Departments of State and Defense Relations:

Are Perceptions Important?

by William Joseph Davis, Jr. and Christopher R. Paparone

As far back as the authors can remember, colleagues from both the Department of State (State) and Department of Defense (DoD) have taken every opportunity to highlight what they see as the significant differences between their organizational cultures. Many are quick to quote the title of a popular article entitled “Defense is from Mars, and State is from Venus.” However, despite the perceptions of cultural incongruence between the organizations, the authors found scant organizational survey research published on the subject. We therefore designed a study to explore the efficacy of a valid and reliable survey instrument (the Organization Culture Assessment Instrument [OCAI]) as an initial foray into data collection to detect interagency cultural differences, particularly at the working-group level.

In order to add an element of practicality to this research—so the results could be used to actually improve relations between DoD and the State Department—we determined that not only would an intra-cultural assessment be insightful (how one views one’s own organization), but also that an inter-cultural assessment (how one views the other’s culture) would also be fruitful. To those ends, we used OCAI and additional survey questions to measure the following: (1) What do mid-grade members of the two departments identify as similarities and differences in organizational values, attitudes, and perceptions and, (2) What do mid-grade members of one department identify as similarities and differences in the organizational values, attitudes, and perceptions of members of the other department?

This study has several important limitations. The authors conducted this study in their spare time.

Dr. William Joseph Davis, Jr. is an associate professor of strategic and operational studies at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. He graduated from Harvard University in 1982 and served 24 years as a Naval Officer before becoming an associate professor and director of curriculum at the U.S. Joint Forces Staff College. He has a doctorate from Old Dominion University.

Dr. Christopher R. Paparone is an associate professor in the Army Command and General Staff College’s Department of Joint, Interagency and Multinational Operations at Fort Lee, Virginia. He is a retired Army colonel and has a Ph.D. degree from Pennsylvania State University. His book, The Sociology of Military Science: Prospects for Postinstitutional Military Design, is forthcoming from Continuum Books.
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study, organizational culture is narrowly defined and measured in terms of the instrument, based on “taken for granted values” members of the organization use to evaluate organizational effectiveness. Eighty-three percent of State Department respondents report at least steady contact with DoD, while only thirty-six percent of military respondents report steady contact with the State Department, so most of the DoD respondents’ view of the State Department’s culture may be based on something other than experience.

Theory of Culture

The OCAI measures the relative importance among the four organizational value groupings defined as follows:

- A rational “market” culture is identified by a “mission first” attitude. The organization does not want to hear how you “don’t do windows,” or “don’t have enough resources,” it wants the mission accomplished. An objectives-based plan is indicative of an organization who values the “market.”

- A bureaucratic “hierarchical” culture is identified by strict adherence to orders from above. The mission is important, but you must also do what you are told. If there is a conflict, then adherence to orders takes precedence. If the mission dictates that aircraft maintenance should be conducted today, but orders come down that sexual harassment training must be completed today, the harassment training is accomplished.

- A consensual or “clan” culture is identified by the organization’s commitment to its people. Personnel up and down the chain of command are consulted before a decision is made. Orders are followed because of respect for the person giving them, not because of positional authority.

- A developmental or “adhocracy” culture is identified by appreciation of innovation. “Thinking out of the box” could be the slogan of this culture. New ways to approach old business is the norm. Regulations or orders do not inhibit accomplishments.

The results of the ipsative-scaled (a specific type of measure in which respondents compare two or more desirable options and pick the one that is most preferred [sometimes called
If the cultural differences seem differentiated but moderately so, the leader can develop alternative frames of reference... to help the coalition of agencies work better together.

Results and Discussion

We used a convenience sample of 62 Army majors and lieutenant colonels in attendance at the CGSC and a convenience sample of 90 State Department FSOs and government service (GS) staff. Of the military officers, we experienced a 58 percent response rate (36 useable surveys) and with the 90 surveyed FSO/GS employees, a 60 percent response rate (54 useable surveys). With the permission of the copyright holders, we constructed a modified OCAI that included asking respondents to rate their own and each other’s organization.

