

## Between practicing and rehearsing: cultural awareness challenges in the military

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### Abstract

*In this article, we confront the tradition that understands cultural awareness training as the individual acquisition of intercultural competences with recent developments in the theorizing of culture and education. The question we ask is how to understand cultural awareness training if dealing with cultural diversity is not depending on individual competences but rather on the interaction between people on the ground. We will take three steps to discuss this point. In a first step we consider the challenge of cultural diversity for military organizations. The second step consists in a reflection on the notion of intercultural competences and the idea that intercultural competences can be acquired by individuals. In the third step we develop an alternative understanding of the preparation for intercultural interaction, based on Sennett's distinction between practicing and rehearsing (Sennett, 2012).*

**Keywords:** cultural awareness; intercultural competences; diversity; military training; small culture paradigm

### Introduction

Cultural awareness training is not a new phenomenon in military organizations (Haddad, 2010; Winslow, Kammhuber, & Soeters, 2004; Wunderle, 2006). Starting from the so-called area studies and simulation games and the first research conducted in the framework of the intercultural management (Hofstede, 1980; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1993), military organizations have increasingly employed various training methods to prepare their staff for diverse operational contexts. Mainly after the negative events in some operations, respect for diversity was considered as an added value; because it would develop everybody's potential for the organization and

contribute to the operational strength of the military. The challenges related to cultural diversity will remain paramount and will continue to influence any military organization, both internally and externally (Manigart & Resteigne, 2013). It is therefore important to ask how cultural awareness training can be optimised and more attuned to diversity. In this article, we confront the tradition that understands cultural awareness training as the individual acquisition of intercultural competences with recent developments in the theorizing of culture and education (Calhoun & Sennett, 2007; Hodkinson, Biesta, & James, 2008). Within social and cultural pedagogy, it is more and more argued that dealing with cultural diversity is something that defies the language of learning developed in the literature on intercultural competences and attempts to measure the added value of those competences (Biesta, 2005). The measurement of intercultural competences and their framing in terms of added value for human resources management are at odds with what is exactly at stake when we deal with cultural diversity. Intercultural competences refer here to a skill set that includes awareness of one's "self" in the context of culture, an open mind towards and appreciation of diversity and other "operationally" relevant cultural elements like the physical environment, the economy, the social structure, the political structure, and belief systems (Watson, 2010, p. 94). Because those intercultural competences are very often considered as a more generalizable skill set than the language proficiency, two separate training paths tend to be maintained in military organizations.

Based on these objections, we try to formulate some tentative answers to the critique of cultural awareness training understood as learning intercultural competences. The question we ask is how to understand cultural awareness training if dealing with cultural diversity is not depending on individual competences but rather on the interaction between people who determine outcomes that are always somewhat unpredictable and not fully predefined. We will take three steps to discuss this point. In a first step we consider the challenge of cultural diversity for military organizations. The second step consists in a reflection on the notion of intercultural competences and the idea that intercultural competences can be acquired by individuals. In the third step we develop an alternative understanding of the preparation for intercultural interaction, based on a distinction between practising and rehearsing (Sennett, 2012).

## **The challenges of cultural diversity**

We first ask ourselves why military organizations have to engage in cultural awareness training and why cultural diversity appears to be such a huge challenge. There are internal and external reasons for military organizations to engage in cultural awareness training. First, there is the undeniable growth of internal diversity. Due to the difficulty to find sufficient numbers of new recruits, many military organisations have opened their door to women, civilians, contractors and even non-nationals. A second reason for engaging in cultural awareness training is the increasing prevalence of external diversity. This is the result of increased multinational cooperation where we can find on the ground a division of labour between participating countries (Resteigne & Soeters, 2010). Challenges not only arise from different cultural values or norms, but equally from different procedures, equipment and daily routines. The external necessity for cultural awareness training emanates also from the difficulties of current battle spaces which are increasingly complex and populated by a wide range of groups motivated by various intentions. Far beyond the traditional logic of friend and enemy, military

organizations need to be able to deal with cultural, ethnic and linguistic differences among the local population (Winslow et al., 2004). Success in operations is only possible by knowing and approaching different groups in appropriate ways. A certain amount of cultural sensitivity is indispensable to avoid unnecessary hostilities and solve conflicts in operations.

