

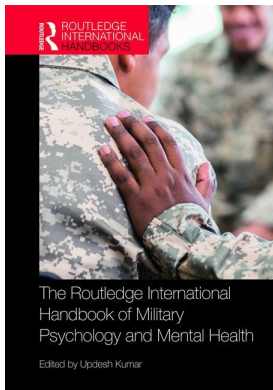
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Faizan Imtiaz, Mark Khei, Li-Jun Ji

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5

THE APPLICATION OF CULTURE AND COGNITION WITHIN A MILITARY CONTEXT

Faizan Imtiaz, Mark Khei, and Li-Jun Ji

Imagine a scene where a few soldiers are walking through a forest. When visualizing this image, do you focus your attention on the soldiers only, or do you also focus on the surrounding forest? If one soldier is walking ahead of the others, do you perceive him to be the leader, or is he one of the subordinates? In large part, the answers to these questions depend on one's cultural background.

Though culture has been defined in various ways (Chiu & Hong, 2006), most definitions emphasize culture as shared norms, customs, and meaning systems among people who inhabit a common language and life space at any given time. According to Hong and Khei (2014), culture is a special knowledge system that is (1) shared amongst interconnected individuals who are delineated by race, ethnicity, or nationality; (2) expressed in various symbols, artifacts, and social norms; (3) used to facilitate successful communication between in-group members; (4) transferred from one generation to the next; and (5) constantly being adapted to fit modern social orders.

This chapter examines how culture influences various psychosocial factors such as attention and memory, information processing and prediction, temporal focus, and goal regulation. Moreover, it aims to extend this knowledge base by examining its potential application in a military context.

Cultural influences on attention and memory

Culture influences how people attend to their direct environment, as well as how they encode and memorize this information. One of the earliest psychological studies demonstrating this effect was conducted by Segall, Campbell, and Herskovits (1966), who examined how visual illusions such as the Muller-Lyer could be perceived differently across 15 unique countries. The Muller-Lyer illusion refers to the phenomenon in which people perceive line A to be longer than line B, even though the two lines are indeed identical in length. Such an illusion is caused by the different directions of the arrow heads on the ends of the vertical lines.

Segall and colleagues found that European individuals were more likely than individuals from the Zulu tribe in South Africa to be susceptible to the illusion. Such cultural differences, according to the researchers, may be due to the more modernized world that Europeans inhabit compared to the Zulu people. Specifically, contemporary urban landscapes regularly expose

Europeans to sharp corners in their eco-cultural environments, whereas the circular huts that the Zulu tribe live in are less likely to expose tribe members to lines and angles such as the ones in the Muller-Lyer illusion. This experiment serves as one of the first empirical findings highlighting the relationship between one's culture and attentional focus.

Culture also influences how much attention individuals pay to the context. Ji, Peng, and Nisbett (2000) examined cultural differences between East Asians (including Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans) and Euro-Americans in sensitivity to context. They tested participants with the rod-and-frame test (Witkin et al., 1954), in which a rod and a frame can be rotated independently.

In this study, participants' task was to make perceptual judgments about the position of the rod, irrespective of the position of the frame. Ji and her colleagues reported that East Asians, as compared to Euro-Americans, made more errors while judging the position of the rod, indicating that they were more distracted by the surrounding frame. These findings indicated that East Asians were spontaneously more attentive to their surroundings (i.e., the frame) compared to Euro-Americans and were therefore more field dependent in their perceptual judgments.

In 2003, Kitayama, Duffy, Kawamura, and Larsen replicated and extended these findings using a frame-line task. In this task, participants were presented with a square frame with a vertical line inside of it. Next, they were given another square of a different size and were asked to draw a vertical line inside of it. In the absolute task condition, they were told that the length of the line should be identical to the original vertical line (thus ignoring visual context or field independency). In the relative task condition, they were told that the line should have the same proportional relationship with the new square as the original line had with the original square, thus taking visual context into account or field dependency. The results showed that Americans performed better on the absolute task, whereas Japanese performed better on the relative task. This suggests that the Japanese were better at incorporating contextual information, whereas Americans were better at focusing on the target, detached from its context.

