFOR, TIPH, OEF in Afghanistan and UNIFIL, took part in interviews voluntarily. The sample of the study is believed to fulfil the "maximum diversification" principle of qualitative research with viewpoints from various missions and regions, in which Turkish military involved.

#### 4.2. Materials

In this study data were collected by means of structured face-to-face interviews, which comprise questions about participants' demographic characteristics, perceived cultural differences, building relations with local population, other military personnel and personnel of international organizations. Participants were not interrupted during interviews. In this way their opinions were tried to be learned thoroughly.

# 4.3. Procedure

The aim of this research is to determine the role of cultural awareness in building relations within cross-cultural context. Survey was conducted between January and March of 2013 in Ankara, Turkey. Before interviews appointments were arranged for each interviewees by calling on the phone and meetings were done in requested places. Prior to interviews a brief explanation regarding

survey was delivered to participants by interviewer. Responses of interviewees were noted below each question by interviewer. The qualitative data were analysed according to "content analysis" method (Holliday, 2007).

### 5. Data Analysis and Interpretation

#### 5.1. Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed within three phases, according to content analysis method (Vanderstoep & Johnston, 2009, p. 225): collating all the data for each dimension, developing themes among collated data for each variable and deriving meaning from themes.

# 5.2. Collation of Data for Each Dimension

Dimensions of this analysis are cultural awareness which is analysed as perceived cultural differences, building relations with local armed forces, building relations with local people, building relations with other militaries' peacekeepers and building relations with personnel of international organizations. The purpose of this phase is to arrange messy data and compare the answers of participants for each question. By this means generate threads of data for each dimension and compile raw data. For that purpose initially each answer was read carefully and collated according to questions, by designating numbers. In this way all answers were numbered, listed below each question and answer sets were created. Following that each answer set was examined in terms of relatedness, repetition and logical ties among them. As a result of this process, thread of answer sets were generated, from which themes for each dimensions were developed later on, in order to determine the role of cultural awareness in building relations.

#### 5.3. Developing Themes among Collated Data

The purpose of this phase is deriving themes for each dimension among threads of data. To that end each data thread was read a couple of times and analyzed in terms of importance and relevance with cultural awareness of peacekeepers and role of cultural awareness in building relations. Subsequently specific themes were derived among threads of answers due to their number of repetition and relevance with the cross-cultural context of peacekeeping operations. While deriving themes, answers were looked for to the question: How do these data explain roles of peacekeepers' cultural awareness in building relations? Derived themes are presented in Table 2.

Cultural Awareness	Role of Cultural Awareness in Building Relations With:			
About:	Personnel of Local Armed Forces	Local People	Other Military Peacekeepers	Personnel of International Organizations
Importance of hierarchy	Enables cooperation and coordination		Saves time	Enables sincerity
Using initiative		Enables cooperation		
Human relations	Enables friend	lliness, cooperation	n, close ties and mut	ual trust
Participation to decision making process	Enables confidence and comprehension of each other			
Relations between superiors and subordinates	Causes eagerness and friendliness		Causes eagerness and friendliness	
Perception of power distance	Eases collaboration and causes politeness		Eases collaboration and causes politeness	
Expression of opinions	Enables clarity and removes ambiguity			
Appreciation of discipline	Enables stability, respect and closeness		Enables stability, respect and closeness	
Knowledge of history	Enables establishment	of strong ties		
Operation procedures	Saves time and eases collaboration			

Table 2: Themes for Each Dimension

#### 5.4. Interpretation

The findings indicate that cultural awareness of peacekeepers have significant roles in building relations with personnel of local armed forces, local people, other military peacekeepers and personnel of international organizations. According to findings peacekeepers are aware of cultural differences of importance of hierarchy, using initiative, human relations, participation to decision making processes, relations with superiors and subordinates, perception of power distance, expression of opinions, appreciation of discipline, knowledge of history and operation procedures. Each of these topics, which peacekeepers are aware of, has specific contributions and pays dividends when peacekeepers tend to build relations with others. By this means, to some extent our findings support social balance theory in terms of success of multicultural teams, according to which, social groups

evolve to a balanced state to reach an ideal composition of multicultural teams (Heider, 1946). A moderate level of cultural divergence and cultural awareness achieves the best results in cross-cultural contexts.