Cultural diversity is challenging because of the increased internal and external necessity to deal with differences. It would however not be much of a deal if we were only able to grasp and define what is going on when we deal with cultural diversity. This is however not the case. This challenge is related to the fact that the experience of cultural diversity is confusing and not fully understandable. Cultural differences defy clear understanding, because they refer to confrontations playing out at the level of our basic understanding and sense making of the world around us. The experience of cultural diversity is an experience that subverts our understanding of the world. The confrontation with mere differences is never neutral; it affects our beliefs and emotions (Ramaekers, 2010). That means, borrowing the words of Nancy (1997), that cultural diversity can be experienced, but this experience cannot be appropriated. Appropriation means that we know and define some phenomenon, that we understand and objectify it, can make predictions and specify how it relates to the rest of the world. Appropriation implies that we can take a distance from a phenomenon and that we can define appropriate reactions in an objective way. This is however not possible for intercultural interactions, because these experiences affect ourselves and involve our subjectivity. How we look at the world and how we look at ourselves is being touched by the presence of other ways of sense making and identity building. The fact that we ourselves are at stake in experiences of diversity can generate a certain amount of stress and anxiety.

It is not possible to fully understand others, just as it is not possible to fully understand ourselves (Blasco, 2012). It is therefore also not fully possible to define how we relate to others and how we have to deal with others. There is always a kind of essential openness. Culture is always unfinished and is continually happening (Calhoun & Sennett, 2007). It is not fully possible to predict how intercultural relations will evolve and how any predefined result can be guaranteed. Checklists and detailed instructions will not be a guarantee to success. This has to do with the fact that people are all the time making sense of themselves and the world around them. Sense making is a non-closed and non-ending practice, which makes checklists and detailed instructions always running behind facts. Making new sense is something that happens to us and to others, without being in full control. The confrontation with cultural diversity is the confrontation with another worldview and another practice of sense making. The fact that we see the world around us through cultural lenses (Arai, 2006) affects our own sense-making and our own understanding, which leads to new sense making and possibly to new checklists and instructions. Something happens to us in intercultural interactions, we see ourselves and the world around us with different eyes. And others too, will experience something unforeseen in the confrontation. The intercultural experience is playing out at the level of understanding and beliefs; it results sometimes in unexpected behaviours, but not automatically in mutual understanding and agreement (Todd, 2011). This brings us to another way of describing the challenge ahead. Even if some authors have tried to identify a certain degree of homogeneity and common cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1980; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1993), cultures and, consequently, cultural differences *change* over time and in every place. New experiences and increased interactions with culturally diverse groups lead to

alterations in understanding and worldview, and often to unpredictable behaviours. One problematic misunderstanding in theory and practice is that cultures are too easily considered as homogeneous and fixed entities. Cultures are often seen as “a fairly static, contained and identifiable object” (Van Oord & Ken Corn, 2013, p. 2). In this reasoning, cultures are seen as a determinant of human understanding and behaviour. Culture is supposed to determine people’s actions, perceptions, routines, responses. This view makes a distinction between culture on the one hand and behaviour, understanding, action on the other hand. Culture becomes something underlying but unaffected by experience and interaction. The consequence of such a view is that intercultural experiences and interactions do not change the culture which is imagined as being stable. Such interpretation of culture can be defined as an essentialist view or the large culture paradigm (Holliday, 1999, 2000). Descriptions of national, ethnic or religious communities with their traditions, norms and values belong to the large culture paradigm. Such descriptions are often presented during the pre-deployment training in military organizations (e.g. Wunderle, 2006). The danger of such large cultural descriptions is that people’s behaviour is fully explained from their belonging to a community with a supposed shared cultural background. Defining culture as an all-encompassing whole does not necessarily lead to effective actions on the ground as it can keep our thinking of others bound to generalizations (Geertz, 1973). Daily life experiences are often very different from general descriptions, which might hamper effective interaction. Haddad (2010) describes for example how daily life experience during a peace keeping operation can be quite different from official discourses, training agendas and doctrines. Lomsky-Feder and Ben-Ari (2012) on the other hand, describe how dealing with internal diversity is much more dynamic than expected, and always contains elements of self-organization emerging at unit level. In concrete situations, it is often wise to be sensitive to what happens and to pay attention to what can be seen and heard. Russell-Farnham (2009) describes the necessity to engage with concrete people in the battle space and to be sensitive to their feelings, thoughts and experiences. The small culture paradigm is a necessary complement to the large culture paradigm and is better able to account for cultural change. Culture is a human activity in this paradigm. Culture *is* behaviour, understanding, action and perception. Culture is continuously being made and remade through activities and interactions (Holliday, 1999). Human experiences are the basis of any sense making and interactions with others provoke alterations in how we make sense of ourselves and the world. Experiences and interactions affect and change cultures. What we do and how we react to others in all kinds of daily interactions does matter and does change those involved. The small culture paradigm can help to develop a more balanced understanding of the challenge of cultural diversity and can help to react more adequately in culturally diverse contexts. Concrete intercultural situations are produced by the simultaneous presence and mutual influence of people from diverse cultures (Geertz, 1973). The mutual influence and interactions in a specific time and place produce unforeseen and unpredictable effects and dynamics at that moment and place. The effects are unpredictable because humans have a certain liberty or disposition to respond in new and different ways. People and cultures are continuously changing in an evolution that does not end and that is marked by interruptions and non-linearity. Interactions and experiences constantly lead to new small cultures and to new ways of relating to others. The large culture paradigm sees culture as relatively stable and focuses for example on books, traditions or even paintings and images as cultural artefacts. The small culture paradigm understands culture as a practice (Calhoun & Sennett, 2007). It focuses for example on the practice