Culture influences not only what people pay attention to, but also what people remember. To this end, Masuda and Nisbett (2001) presented Japanese and American participants with animated underwater scenes, followed by a question period regarding what they could recollect about the scene. In each picture, a few focal fish (large with salient colors) were moving in front of a background. Results indicated that Japanese participants reported the background and the relationship between objects in the background significantly more than American participants. In a succeeding recognition task, participants were presented with either objects that had been previously included in the underwater scenes or novel objects that were absent from the scenes, each with the original or a new background. They were then asked to indicate whether they had seen any of these stimuli before. The researchers found that Japanese participants recognized the previously seen objects more accurately when the objects were shown with the original background than when the objects were presented with novel backgrounds. This suggests that Japanese participants attended to the objects *together* with their contextual environment as a whole, treating them as interdependent. Americans' recognition, on the other hand, was less affected by the paired background, presumably because they decontextualized the objects from their background (Yap, Ji, & Hong, 2018).

Military application

A direct military application of the attentional differences across cultures involves what military personnel may pay attention to on the battlefield. Related to this, research in social psychology has demonstrated that although we often erroneously believe that we are paying attention to everything in our direct environment, human beings actually pay attention to a relatively small

percentage of their visual field (Simons, 2010). This phenomenon, called inattention blindness, usually stems from the simple fact that we are typically more motivated to pay attention to certain things, and less motivated to pay attention to others. This combined with the fact that we have finite cognitive resources that are easily depleted leads to us prioritizing certain stimuli at the cost of ignoring others. Indeed, people seldom experience the world through a truly neutral attentional focus, and there is usually some motive that is directing our attention, regardless of whether we are consciously aware of it.

A major implication of inattention blindness is that we may end up missing a significant amount of information from our visual field. Linking this to culture, the differences in attentional focus covered in the previous section may not only lead to individuals from varying cultures focusing on distinct sets of stimuli, but perhaps more importantly missing unique information from the broader environment. These ubiquities may lead to individuals from varying cultures evaluating the exact same scene completely differently. In the military, these small differences may produce massive outcomes as high-stakes decisions regarding what one is witnessing (e.g., enemy or compatriot) and how to appropriately respond (shoot or refrain from shooting) are often being made with major time constraints and under extreme pressure.

The rationale above may also be extended to international conflicts if two units are focusing on completely different aspects of the same situation. For instance, individuals from cultures emphasizing context and background may focus on the incident at hand as well as the contextual circumstances that led to it. Meanwhile, people from cultures that emphasize the focal point of interest may want to focus solely on the issue at hand.

A real-life example of the scenario above occurred in 2001, when an American spy plane collided with a Chinese fighter jet, leading to the death of the Chinese pilot. After the event, the Chinese, who tend to focus on the context and background (Masuda & Nisbett, 2001), demanded an apology from the Americans not only because of the crash itself, but also due to other historical indiscretions (e.g., American-led NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999) where the Americans had been perceived to be aggressors (Aberman, 2001). The Americans, who tend to focus more on central point of interest, discredited the importance of the previous events as they viewed them to be independent from the current incident, and refused to apologize in lieu of their assertion that their crew was not at fault in this specific case. This practical example highlights how small differences in attentional focus can have major ramifications in real-world settings. Future research should aim to tease apart these intricacies in applied contexts such as the military in order to advance our knowledge about how this variability influences our daily interactions, decisions, and relationships.

Cultural impact on perception and prediction

Culture not only influences what information we attend to, but also how we process information (Ji, 2005). For example, East Asians tend to be more dialectical in their thinking than European North Americans (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001; Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Dialectical thinkers are more inclined to view everything in the world as comprising contradictory elements (principle of contradiction), and more likely to believe that every element in the universe is in a constant flux (principle of change; Peng & Nisbett, 1999).