The authors admit they were somewhat surprised by the patterned results plotted from
the OCAI results (Figure 1). When respondents rated their home organizations, only moderately differentiated patterns can be detected between the DoD and State Department. More State than DoD respondents saw their own organization as more hierarchical (the dominating value) and clannish (secondarily). Those surveyed in DoD rated market-like cultural values most dominant in their home organization. Both saw their home organizations as having least emphasis on adhocracy values— which include adaptation and flexibility.

We also asked the respondents to rate each other on the same scale. The resulting patterns were negligibly different from each other (Figure 2). These data suggest DoD and State Department respondents see each other in much the same way as they see themselves. DoD sees State as having dominant hierarchy and clan values and State sees DoD as having both dominant market and, to a lesser degree, hierarchical values. Both saw values associated with flexibility (clan and adhocracy) as least applicable to either organization.

Here, we must remind the reader that because of our convenience in sampling the respondents, these results cannot be generalized. However, we can imaginatively comment as if these respondents were going to work together on some sort of interagency team. First, we see more similarity in value patterns than potential for value conflict. Both respondent groups see themselves and each other as habituated to the idea of hierarchical forms of control. We would speculate, then, that we can count on their shared sensitivity toward formalized and structured procedures and compliance with their efficiency-minded bosses, who pride
themselves on being successful coordinators and organizers. Both acknowledge that effectiveness in addressing a project at hand can be defined in terms of the dependable delivery of the established core contributions routinely expected by their home department.

On the surface of these data, we also see some moderate evidence of differentiation between cultures. The DoD respondents perceive their organization expects them to be hard drivers, producers, and competitors. They are more used to tough and demanding leaders than are the State respondents. DoD respondents also identify that their home organization expects well-planned actions that achieve measurable goals and targets; whereas, the State Department expects their participants to see things a bit differently, more along the lines of clan values. Respondents from State distinguish it as being a bit more sensitive than DoD to social situations and as placing a premium on inclusion, participation, and consensus-building. Department of Defense members seem to sense these propensities about the State Department as well. Although State members appear to acknowledge their military counterparts’ propensities toward hard-charging, “get ‘er’ done” values, they see their own leaders as more like mentors and perhaps even parental figures. State respondents see their organization as more strongly held together by an unspoken loyalty, similar to that which might be given to a wise clan elder. In comparison, DoD’s sense is that its source of authority is more bureaucratic, linked to positional power and perquisites of rank.

The most striking data that might be some cause for concern with both of these respondent
groups reveal the lack of cross-cultural expectations for adhocracy values, including entrepreneurial spirit and rewards for creativity. We should not expect representatives from either agency to “stick their necks out” and take risks, as they see their bosses as something other than innovators and risk takers. In this case, the glue that holds interagency relations together will hardly be a commitment to experimentation and innovation. Success with these interagency groups will not be defined as developing unique adhocracy values.

Following the OCAI, the authors also asked the respondents specific survey questions concerning expectations about (1) interagency communications, (2) integration, (3) “out-of-the-box” thinking, and, (4) compliance. Answers ranged from not confident, not very confident, somewhat confident, confident, very confident, or extremely confident. In response to the question “How confident are you that you can clearly communicate with members of the Department of Defense (for State respondents) or Department of State (for DoD respondents),” 38.9 percent of DoD respondents were less than confident, while 41.5 percent of State respondents were less than confident. Although there was no statistically significant difference between the answers of the two groups, it is disheartening to note that although the research sample from both departments were officers, over one-third of the respondents felt they could not communicate effectively across cultures. In addition, no DoD and only two (3.8 percent) of State respondents were extremely confident.