of making images or paintings, of reading books, of performing traditional rituals rather than on decontextualized cultural artefacts. It focuses on human and non-human interaction in context. It focuses on “ways of making things, relating to others, constituting value, and engaging performances” (Calhoun & Sennett, 2007, p.6). Culture is something that happens to us and through us. It is made and remade in small interactions like a dialogue at a check-point and in big, meaningful events like the 9/11 attacks (Bosman, Richardson, & Soeters, 2007).

What is important in intercultural interaction is the openness and readiness to sense unforeseen behaviour and sense making. Often, success means being able to respond in concrete and surprising situations that are quite different from large culture descriptions. Responding to unforeseen intercultural situations is not only necessary in a condition of increased internal and external cultural diversity. It is also very difficult because it entails opening up to the risk of undergoing a change in our own perceptions and ideas, leading to changed practices. The best possible reaction to cultural diversity cannot fully be defined beforehand, because responding to cultural diversity entails changing definitions and guidelines on what is the best possible. There are many pleas for cultural awareness and for understanding the culture of those present in the operation space (e.g. Skelton & Cooper, 2004). What is not genuinely recognized, however, is that understanding is played out at the level of one’s own basic assumptions. Understanding cannot be achieved without changes taking place in one’s own perceptions and beliefs. The difficulty is that the best response is different in every situation; diversity entails that things are different each time and each place. This is quite a challenge for military organizations that work with predefined and approved goals, clear rules and directives for action and well-designed procedures. Dealing with diversity is a real challenge, not only to individuals who must respond to intercultural situations, but also to the whole military organization (Manigart & Resteigne, 2013). The challenge of diversity can be illustrated by an example of an intercultural interaction encountered by the US Armed Forces in Iraq and described by Skelton and Cooper (2014, p.12): “Iraqis arrested by U.S. troops have had their heads forced to the ground, a position forbidden by Islam except during prayers. This action offends detainees as well as bystanders.” Wunderle (2006, p.2) comments on this example in a cultural awareness primer for US Armed Forces deploying to Arab and Middle Eastern Countries: “Tactics such as these might bestow short-term tactical advantages and might appear to be effective measures, but can undermine the long-term US goals for building stability in the region.” Both authors use this example as a plea for cultural awareness training, and link the understanding and knowledge of cultures to appropriate reactions in ambiguous and uncertain circumstances. We agree with this line of reasoning, but also point to an unreported difficulty in what it means to understand and to respond to differences. The situation which is described here, involves cultural change. The forcing of heads on the ground provokes changes in the attitudes of Iraqis towards the American Forces. This concrete experience at that time and in that unanticipated situation, results in a negative change towards the Americans. The reaction of Iraqis was unforeseen and it probably took a while to find out why bystanders became “a hostile mob” (Skelton & Cooper, 2014, p.12). If Americans would have hold Iraqi heads to the ground in order to take care of wounded bystanders, the same hostile reaction would probably not have taken place, which makes it clear that reactions, although related to Islam (big culture), are negotiated by sense making and unpredictability in concrete interactions (small culture). Cultural specific knowledge is not enough to deal with this situation. Understanding and adequate responses go hand in hand with cultural change on the American side, and this