In a seminal study examining these issues, Peng and Nisbett (1999) reported that Chinese preferred dialectical proverbs containing contradictory elements (e.g., “Beware of your friends not your enemies”) to a higher degree compared to Americans. Moreover, Chinese favored a middle-path approach when solving social conflicts by considering the issues from both sides and trying to resolve the problem by using a compromising strategy. In contrast, Americans opted to

solve the same issues by identifying which party was more at fault and demanding change from the guilty party. Finally, Peng and Nisbett found that Chinese inclined more towards dialectical arguments and were more tolerant of opposing viewpoints when two contradicting positions were presented, whereas Americans favored logical arguments and responded to contradictory statements by gravitating towards the one that they believed to be more correct and polarizing their views. These findings illustrate how Eastern individuals tend to be more holistic in the thinking styles, while Western individuals gravitate more towards an analytical approach to problem solving.

Another way in which culture shapes dialectical thinking is by influencing people's predictions about the future. Ji, Nisbett, and Su (2001) presented American and Chinese participants with hypothetical scenarios, and asked them to make an estimation at the likelihood of an opposite future event taking place. They found that Chinese participants, compared to American participants, predicted a greater likelihood that the future would be different. For example, Chinese participants predicted greater likelihoods for two kids fighting in kindergarten to become future lovers, and for a chess champion to lose in the next game in the midst of winning streak. Along the same lines, Americans and Chinese also made different judgments about the stock market (Ji, Guo, Zhang, & Messervey, 2009). That is, when a stock was going up, Americans believed that it would continue to rise, and when a stock was going down, they believed that it would continue to decline. In contrast, Chinese participants expected that the opposite trend would occur (i.e., an upward-moving stock would be more likely to experience a decline in the future). These findings indicate that culture has a major bearing on expectations and the belief that a situation can change and transform over time.

Military application

One intriguing military application for dialectical thinking across cultures is in the realm of stress management, where researchers have long argued that one's subjective perception of a situation is often just as important, if not more important, than the objective reality of the circumstance (James, 1984). Indeed, contemporary research has also shown that the body's physiological response to stress is influenced significantly by how one subjectively perceives the stressor. Specifically, in a large-scale ($n = 28,753$) prospective study examining the longitudinal impact of stress, Keller et al. (2012) reported that individuals who experienced a significant amount of stress, and believed that the stress would have a major impact on their health, experienced a 43% increased risk of premature death, even after controlling for socioeconomic status, health behaviors, and access to healthcare.

Relating these findings to the military, there is no doubt that challenge, adversity, and suffering play an inherent role in the military experience (Imtiaz, Khei, & Ji, 2017). As for coping with this stress, researchers and clinicians alike have argued that meaning-making plays a crucial role in how one acclimatizes to highly stressful situations (Davis, Wortman, Lehman, & Silver, 2000; Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Park & George, 2013). That is, voluntarily engaging the stressful experience (as opposed to ignoring or suppressing it) in an attempt to understand the experience, resolve the crisis, make sense out of what happened, and find some benefits in it can be both meaningful and curative (Calhoun, Cann, Tedeschi, & McMillan, 2000).

Interestingly, this meaning-making process may be mediated by culture, as dialectical and non-dialectical belief systems may lead to individuals perceiving their stressful experiences in unique ways. For instance, an individual who approaches a stressor with a dialectical mindset may apply the principles of contradiction and change in order to extract optimism from the situation. Indeed, if one believes that there is a strong possibility that the negative experience

will transform into a positive one in the future, this may allow a person to stay the course during times of difficulty. Likewise, a dialectical belief that things exist in a perpetual cycle of change and renewal may lead to one realizing that similar negative experiences are likely to reoccur in the future, and thus whatever can be gained from the current experience may be useful in navigating future stressors.