According to our findings to be aware of differences in importance of hierarchy, using initiative, human relations, power distance and operations procedures in cross-cultural contexts enables and eases cooperation, collaboration and coordination. One of participants' statements explains mutual dependency and coordination clearly: "In the UNOMIG mission we had to work very closely with all sorts of humanitarian relief organizations either International Organizations or Non-Governmental Organizations and knowing their habits helped much. In Afghanistan we had our own capacity but still we tried to coordinate all humanitarian activities with international organizations; at the same time providing security to international humanitarian operations and the UN base was a key task." To be aware of principles of rules of relations between superiors and subordinates, appreciation of discipline and perception of power distance enable establishment of friendly and close relations, which is highlighted by statement of one of participants: "While in other contingents, after completion of missions they are so relaxed, there is always high power distance even during leisure times in our military, of which knowledge helps us accommodating them." Unsurprisingly to be aware of shared history with local country enables establishment of strong ties. One of participants clearly explains it: "In UNOMIG Afghanistan, it was not difficult to build strong relations with locals, who have common historical and cultural bonds with Turkey." To be aware of rules and principles of human relations of host country and allied countries also have significant contributions in terms of establishment of friendly and dependable relations. One of participants' perception simply explains benefits of both awareness of human relations and providing mutual trust: "Our country was in command in Kabul when I arrived there. And it is said that the way we commanded the operation is completely different from the way other countries commanded it. I can say that we accept the high risk with a greater tolerance than the others and behave with the local citizens in a more humanely way. Walking or driving in the streets of Kabul isn't a matter of life or death for a Turkish soldier." Besides, findings indicate that to be aware of principles of expression of opinions plays remarkable role in building relations by enabling clarity and removing ambiguity, which is important and can be varied across cultures. One of participants' interpretations of his experience: "French officers try to say some words at every meeting. I think, they intend to show that they have important opinions for every subject and they affect coalition decisions." constitute a good example for role of awareness of expression of opinions.

#### 6. Conclusion

Today's third-generation PSOs are complex, multidimensional, demanding situations, which combine military and humanitarian components together in cross-cultural contexts. Those missions so-called "intellectual warfare" require physical, mental and intellectual capability as well as cultural adaptability and awareness.

The aim of this article is to determine the role of cultural awareness in cross-cultural contexts while building relations with local military and people, other peacekeepers and personnel of international organizations. The data of this research was collected by means of structured face-to-face interviews with volunteers of 34 Turkish peacekeepers, who took part in peacekeeping operations previously. The research topic is explicated from general to specific. Therefore initially the notion of cultural awareness and cross-cultural context of peacekeeping operations were explained. Following that contributions of Turkish Military to peacekeeping operations were recounted. Later on data were analysed, interpreted and discussed.

As distinct from other studies, in this study cultural awareness of peacekeepers about importance of hierarchy, using initiative, human relations, participation to decision making process, relations between superiors and subordinates, perception of power distance, expression of opinions, appreciation of discipline, knowledge of history, operation procedures and roles of cultural awareness in building relations with local military and people, other peacekeepers and personnel of international organizations, which were not studies before, were examined. Findings indicated several important roles of cultural awareness in building relations such as, saving time, enabling close, sincere friendships and mutual trust, easing cooperation, collaboration and understanding between several actors of cross-cultural contexts.

Although our research revealed remarkable findings in terms of roles of cultural awareness in building relations in cross-cultural contexts, there are limitations, such as small sample size, absence of prior studies on the same topic and oneness of the sample. Small sample size might have caused biases while determining roles of soft skills. Absence of prior studies limits us to compare our results with other studies and oneness of our sample limits us to reveal and compare other nations' peacekeepers' ideas about roles of cultural awareness.

In future studies researchers may conduct their surveys on larger samples. In this way they can reduce possibility of biases. In addition they can conduct their surveys on different samples such as, peacekeepers of other nations or civilian samples. By this means they can reach other samples' ideas about roles of cultural awareness and compare them. Organizations, both military and civilian, may pay attention to our findings and amend their training curriculums in order to give sufficient training on topic of cultural awareness regarding prospective missions to their personnel, who will have duty in cross-cultural contexts. By this means they can take advantage of using cultural awareness and avoid unnecessary costs of unstable relations.

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