seems to be happening in the reflections of Skelton and Cooper but also those of Wunderle. They try to understand what happened on the Iraqi side, and their perceptions alter at the same time. Wunderle (2006, p.2) literally describes his altered perception when he says that this tactic “might appear to be effective” but in fact is not. The forcing of heads to the ground was indeed designed as an effective tactic. The confrontation with others in a concrete interaction led to a new self-perception, namely that the tactic is ineffective and might undermine success in the long term. Understanding what happened entails a new perception and might lead to new tactics. This is challenging, goes along with uncertainty, and involves choosing and redefining the best way of making an arrest. The best solution for this situation does not stem from the application of simple checklists or instructions. It demands a questioning of tactics and a balancing of different interests, like safety, long term goals, and respect for others. The example shows that not only individuals have to respond in a cultural sensitive way; intercultural diversity also plays out on the organizational level where decisions about tactics have to be made.

### **Intercultural competences**

In the second part of the text, we discuss the way in which learning to deal with diversity has often been understood (Perry & Southwell, 2011). Cultural diversity is often seen as “a potential obstacle to the efficient running of the military” (Lomsky-Feder & Ben-Ari, 2012, p.195), and learning to deal with diversity is often seen as the acquisition of individual competences that are supposed to contribute to the overall performativity of military organizations. The definition of intercultural competence and the accompanying conceptualization of learning as the individual acquisition of competences depend on specific assumptions and definitions of differences, of learning, of effectiveness and of culture (Biesta, 2005; Rathje, 2007). In this part of the text, we discuss these four assumptions and argue that the idea of individual acquisition of intercultural competences has some shortcomings and needs to evolve into a more nuanced approach. The first assumption is the way in which differences are framed. The concrete and manifest differences related to cultural diversity are often associated with potential problems and threads to success (Todd, 2011). Cultural diversity is something that is assumed to be a potential obstacle and harm to solidarity and cohesion, which is considered necessary for effective military functioning (Lomsky-Feder & Ben-Ari, 2012). This kind of assumptions played an important role in arguments against the integration of women or gays in the armed forces. The idea is that differences hamper the bonding process and cohesion, and thereby undermine operational strength. This is a very specific way of thinking about differences that not necessarily reflects the dynamics of intercultural interaction on a concrete level (Lomsky-Feder & Ben-Ari, 2012). On top of that, such assumptions can even install a problematic and counterproductive orientation in training programmes (Engelbert, 2004). Facing those very common critics, we need to make a distinction between social and task cohesion. If cultural diversity can, at the short run, be detrimental to social cohesion, common drills and training can ensure the necessary level of task cohesion (King, 2006). Beyond the importance of bonds of comradeship, the decisive rituals which bind military groups together are the formal processes of training and, mainly, communication drills. The assumption that diversity means problems is also related to a strong distinction between *us* and *them*. Van Oord and Corn (2012) call this tendency the “balkanization of

difference.” Balkanization refers to the process of disintegration that took place in the Balkan region of south-east Europe. It entails an often unintended process of disintegration and separation related to the assumption that there is a big gap between cultures and people. The concrete differences that go hand in hand with cultural diversity are thereby seen as an essential identity difference that is almost impossible to bridge. It is assumed that cultures and people are “hermetically disconnected units, unless they are deliberately connected by means of an intercultural bridge” (Van Oord & Corn, 2012). This is however not the only way to look at differences. One does not need to essentialize differences. It is exactly the reduction of concrete differences to an essential identity difference that made the Balkan Wars possible (Nancy, 2000). Identities are thereby seen as closed units which can be appropriated and exist separately. Such a vision makes it impossible to appreciate the connections between cultures and people that are always already in place. There is thus also a more nuanced appreciation of differences possible, in which concrete differences do not stand for one essential identity difference. Nancy (2000) argues that humans are always connected and disconnected at the same time. There is no absolute separation between cultures and people and, referring to the famous concept of Karl Weick (1976), they must be rather seen as “loosely coupled” units. There are always elements that bind together, the bonds between people are however also never absolute. There are differences between people belonging to the same culture and there are points of connection between people from different cultures. A more nuanced approach to differences does not deny problems related to cultural diversity, but makes them concrete instead of absolute. Instead of reducing concrete differences to an essential identity difference, it is also possible to understand that “people differ differently” (Van Oord & Corn, 2012, p. 7). The differences we encounter in concrete interactions are each time different. The second problematic assumption is that learning intercultural competences is often understood as an individual acquisition. Some intercultural learning models emphasize the different components of intercultural competences, namely knowledge, skills and attitudes. Such models make listings of knowledge, skills and attitudes that need to be acquired in training and are called compositional models or list models (Rathje, 2007). Other approaches, called developmental models (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009), emphasize the different steps an individual learner needs to take to become intercultural competent. The developmental approach of Bennett (Bennett, 1986; Bennett & Bennett, 2004) makes a distinction between six different steps in becoming intercultural sensitive (denial, defence, minimization, acceptance, adaptation and integration). In social and cultural pedagogy, there has been a lively and partly still on-going debate as to whether learning has to be understood as individual acquisition or rather as participation in social and cultural practices (Sfard, 1998; Fenwick, 2000; Hodkinson, Biesta, & James, 2008). The difference between the two views is that in one view learning takes place within the individual and in the other view, learning takes place between individuals operating in concrete situations. This latest view emphasizes that learning takes place in context and that learning encompasses more than an individual acquisition. While individual learning models tend to focus on the cognitive domain, situated learning models also focus on the concrete bodily interaction in which much more than cognition is at stake. More nuanced models argue however that there is “no reason why individual learning cannot be addressed from within a broadly situated or socio-cultural perspective” (Hodkinson, Biesta, & James, 2008, p.30). Learning to deal with cultural differences can be based on such a nuanced, socio-cultural view of learning. Such a view does not only focus on the individual acquisition, but places the individual in the