Though there may be significant stress management benefits associated with adopting a dialectical mindset, it must be noted that there may also be an alarming dark side to applying this mindset in times of war. Specifically, in wars of attrition, a dialectical mindset may increase one's willingness to remain engaged in a war, even in the face of bleak prospects. Thus, the same principles of contradiction and change that lead to enhanced optimism in times of difficulty could also lead to armies remaining in battles for too long, with potentially catastrophic results.

A closer examination of Japan, a dialectical culture, and the events that unfolded at the end of the Second World War provides credence to this notion. After the absolutely devastating effects of the first atomic bomb on the city of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, the Japanese did not immediately surrender in spite of the fact that it was clear that they had virtually no path to victory (Stimson & Truman, 1947). This prolongment led to the United States deciding to drop a second atomic bomb on the city of Nagasaki three days later, a decision that raised the number of already high casualties to well over 100,000 people (Stimson & Truman, 1947). Though world wars are incredibly complicated and we are by no means arguing that the Japanese's dialectical beliefs were the sole reason for them not surrendering earlier, we are highlighting that this important element of culture undoubtedly influences our thinking and decision-making in everyday life, and there is no reason to believe that it would not have a similar impact in military settings. As such, it is our hope that these ideas can stimulate future empirical research devoted to addressing these incredibly important questions.

In contrast to the dialectical approach, a non-dialectical mindset may lead to military personnel becoming more confident in times of prosperity if they believe that things will continue to progress in a linear manner. However, this same approach could also backfire and spin individuals into a perpetual cycle of despair when things are not going well. Unfortunately, empirical research devoted to answering these important questions is sparse. In one of the few studies related to these issues, Grossman and Kross (2010) investigated the role of culture in how people reflect on their negative affect and experiences. The researchers reported that individuals from an interdependent culture (Russia) tended to adopt a more external perspective when reflecting on their negative experiences, which led to less-detrimental outcomes and more adaptive coping. In contrast, individuals from an independent culture (America) showed a tendency to get more absorbed in their emotions, which led to less-adaptive outcomes. These findings suggest that culture may shape coping and resilience in meaningful ways, and more research in this field is required, especially in how factors such as dialectical and non-dialectical thinking may influence the way people deal with their negative affect and experiences.

Impact of culture on Temporal Focus

Cultural differences in attention may also lead to different orientations towards the past and the future. Compared to European North Americans, East Asians' greater attention to the context and background in perceptual tasks (e.g., Ji et al., 2000; Masuda & Nisbett, 2001) may be generalized to the temporal dimension, where the past and future serve as the context or background for the present. Indeed, researchers have found that, compared to European North Americans, East Asians attend more to the past and future, perceive the past and future to be closer to the present, and have greater access to the past and future (Ji, Hong, Guo, Zhang, Su, & Li, in press).

For instance, Ji and colleagues (2009) examined how much consideration Canadian and Chinese individuals gave to past and present information when solving a hypothetical criminal case about theft. Results indicated that Chinese participants perceived information that was related to the past (e.g., “three years ago, one student spent all her money on lottery tickets”) to be more pertinent to the present decision compared to Canadians. In a follow-up study, the researchers also found that Chinese participants reported significantly more details about events that occurred in their past compared to Canadians. Lastly, Chinese participants also perceived the past to be more connected to the present compared to Canadian participants, even though the actual temporal distance did not vary. That is, the same objective time period (e.g., 1 year ago) felt subjectively closer for the Chinese participants. Together, this research highlights how the past may be perceived as more relevant, easier to recall and closer in subjective time to the present for Chinese participants.

