



The Complexities of Cultural Identity in the Future Operating Environment

By Major Scott LeBlanc, Canadian Army

According to the United Nations (UN), continuing urbanization and overall growth of the world's population is projected to add 2.5 billion people to the urban population by 2050. The proportion of the world's population living in urban areas is expected to increase to 66 percent by 2050, with one in eight living in a megacity. The urban environment is characterized by increasing diversity and need for careful management. The UN's *World Urbanization Prospects 2014* report highlights the fact that in some cases, poorly managed urban expansion can increase disparities and divisions that may lead to instability.¹ From a security perspective, a rise in instability is a cause of concern for the United States (US) Army, particularly when national interests are threatened.

The US Army's doctrine for urban operations (FM 3-06) acknowledges the importance of understanding populations.² However, recent operations in Iraq and Afghanistan indicate that US Army efforts were sometimes "...undercut by a lack of knowledge of the culture and people they [were] dealing with every day."³ The aim of this research is to put forth the assertion that gaining a comprehensive and early understanding of the multitude of cultural identities, which are depicted in the evolving urban environment, is critical to enhancing the US Army's ability to effectively influence populations and, in turn, dispel some of the complexities found within the megacity urban environment.

The Elements of Cultural Identity

To begin the dialogue on cultural identity, it is essential to establish a baseline understanding the concept. Culture can be defined by the "totality of that group's [a community or population] thought, experiences, and patterns of behavior and its concepts, values, and assumptions about life that guide behavior and how those evolve with contact with other cultures."⁴ Cultural identity refers to people who identify themselves with a specific cultural group that has a shared system of symbols and norms for conduct. Recognition of this identity facilitates others' understanding of the opportunities and challenges faced by individuals within a cultural group.⁵ To assist in understanding the basics of cultural identity, symbols and narratives as elements of culture will be examined in this section.

As many of our judgments are based on external observations, it should not be surprising that identities are shaped through use of symbols. According to sociologist Erik Cohen, the use of symbols in defining identity is a universal human trait. Symbols are



employed in value systems such as religion, nationalism, social ideologies, and ethnicity.⁶ There are times when symbols become so significant to an existing cultural group's identity that they stand out amongst all other symbols, dominating the narrative of cultural identity of that group. Dominant symbol systems provide "a set of stories, images, landscapes, scenarios, historical events, national symbols, and rituals which represent the shared experiences, sorrows, and triumphs and disasters which give meaning to the nation."⁷ Therefore, understanding how complex symbol systems function and transmit meaning can help with assessing the motivations that underlie a cultural group's actions. This is key to developing appropriate engagement strategies with cultural groups in urban environments.

Cultural groups use narratives as a conduit for conveying messages. Narratives can be used as an analytical framework for understanding a wide spectrum of human activities. The stories conveyed through narrative can be viewed as building-blocks of identity in that they enable cultural groups to understand who they are and what they are in relation to others external to their group.⁸ In the search to understand cultural identities, knowledge of a cultural group's narrative is "instructive for understanding how decisions might have come about, the motivations for actions, the causal assumptions drawn, and the arguments put forward, as well as a variety of other actions or variables."⁹ Therefore, it can be deduced that the future urban environment the Army may find itself operating within will witness a multitude of competing narratives, which may be further exacerbated by competition over limited resources and power.

Cultural identity and its complexity

In environments characterized by conflict and instability, the understanding of narratives takes on even greater importance. With a basic understanding of their role in cultural identity narratives, we now turn to associated complexities which are emerging as a result of increasing urbanization and ongoing globalization. The forces of urbanization and globalization, which have facilitated the development of megacities, have certainly added to the complexities of human activity. Cultural identity, environment, urbanization and globalization are all shaped and influenced by each other. Policy makers, in seeking to reduce tensions and bring appeasement amongst cultural groups, have looked to multiculturalism as a solution to problems that arise out of the tensions of these overlapping domains.