intercultural situations and acknowledges the situational conditions that have an effect on learning. Intercultural competence is then understood as the learning process by which people deal with each other and create new behaviour in the context of their interaction. Intercultural competence is the ability to find ways of dealing with each other through the creation of adapted behaviour, routines, communication, understanding, values. The outcome of intercultural competence can be defined as the creation of new forms of cultural traits: “Intercultural competence is best characterized therefore, by the transformation of intercultural interaction into culture itself. Depending on the type of interaction, the normality and familiarity created in this process forms the basis for future communication, cooperation or coexistence” (Rathje, 2007, p. 263). The learning that is at stake here, is not only cognitive but rather emotional and practical. At the same time it does not separate and decontextualize individuals, but places individuals in the physical, social and cultural dynamics and entanglements taking place in the field. Learning can be defined as becoming (Hodkinson, Biesta, & James, 2008, p.30); the reactions in intercultural situations and the creation of solutions in the field become part of those involved. This is not only an individual learning process, but a thoroughly social, situational and cultural process in which individuals depend on their own reactions as much as on the reactions of others. Intercultural competence, then, is not something defined in abstract lists or in a series of steps. It is the learning that is involved when we find answers in concrete intercultural situations. A third assumption of intercultural competences is that they will provide benefits for the organization and will lead to more effective results. Cultural awareness training is often also understood in goal oriented terms as a means to an end. The end or goal is nowadays more and more described as success or as effectiveness in dealing with intercultural situations (Rathje, 2007). What counts as effective and as success, however, depends on cultural judgments about what is desirable (Biesta, 2007). Success in the field is always concrete and related to particular prescribed goals. It is clear that those goals are based on cultural judgments about what is desirable for the military organization. We wonder however whether it is possible to define *learning* intercultural competences in terms of predefined and attainable goals, precisely because every intercultural interaction puts cultural judgements in motion. A more nuanced approach would define intercultural competences not only as a fixed goal, but also as a process that is never fully ended or reached. Collins and Pieterse (2007) propose such a process perspective on intercultural competences. Intercultural competences then are not something that can progressively be acquired, but something that asks a continuous engagement and commitment. Understanding intercultural competences as a fixed goal can lead to a “harmful and limiting interpretation of what competence actually is” (Collins & Pieterse, 2007, p.15). It can lead to the idea that, once intercultural competences are acquired, no more efforts are needed to deal with diversity. It can also lead to a limited and measurable interpretation of intercultural competences, only containing predefined knowledge, skills and attitudes. Intercultural competences can thus also be defined as a process: “a process that involves engaging in an honest exploration of one’s experience of racial and cultural reality” (Collins & Pieterse, 2007, p.15). This process is an on-going process that cannot be fully captured in predefined goals, as it demands the invention of new culture and new behaviour adapted to the situation. Predefined goals are not intercultural competent instruments, because they are not sufficiently open to change and to intercultural interaction playing out exactly on the level of what is judged to be a worthwhile goal. Fixed goals also place excessive demands on individual intercultural competences and ignore the importance of external