Cultures differ not only in how much they attend to the past and the future, but in also in how much they value these temporal periods. To this end, research has shown that Western individuals value the future more than the past. Specifically, Guo, Ji, Spina, and Zhang (2012) reported that European-Canadians were more appreciative (as indexed by the amount of money they spent on a thank-you gift) of a favor that an acquaintance was scheduled to do for them in the future compared to an identical favor that was done in the past. In similar research, Caruso, Gilbert, and Wilson (2008) demonstrated that American individuals placed a higher value (\$125) on work that they imagined doing in the future compared to the exact same work done in the past (\$62). Moreover, these findings emerged in spite of the fact that participants did not perceive the past and future work to be different in terms of difficulty and demand. These findings highlight that the future is perceived as intrinsically more valuable for individuals in the west.

In trying to pinpoint why Western individuals appear to be more future oriented, researchers have pointed to the fact that the future is often referenced as relatively superior to the past in Western culture (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961). As to why the future is framed more positively than the past in the West, Van Boven and Ashworth (2007) have postulated that anticipating future positive emotions may be the driving factor behind this effect. Across a series of experiments, the researchers found that North American individuals reported more intense positive emotions while anticipating a positive event in the future (e.g., upcoming thanksgiving dinner) than recollecting the same positive event in the past. Similarly, Caruso et al. (2008) reported that reflection over future events produced significantly greater affect compared to reflection over past events in American subjects, indicating that Western individuals tend to display stronger emotional reactions when looking forward than when looking backwards.

In contrast to their Western counterparts, Eastern individuals tend to place a higher value on the past compared to the future. For instance, Guo et al. (2012) reported that Chinese individuals were more grateful for a hypothetical favor that an acquaintance had done for them in the past compared to a similar favor done in the future, indicating that they perceived the past favor to be relatively more valuable. The researchers also reported that Chinese individuals placed a higher monetary value on work that was done in the past compared to the same work scheduled to be done in the future. Along the same lines, Levinson and Peng (2007) asked East-Asian and North American participants to place a monetary value on antique furniture that had been valued at \$350 USD in 1985. Compared to the North American participants, whose evaluations were 2.83 times greater than that of the original 1985 value, East-Asians estimated that the chair would now be worth 12.02 times more than the 1985 value. Similarly, research in consumer behavior has shown that Chinese participants tend to display significantly more brand loyalty than Americans towards companies that they have done business with in the past (Robinson, 1996), a proclivity that some researchers have attributed to their robust orientation towards the past (Yau, 1988).

In trying to understand why Eastern cultures may have this positive affinity towards the past, one can begin by examining the broader culture, which has always valued its rich history and held the past in high regard (Brislin & Kim, 2003). This is reflected in the respect that is often given to ancestors and communal traditions (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961). Another potential explanation involves differences in temporal focus, which is the amount of attention individuals devote to the past and the future. Specifically, Guo et al. (2012) have postulated that Eastern cultures value the past more because they allocate more attention towards the past, while Western cultures value the future more due to the greater attention they devote to the future. Evidence for this argument comes from the fact that when induced to focus on the future, Chinese begin to value the future more than the past. Likewise, when induced to focus on the past, Euro-Canadians begin to value the past more than the future. The fact that these natural inclinations can be reversed suggests that temporal focus may indeed be an important determinant of how cultures value different time periods.

Military application

Military commanders may use cultural idiosyncrasies in temporal focus to motivate their troops to “fight for their future” or “fight for their tradition” Based on the literature outlined in the previous section, we might expect Western soldiers to respond more favorably to calls advocating for the future, while Eastern soldiers may respond better to similar calls framed with a focus on past history and tradition. Research by Van Boven and Ashworth (2007), which has demonstrated that Western participants show greater positive emotions when anticipating the future versus recollecting about the past, certainly gives credence to this argument.

Related to this, Heine and Lehman (1995) reported that, compared to Japanese participants, Canadian samples were significantly more likely to be more optimistic about the future, sometimes even to unrealistic degrees. Interestingly, the researchers also found that Canadians were actually more optimistic (i.e., they felt relatively invulnerable) when there was an element of threat associated with a future event. Lastly, this unbridled optimism further led to the Canadians perceiving that they had more control over the future event, especially as the perceived severity of the threat increased. As many military operations often contain an inherent element of threat and danger, these findings may prove to be particularly important in this setting, and more research on this question is certainly warranted. If Western militaries can tap into these narratives strategically and motivate their personnel to think about the future success that would come about through a successful operation, this may drastically improve morale and performance on the battlefield. East Asians, on other hand, may respond better when prompted to think about the lives they have left behind and that are waiting for them upon successful completion of their missions.