In *Multiculturalism's Double Bind: Creating inclusivity, cosmopolitanism, and difference*,¹⁰ author John Nagle describes the urban environment in terms of cities which enable various actors to come into contact and experience different cultures. It releases actors



from their "...preordained identities, allowing them to re-imagine who they are."¹⁰ These large cities, due to economic opportunities, attract multitudes of migrants. It has been found that in such cities whose cosmopolitan and diverse image is seen as a source of strength, the maintenance of cultural identities is supported and encouraged.¹¹ 'Cultural quarters' emerge as part of the city landscape.¹² Under such conditions, cultural identities no doubt thrive and can be more easily understood as they maintain their traditional foundations. Notwithstanding the harmonious image portrayed by these global cities, the reality can be more troublesome.

Large cities can set the conditions for conflict due to emerging tensions arising between competing cultural identities. Urbanization and the growth of city centers can be characterized by their high levels of inward migration, as well as conflict regarding imbalances in power, welfare and status between the various groups.¹³ Multiculturalism is an approach to accommodating cultural and ethnic differentiation in social, political, and economic arrangements.¹⁴

On the surface, such an approach seems appealing. However, a symptom of this approach has been the creation of a "...multiplicity of separate groups and identities that are in competition with each other..."¹⁵ A new approach that sought to mitigate this competition emerged in the post-9/11 period. It sought to balance embracing diversity while promoting solidarity with a common identity.¹⁶ The objective of this solidarity was to create a hybrid version of cultural identity, which would help with the maintenance of an orderly society.¹⁷ When two cultural groups are in conflict, there is a tendency among disputants to focus on their own stories of injustice. In order to mediate conflict, it is suggested that each respective group should become more conversant with their counterparts' framing of events. The aim should be to find "points of convergence between narratives and even mutual affinity that may somehow enable antagonists to shift from 'conflict-saturated' stories to stories that permit the formation of a new relationship."¹⁸

A major aim of hybridity is de-emphasizing divisions along cultural identity lines and subverting ideological movements that could be seen as disruptive.¹⁹ However, evidence indicates that it is a complex task to make any approach that seeks to honor unique cultural identity truly effective.²⁰ The above observations concerning narratives in conflict situations have great relevance particularly for the US Army whose own narratives will have to be shaped in relation to the region within which it is deployed.



Facing the Challenges of the Complex Operational Environment

With an appreciation of the complex nature of cultural identity within the megacity environment, the discussion must now look at how the US Army can improve its approach to understanding diverse urban populations. There is no panacea to immediately resolving conflicts that involve clashes between cultural identities due to the complex nature of cultures.

The imperative is ensuring that Army identities do not become impediments when dealing with other cultural identities found in an operational environment. Therefore, in seeking to overcome the challenges of operating in a highly populated and diverse urban environment, the way ahead should focus on establishing a comprehensive institutional understanding of the unique population dynamics. Understanding a city population with its diverse cultural identities will set the conditions for crafting effective operational approaches.

In operational planning, there can be a tendency to make quick and hasty assessments based on a collection of cultural data sets without developing a true understanding of a situation. This can occur when institutional and cultural biases emerge. Such biases can lead to erroneous assessments, which result in unsuitable plans. In the majority of operations, with the exception of Defense Support to Civil Authorities (DSCA) operations, the US Army will never be the resident expert when faced with trying to understand the cultural dynamics of a population.

While the US Army possesses a wealth of capabilities with which to collect data, the challenge lies with gaining an in-depth understanding of the cultural identities. The way to meet this challenge is to gain access to local knowledge from which to build understanding. Doing so will facilitate the US Army's operational approaches by relying on more than just data, but rather on insights that address deeper and more complex issues of cultural narrative.