conditions to which individuals have to respond (Rathje, 2007). The goals perspective can therefore be completed with a process perspective which allows setting the goals themselves at different moments in time. The goals of intercultural awareness training, in order to be truly intercultural, have to be subjected to a process of permanent evaluation. This is exactly taking place in the writings of Skelton and Cooper (2004) but also Wunderle (2006) on the practice of making arrest in Iraq. Predefined goals presume that we already know in advance what the best way of dealing with cultural diversity is, while a process approach also takes into account what happens during the interaction and allows new and better ways of thinking and doing to emerge from intercultural interaction. The fact that differences are often seen as potential problem, that effectiveness is often seen in goals oriented terms and that learning is often seen as individual acquisition points to a last assumption in our discussion. The underlying definition of culture is often too much in line with the large culture paradigm alone. There is often a very specific definition of culture and individuality at work. Individuals are seen as belonging to a specific culture, which is a closed system of symbols and traditions valid for a community of individuals (Engelbert, 2004). Intercultural interactions are seen as something individuals can control and appropriate after due training, understood as the individual acquisition of predefined intercultural competences that would guarantee success. The danger of individualizing or privatizing intercultural competences can also be shown when we define culture as a public matter. Geertz (1973) defines culture as a public matter that we should not confound with knowledge, skills and attitudes possessed by an individual. Knowing how to do things, developing the skills to communicate and having a respectful attitude is not the same as the concrete interaction in practice. Culture is the interaction itself, not the individual competences that are necessary for interaction. Intercultural interaction is just as well a public event with different people interacting and making sense of the event in their own way (Todd, 2011). Individual competences should not be confounded with concrete human interaction. Intercultural interaction is a public matter between people in a specific situation, not a private matter like individual knowledge, skills and attitudes. Public action cannot be reduced to a mere effect of successfully acquired private competences. Public action is shaped in interaction with others who have their own sense making and unpredicted responses to our unpredicted responses. Public interaction is a matter of searching and trying the best response at that moment, based on good preparation, but not reduced to pre-established definitions of good behaviour. Trainings based on a confusion of controllable private competences and not fully controllable public intercultural interaction will not be our best option for dealing well with diversity. If intercultural interaction is often confusing and unpredictable, we should take cultural changes and sense making processes into account when we train people for intercultural interaction. Embracing a more nuanced idea of preparation for intercultural interaction, would not only take the large culture paradigm into consideration, but also the small culture paradigm.

### **Preparing = practising + rehearsing**

The third part of this article develops an alternative understanding of the preparation for dealing with cultural diversity. This theoretical understanding of preparation can be translated in concrete cultural awareness trainings. We propose to develop trainings that take the two divergent and sometimes conflicting paradigms of culture into account and

that accept both the usefulness and limitations of thinking cultural awareness in terms of intercultural competences. One important observation by Spitzberg and Changnon (2009, p.9) is that “there was (and still is) no widely accepted model for training and assessment of intercultural ‘readiness’.” In other words, the difficulties related to intercultural interactions and the difficulties related to dealing with cultural differences mean that we still do not fully know how we can prepare people for intercultural interaction. Intercultural situations and experiences cannot be fully appropriated; one consequence is that the training for intercultural situations can still not be seen as a well-defined undertaking, leading to certain success. The reason for this has already been discussed; the meaning of success and the meaning of being prepared is put at stake in intercultural interactions. The confrontation with a different orientation to the world and different identity constructions touches one’s own fundamental assumptions and identity constructions. The question thus remains on-going: how to prepare people for intercultural practice in the context of military organisations?

Based on our previous analysis we argue that there are two ways of looking at preparation, and that training need to be based on both. Sennett (2012, p.6) uses the preparation for music performances as an important example in his analysis of how people with “separate or conflicting interests” learn to cooperate. Sennett (2012, p.15-16) describes a difference between practising and rehearsing in making music. This difference can be translated to the preparation for intercultural interaction:

In making music, there’s a basic distinction between practising and rehearsing; the one is a solitary experience, the other is collective. Common to both is the standard procedure of attending initially to a whole score, then focusing on particular testing passages. The two forms of work on music divide, first, because rehearsing drags musical habits into shared consciousness. When practising alone, the musician goes over his or her part again and again so that passages become ingrained routines; this is especially necessary for the musician preparing his or her part for public performance – only a very few performers (...) can commit a score to memory after a couple of run-throughs. The danger for the rest of us lies in losing sight of how ingrained passages sound to others. In rehearsing, one player can jolt another into this awareness.