Culture and regulatory focus

An interesting final extension of the differences in temporal focus across cultures involves the pursuit of various social goals. To this end, regulatory focus theory argues that individuals vary in their pursuit of promotion and prevention goals in order to accommodate their unique self-regulatory strategies and needs (Higgins, 1997). In other words, while some tend to focus more on promotion or approach goals (i.e., chasing your aspirations and trying to maximize gains), others find greater motivation in prevention or avoidance goals (i.e., fulfilling your obligations and trying to minimize potential losses).

Relating this to culture, Lee and colleagues reported that North Americans preferred promotion goals, while their East Asian counterparts preferred prevention goals (Lee, Aaker, &

Gardner, 2000). As it relates to the military, these differences may have important implications on how leaders go about motivating and getting the best out of their units, an application that we outline with more detail in the next section.

Military application

Cultural differences in regulatory focus may influence the overarching goals that military units adopt. For instance, should leaders aim to go for great achievements and accomplish unprecedented feats, or simply carry out their operations in a manner such to limit potential harm and not disappoint others? The literature on regulatory fit theory would suggest that the answer may depend on the cultural dispositions that individuals bring to the operation. To this end, Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, and Norasakkunkit (1997) asked American and Japanese participants whether experiences that were classified as successes or failures were more important to their self-esteem. The researchers found that American participants believed that success experiences (e.g., “getting a good grade on a test when I study hard”) were more pertinent to their self-esteem than failure experiences (e.g., “when your employer tells you that you are not performing well on the job”). In contrast, Japanese participants actually rated the failure experiences (e.g., “when I was jilted by someone I was thinking of marrying”) as more relevant to their self-esteem than success experiences (e.g., “when I remember a difficult job in the past that I managed to carry through”). Furthermore, findings also revealed that Americans believed that their self-esteem would increase more after successful experiences than it would decrease following failure, whereas the Japanese showed the opposite pattern by reporting that their failures would be more impactful to their self-esteem than their successes.

These results are in line with other research illustrating that many East Asian cultures do not share the same desire for admiration and positive self-regard that is commonplace in the West, and a self-critical focus centered around not making egregious errors and maintaining overall harmony is more desired in these individuals (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999). Together, these findings suggest that aiming for grandeur is by no means a universal motive, and many individuals may perform better in every tasks (e.g., school, work) when simply trying to avoid failure. This assertion has been supported in other domains such as healthcare, where Uskul, Sherman, and Fitzgibbon (2009) found that Western individuals, who had a stronger promotion regulatory focus, responded more favorably to gain-framed health promotion messages, while Eastern participants, who had a stronger prevention regulatory focus, responded more positively to loss-framed messages. Relating this back to our discussion, it seems that Western militaries would be well served to motivate their teams by encouraging them to strive for major victories and success, whereas Eastern militaries may be able to achieve a similar positive outcome by motivating their squads to simply get the job done in order to avoid falling short. Again, researchers should aim to empirically test these hypotheses across diverse military units.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to bridge the gap between existing research on cultural differences in cognition and its potential applications in a military context. Generally, culture can be defined as the shared norms and values of a certain group of individuals that sets them apart from other groups. Much research has been conducted to compare cross-national differences in cognition, but little research has examined the implications for military, which is arguably a culture by itself. Effective knowledge translation of this work will ensure that it has a meaningful impact on international military operations around the world, the importance of which cannot be

overstated in a world rife with global conflict. Successful consideration and implementation of this knowledge may prove to be a critical step in enhancing international negotiations and eradicating some of the most important issues in the world today.

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