

The Case for Sociocultural Situational Analysis in Intelligence Assessments

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Introduction

The risk of social unrest created by fragile states and extremist ideologies, the use of cyber technologies to disrupt democratic institutions, and the use of social media to develop communities across borders are a few of the global currents that have significant implications for national security priorities and intelligence analysis. The assessment of these situations requires a host of well-honed reasoning skills and abilities, along with a set of methods to make sense of and to discern meaning from the activities occurring in other parts of the world that do not involve U.S. based experiences (Sands & Haines, 2013). Current forms of analysis often treat culturally relevant considerations as peripheral and as side-bar considerations. In order to understand people and groups with substantially different sociopolitical histories, backgrounds and value systems, intelligence professionals need to have some fluency with sociocultural concepts. Schmorrow & Boiney (2014) also note that analysts should possess a clear set of advanced cross-cultural cognitive competencies to make sense of how cultural values impact motivation and behaviors. With these principles in mind the purpose of this paper is to explore: *What does it mean to use a sociocultural lens for global situation analysis, intelligence assessments and the provision of analytic judgments?*

A sociocultural perspective is multi-disciplinary and offers a range of methodologies, models, and theoretical perspectives that can be used to improve understanding of cross cultural and intercultural experiences of individuals, groups, communities, and nations (Stevenson, 2016). Organizing the literatures to discern what we know about sociocultural factors, including world views; identity development (e.g., ethnic identity; gender motivations); cognitive processes, especially ways of knowing from the cultural-insider point of view; group processes; and uses of knowledge management systems could be valuable for the intelligence and broader national security communities. For example, it is vital to explore: (1) the cross-cultural management of information processes and knowledge sharing between countries (cf., Fink & Holden, 2007); and (2) the role of acculturation and adaptive processes of people migrating to new environments with different governance systems and institutions, and to understand whether host communities are prepared to receive individuals with contrasting value systems.

Global Context: Key Challenges and Needs of the Intelligence Community

Globalization and technological innovation have transformed countries, communities, and the lives of individuals in the US and in every corner of the world. These powerful forces of change are upending traditional ways of working and living, reshaping economies and the workforce, and creating instant communication and virtual communities around shared world views. At the same time, demographic trends and the mass migration of people – including refugees fleeing war and violence and economic migrants seeking opportunities for a better life – are changing the very fabric of communities and cultures in many countries. The shift of demographics in the millions (Connor, 2016) has created a rift amongst some groups of citizens who fear the presence of “others” as causing economic hardship and changing the value systems of their regions.

It is no longer necessary to be formally affiliated with a state sponsor or even radical groups to become a “soldier” for an extremist cause – individuals who are primed for acts of terrorism merely identify with certain messages and call for violence and carry them out at the local level. Moreover, recent incidents leave Western security experts increasingly worried about low-tech, almost spontaneous attacks by extremists who are not directed by terror entities or in some cases, known to intelligence agencies. Additionally, there is increased concern of the use of social media to lure females to join these causes and to serve as operatives who tend to stay in the shadows until it is too late as they usually participate in suicide missions (Speckhard, 2015).

A Sociocultural Framework for Analyzing both External and Internal Risks

Understand the development of beliefs and social identity from an intercultural perspective.

The US intelligence community is struggling to understand and address the triple threats of rising extremism (at home and abroad), radicalization of youth and other disaffected individuals, and acts of terrorism (including lone wolf). Sociocultural frameworks are highly relevant and valuable tools for understanding the motivations that drive active pursuit or acceptance of the use of violent means by these types of individual non-state actors. Amongst the many reasons, well-known terrorism theorists (e.g., Krieger & Meierrieks, 2014) have noted that one of the key characteristics of people who commit acts of violence against other human beings is that they build *ethnocentric ideologies that emphasize the superiority of their group and act against those representing a threat to their system of values*. This finding corresponds to the case-study work of Post (2007) who notes that the terrorist mindset is developed early in the socialization process,

and attempt to repair a fragmented or compromised psychosocial identity through collective maladaptive actions. Further, he notes that terrorists are compelled by absolutist or polarizing rhetoric, thus, the capacity for cognitive resilience and responsiveness to change is thwarted.

Other scholars (e.g., Schwartz, Dunkel, & Waterman, 2009) who explore terrorism emphasize that terrorists are not in search of an identity but seek to express a belief system that is already developed. However, there is agreement that terrorists believe that they have moral superiority to those being attacked and that belief systems are based on dichotomous (“us versus them”) constructs. The interaction between the roles of cultural, social, and personal identity in terrorism requires more research and analysis.

Concomitantly, a number of terrorism experts have found that some people with radical ideas or who justify violence – more often than not – do not engage in terrorism (Rabasa, Pettyjohn, Ghez & Boucek, 2010). Yet, it is critical to understand: (1) how individuals move from radical ideas to violent acts, and why; and (2) the nature of support for creating pathways out of terrorism (e.g., Horgan, 2008). In this regard, Post comments that more cross cultural research is needed.