The preparation for musical performance as well as intercultural practice does not only consist in the individual learning of knowledge, skills and attitudes. It also consists in a movement of turning outwards in order to play music with others or in order to reach objectives in diverse contexts. Individual musicians who practice a score of music learn the notes, learn the skills to play the notes and develop their own interpretation of the music. When they go to collective rehearsals, another type of preparation takes place. This preparation is no longer the acquisition of new knowledge or skills, since they already know the notes and know how to play it. It is a process of inventive mutual adaptation, which is according to Sennett (2012, p.14) not without conflicts, as many good musicians find it difficult to play together and to interpret music in confrontation with others: “Though they may know their own part perfectly, in rehearsal they have to learn the ego-busting art of listening, turning outward.” Rehearsing is an action whereby musicians learn to listen to each other, learn in confrontation how others hear their own playing of the score, and learn to play together to reach an interesting music performance. Learning to perform together or learning to deal with each other in order to reach a result is taking place between them. It is a process of confrontation and loss, where musicians have to give up their individual interpretation of the music and interact with others. It does not mean they have to reach full consensus, it means that they have to build their cooperation from the ground up. They build a new interpretation of the

music through discussion and “through little dramas of deference and assertion” (Sennett, 2012, p.15). The preparation for intercultural situations can be understood as practising and rehearsing. While practising is a process of individual acquisition, rehearsing is a process of turning outward to others. What is at stake in preparation understood as rehearsing is being attentive for others, listening to them and make them listening to you. It is about becoming aware of what happens out there and about trying to find responses that are adapted to the situation. This kind of preparation will not give competences that can be used, this kind of preparation helps to be able to respond adequately to new situations by being present in the situation and by attuning (literally in music rehearsal) to what happens. Preparation here is an exercise to be present in the situation (Masschelein, 2008). The biggest obstacle for being present in a situation is that we already have all kinds of judgements about others, about how the music should sound and about what is going on. These judgements make that we don’t fully listen, look or perceive the complexity of the interactions. Becoming attentive in rehearsals means that we have to interrupt our judgement and listen how our music sounds to others. It means that we have to listen over again to the music and that we have to build up cooperation, which is a process of invention. In intercultural situations attention also means that we have to focus on our senses rather than only on already made judgements. Adequate reactions are reactions that pay attention to the situation, that are justified in the situation. This means that it is not always possible in advance to know what is adequate. Adequate reactions sometimes need to be invented in the situation, based on good preparation, which entails acquisition of competences and exercising attentiveness to situations. When we think about preparation only in terms of the individual acquisition of competences, we address people as separate individuals who have to work on themselves (Masschelein, 2008). This is weird, because we are preparing people to operate in sometimes high-risky situations in which their life depend on others, or in which others play an essential role. It does therefore seem no more that obvious that preparation should also entail activities in which we relate to others, learn to orient ourselves to others, or learn to turn ourselves outwards instead of inwards. We should not only constitute people as competent individuals, but also as relational beings, caught up in connections and disconnections with others that always partly escape appropriation. Preparing for intercultural interaction is not only preparing to be in control, it is also preparing to be not fully in control. We do not have control over what others say to us, do to us, or how they call upon us (Masschelein, 2008). Learning to deal with diversity is learning to react in situations of mutual dependence. The experience of intercultural situations is always slightly confusing, because it is not an experience of ourselves individually. Intercultural experience comes to us as an experience of being with others. This experience has to do with being caught up in a situation where I and others mingle up in interaction (Nancy, 2000). Even in hostile interactions there is form of being mingled in, although by far not all intercultural interactions at home or abroad are hostile. Preparing for such confrontation is not only done in the safe acquisition of competences, but also by being in contact with whom we need to establish “a relation of giving and receiving” (Masschelein & Simons, 2002, p.605). Preparing for intercultural situations needs doing, undergoing intercultural experiences. No individual learning can replace collective experience: “The usefulness of reflexivity in dealing with cultural encounters, whether in-the-moment or retrospectively also, depends on the extent of our past experiences. Someone with little experience of unfamiliar environments, for instance, will not have the same range of experiences to draw on in approaching the question of otherness as someone who is