This leads to several suggested approaches to helping the US Army achieve depth of understanding. The first is actively engaging and incorporating resident experts as part of the planning process. While the level of expertise will vary by region, reaching out to local experts such as city managers and emergency service providers would likely deliver a depth of understanding that would otherwise not be achievable. A second approach is to further establish and reinforce the regional relationships as part of the Regionally



Aligned Forces (RAF) initiative. The respective Geographic Combatant Commands (GCC) also need to reinforce their understanding of key megacities within their regions.

An element to be considered throughout all these approaches is that of timeliness. Gaining the initiative on developing understanding would ensure that the US Army is well prepared far in advance of a potential deployment to a megacity. It would pay dividends to take such measures that may alleviate the level of complexity associated with potential future operations in megacities.

A final and more important approach to alleviating the level of complexity related to populations in megacities is establishing a comprehensive institutional understanding of cultures. There should be a focus on developing a better understanding of the nature of conflicts that can emerge as a result of clashes between cultural identities. Education is the cornerstone of such an approach. This goes far beyond doing pre-deployment cultural training. It is a matter of educating in such a way that will elicit institutional change.

The educational approach can involve an array of options including studies related to language, religion, history, and politics. Due to its comprehensive and institutional nature, this approach must be aimed at educating all ranks and incorporated into all aspects of the Army institution at large. Instituting an appreciation and sensitivity towards such things as cultural identities would not only help develop operational approaches in megacity environments, but would help create more agile and adaptive leaders.

The purpose of this discussion on cultural identity was to validate the assertion that gaining a comprehensive and early understanding of the multitude of cultural identities, which are depicted in the expanding megacity urban environment, is critical to enhancing the US Army's ability to effectively influence populations and, in turn, dispel some of the complexities found within the urban environment. The introduction of the general concept of cultural identity sets the stage for understanding the complexities associated with cultural identity, particularly in light of urbanization and globalization. Armed with an awareness of the increasingly complex issues related to cultural identity, the US Army's aim should be to further develop relevant ways with which to improve its approach to understanding urban populations.

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NOTES

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2. Field Manual (FM) 3-06, Urban Operations (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2006), 2-13.
3. Defense Science Board Task Force, *Understanding Human Dynamics* (Washington, DC: Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics, 2009), 18, accessed 1 February 2015, <http://www.acq.osd.mil/dsb/reports/ADA495025.pdf>.
4. Constance DeVereaux and Martin Griffin, "Introduction: Storytelling, Narrative, and the Map of Cultural Policy," in *Narrative, Identity, and the Map of Cultural Policy: Once Upon a Time in a Globalized World* (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2013), 6, accessed 1 March 2015, ProQuest Ebrary.
5. *Ibid.*, 7.
6. Erik H. Cohen, "Symbols of Diaspora Jewish Identity: An international survey and multi-dimensional analysis," *Religion*, 38, no. 4 (2008): 295.
7. Stuart Hall, "The Question of Cultural Identity," in *Modernity An Introduction to Modern Societies*, eds. Stuart Hall, David Held, Don Hubert, and Kenneth Thompson, (Blackwell Publishing, 1996), 613.
8. DeVereaux and Griffin, "Introduction: Storytelling, Narrative, and the Map of Cultural Policy," 1.
9. *Ibid.*, 8.
10. John Nagle, *Multiculturalism's Double Bind: Creating Inclusivity, Cosmopolitanism, and Difference* (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2009), 5, accessed 25 March 2015, ProQuest Ebrary.
11. *Ibid.*, 27.
12. *Ibid.*, 33.
13. *Ibid.*, 5.
14. *Ibid.*, 6.
15. *Ibid.*, 173.
16. *Ibid.*, 13.
17. Nathan C. Funk and Abdul Aziz Said, "Islam and the West: Narratives of Conflict and Conflict Transformation," *International Journal of Peace Studies* 9, no 1 (Spring/Summer 2004): 2, accessed 3 March 2015, http://www.gmu.edu/programs/icar/ijps/vol9_1/Funk&Said_91IJPS.pdf.
18. *Ibid.*, 96.
19. *Ibid.*, 97.
20. *Ibid.*, 156-8.