Synthesize the research on transition from homogeneous to multicultural environments. By virtue of the ecosystem of a host culture and its embedded value system, post-migration stressors present challenges that are faced by immigrants and refugees. Loss of social status, supportive networks, and a sense of not belonging are components of acculturative stress. *The importance of belonging, especially if individuals are experiencing isolation from a social milieu, cannot be underestimated.* However, it is a mistake to think that lone wolves and terrorist activity come solely from external influences (Hamm & Spaaj, 2015). It appears that a white supremacy motive is the primary driver for terrorism within the United States followed by other personal and political grievances. In this regard lone-wolf terrorist activity and racial/ethnic group dynamics are a growing concern and are a conundrum for the social and behavioral sciences as theories and their application are underdeveloped. Although the national security community has recognized the relevance of sociocultural frameworks, there are noticeable gaps. The extant national security literature on sociocultural factors includes certain kinds of epistemic views, such as anthropology and sociology, yet there is little attention to psychological or social psychology frameworks *from a cross-cultural or intercultural viewpoint.* To formulate responses to radicalization processes and intercultural dynamics it is essential to understand the

evolution of beliefs from a psychological perspective (e.g. Perry, 1981); the relationship between trust and group membership in multicultural contexts (Williams, 2001); acculturation processes, including threats to social identity no matter the race or ethnic category (e.g., Santos & Umaña-Taylor, 2015); and the readiness of host cultures to integrate populations with different socialization and value systems. New kinds of communities however are emerging---and these are virtual---competing for control of social narratives that have appeal to disengaged factions.

The role of social media during cultural transition. Many social movement scholars (e.g., Oliver & Johnston, 2000) note that the ubiquitous use of social media has made it easier to attract potential acolytes by constructing messages that appeal to basic collective strivings (Borum, 2011). Some virtual relationships are built through the use of emotionally-grounded messages that can “exploit moral outrage and feelings of humiliation based on political events” (Sieck, 2011, p. 4). These communications can offer solutions to experiences of cultural stress that vilifies the community in which a person is attempting to engage in everyday life, spawning the actions of a lone wolf. More inquiry is needed about the role of social media in belief development and maintenance through *tele-cocooning* (Kobayashi, Boase, Suzuki, & Suzuki, 2015) and in fake news in anti-diversity propaganda.

Improving Absorption Capacities inside the Intelligence Community

While most of the attention within the US intelligence apparatus has been focused on external national security threats arising from extremism and radicalization, there has been less focus on the challenges that the intelligence community faces *internally* in absorbing new types of approaches and knowledge. The intelligence community has dominant epistemic preferences that should be addressed in order to implement sociocultural frameworks for improved analysis.

The ability to identify explanations and assimilate new information, especially in conditions of uncertainty, requires absorptive capacity. *Absorptive capacity* refers to “the ability to identify, assimilate, and exploit knowledge from the environment” (Lane, Koka & Pathak, 2006, p. 833). The world views of national security analysts directly influence how portfolios are analyzed, affect the definition of indications and warning (I&W) and, ultimately defines what actions are recommended to policy decision-makers. “World views” are a set of philosophical assumptions, beliefs and values about the human condition, and the basis for human interests that explain how the world is the way that it is. These views form knowledge development and knowledge

management frameworks that guide thought and action, and determine how information is evaluated and prioritized (Pauleen, Wu, & Dexter, 2007). The ability to learn and apply new models can create new opportunities for improved collection, pattern recognition, and judgments. Frequently, heuristics based on old knowledge become habits even though the application of new knowledge frameworks could improve assessments of situations. There are prescribed ways of analyzing situations within the intelligence community (cf., Hastie, 2011). As noted by Moore (2007), inherent in national security analyses are two critical goals: (1) Mindfully constructing judgments for the purpose of problem clarity; and (2) improving national security analysts' critical reasoning skills by understanding the filters that are used to form their judgments. According to Johnson & Berrett (2011) the importance of the filters cannot be underestimated because it appears that behind most significant intelligence failure is a form of cognitive bias. Heuer (1999) notes that because of "a prevailing mind-set or mental model", the sources of many intelligence errors are related to discounting, misinterpreting, ignoring, rejecting, or overlooking important information. Additional models that are related to world view variation and multicultural dynamics are needed. The narrative needs to be more epistemically inclusive if future solutions are to be realistic, credible and sustainable (Trout, 2013). It is important that these models are sufficiently absorbed and continually applied in practice.

Implications for the US Intelligence Community and National Security

Crafting an environment for epistemic plurality and inclusion. Since 9/11 there has been increased realization that the bandwidth for intelligence analysis needs to be expanded. Given that intelligence situations are anchored in a global environment it requires that analysts and national security policy decision makers understand varieties of worldviews and multicultural dynamics. The instrumental value of a wider epistemic framework involving sociocultural theories and concepts from a processing point of view will: (1) help analysts to explain situations from more than one model; (2) result in multiple evidence-based arguments that can be compared and contrasted; and (3) trigger further questions or highlight missing information. Overall, sociocultural analytical capacity can assist the intelligence and national security communities in important ways by improving objectivity, timeliness, and increasing clarity about known and unknown threats in an increasingly complex multicultural world.

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