well travelled and/or accustomed to dealing with strangers” (Blasco, 2012, p.482). This does not mean that sufficient experience alone will do the trick, as each interaction is unique and asks for new adequate reactions. It is the habit of relating to others that matters in intercultural experience, the habit of sensing connection and disconnection and of finding unique answers in that place and time. Finding answers is not only a matter of active control, but also of passive sensing and of responsive answers. ‘Practising’ individual knowledge, skills and attitudes is important as a preparation to intercultural situations. Next to this, there is also need to ‘rehearse’ with others. This rehearsing enables relating to others and allows the individual to experience the confrontation of self and other at the border of one’s own sense making and identity building. Rehearsing involves being attentive to others, and is something we give rather than have. We change or transform who we are by this attention. What our self means and what our fundamental judgements are undergoes a confrontation at the borders of self and other. Rehearsing is relating to others, it is the dealing with others that has a preparatory impact, and teaches us to make sense in unforeseen situations. The idea that preparing for intercultural interaction can be seen as rehearsing is based on the small culture paradigm and on the idea that people always make new sense of themselves and others. The large culture paradigm still remains important in order to acquire sufficient knowledge about other assumptions, values and worldviews. An adequate knowledge about the larger framework in which individuals and groups operate must however not be limited to culture alone. Coulby (2006) shows that not only cultural knowledge is important to understanding people and groups, also wider historical, economic and political contexts play a paramount role in people’s understanding and aspirations for themselves and the world. Political and economic motives play a major role in identity formation processes and in understanding the complexity of contestations and interrelations between groups in the battle space as well as at home. The small culture paradigm cannot replace the study of larger frameworks, it offers however a necessary complement.

### **Culture eats strategy for breakfast**

In this article, we confronted an understanding of cultural awareness training as the individual acquisition of intercultural competences with more recent theorizing in culture and education, which emphasizes the changeable nature of culture and the social and cultural nature of learning. We developed a more nuanced understanding of preparation for cultural diversity incorporating both practising and rehearsing, understood as individual learning and as collective learning taking place between people interacting in concrete situations. Preparation is not only understood as an individual self that acquires competences, but also as a transformation of oneself and one’s understanding of the world. Preparation is not only an inward process entailing the enlargement of the self, but also an outward process entailing experiences of being not fully in control and of dealing with others played out at the border of one’s identity and sense making. As it is also the case for private companies (and was famously illustrated by Peter Drucker’s quote *Culture eats strategy for breakfast*), recent experiences in operations like Iraq or Afghanistan have reminded us the crucial role of understanding cultural factors as an operational necessity. The difficulties encountered for stabilizing various regions where tribal linkages are at stake but also the amount of casualties resulting from green on blue attacks emphasized the importance of communicating and

building swift trust with indigenous forces and local actors. Even if we know that, from a military perspective, it is not the cultural dimensions per se which are of first importance but rather their impacts on the organizational objectives and, in this case, on the conduct of military operations. With that in mind, military organizations have tried to develop the intercultural competences of their military personnel. Depending on the countries, cultural awareness training has taken various forms. Some use lectures and short lectures but, if too short, they tend to confer a false sense of fully understanding the cultural complexities of the area of operation and, if too expanded, a sense that culture is impossible to fully understand. Others have used cultural awareness ‘pocket’ tools like smart cards. But, referring to simple terms with do’s and don’ts, those tools tend to reduce human interactions to generalizations that can be described in an IKEA-style manuals (Bergman, 2013). Despite recent greater consideration for cultural dimensions, the field of cultural awareness still remains a weakness for many military organizations; they continue to consider those dimensions as less important than the kinetic ones. Also at the institutional level, the existence of a gap in the training of intercultural competences has been stressed (e.g. during the summit held in October 2013 at NATO headquarters on “*Assessing the impact and role of cultural awareness and public perceptions in NATO operations*”). One of the difficulties seems to refer to the lack of common definition of cultural awareness but also the level of expertise military personnel should reach. As previously mentioned, the concept of culture and its operational considerations are not easy to define and, consequently, to implement neither to measure. But, from our perspective, because there is no universal or *one-size-fits-all* approach to teach culture, there is also no standardized training of it. Instead of focusing on a pre-deployment training of those intercultural competences, we need to develop a more holistic approach in the educational curriculum. Because learning while being deployed can lead to major failures, learning by practising and rehearsing seems definitely to be a better option. Practising during the educational process and, in a second stance, rehearsing it during the pre-deployment training -with immersion training based on real life exercises- is one of the most effective ways for developing a cultural sensibility among military personnel.

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