We utilized the same range of responses as above (from not confident to extremely confident) in gathering responses to the question “How confident are you that you can integrate DoD/State Department capabilities and limitations for mission accomplishment?” Even though State Department respondents reported more interaction with DoD than vice versa, both groups felt about the same in their ability to communicate across cultures (no statistical difference). Fifteen percent of DoD respondents felt more confident about their ability to integrate State Department capabilities to accomplish the mission. Also notable is that no respondent answered “extremely confident” when answering this question.

The next survey question asked respondents to strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statement: “My organization values officers who are “out of
the box.” Although there was a statistically significant difference between the responses of the two organizations—45.5 percent of State respondents agree and 25 percent of DoD respondents agree—it is interesting and potentially more insightful to note that not one respondent from either organization answered that he/she strongly agreed with the statement.

The final survey question asked respondents to strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statement: “If given an order by my superior, I must follow it, if it is lawful, even though it may be completely contrary to my personal values or those values of the organization.” Once again the survey results found no statistically significant difference in how the respondents from the two organizations answered. Of note, though, are the arguably low cumulative numbers for both groups indicating disagree or strongly disagree: 25 percent for DoD and 36 percent for State.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Responding to the first research question “What do mid-grade members of the two departments identify as similarities and differences in organizational values, attitudes, and perceptions?” this study finds that if these respondents worked as members of an interagency group in the future, they would share the core organizational values of long-established government bureaucracies that do not reward risk-takers. Values conflicts between these members, as measured by the OCAI, would be expected to be negligible.

Responding to the second research question “What do mid-grade members of the two departments identify as similarities and differences in organizational values, attitudes, and perceptions?” the aggregate answers indicate both groups would be somewhat uneasy communicating and integrating capabilities with each other if placed in a group project. In addition, respondent groups seem to share the same basic value toward mission accomplishment. Insofar as compliance with following lawful orders, low percentages from both respondent groups—DoD 25 percent and State 36 percent—who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement indicate that not only is innovation not perceived to be rewarded, but that even morally justifiable deviance may be intolerable to both parties.

This study was exploratory in nature, and the results cannot be generalized to both organizations. The authors recommend that DoD and the State Department conduct further studies on intra- and inter-organizational cultural values differences. Competence and confidence in cross-cultural communication and understanding of each other’s values should be the least common denominator in attempting to work together. The use of the OCAI in further studies is recommended.

The authors speculate that anecdotal tales heard during numerous interactions with both DoD and State personnel (e.g., “State doesn’t plan,” “DoD doesn’t listen,” “DoD gives too many orders,” “State doesn’t know how to make decisions”) may indicate the tendency for each organization to overestimate the differences in their values; a proposition worth further study. Further research may show that senior DoD and State officials should address the similarities (and the danger of groupthink)
in their respective organizations versus focusing on values differences.

We hope this exploratory study will not only become a catalyst for further research, but also begin a long overdue conversation between members of the DoD and State. This study represents a very narrow view of culture based on a convenience sampling of members from both departments that measures their competing beliefs about what makes their organizations effective. Nevertheless, this snapshot of competing value patterns, afforded by the OCAI and other questions, may provide important insights as to how DoD and State Department members may design interagency approaches together. There seemed to be considerable overlap in shared values with this population, which reflects more integration than differentiation. In addition, there was a collective dearth of adhocracy-values, which would include an appreciation for improvisation, innovation, and creativity. When faced with complex and unique issues of policy, strategy, and operational activities, these adhocracy values may be vital in approaching their design, yet these seem to be underrepresented in the cultural fabrics of both agencies.

We suggest the following additional studies would offer important insights with respect to inter-organizational relations as applied to national security:

- A more comprehensive study of the cultural relationship between the two departments. Using more sophisticated statistical sampling techniques may confirm the lack of adhocracy values and hence spur more comprehensive research into finding creative designs of policy, strategy, and operational activities.
- A study that explores how other national security agencies (e.g., Department of Justice and Department of Homeland Security) rate themselves and other agencies.
- A study to investigate important sub-cultures within agencies (e.g., the Service cultures of DoD, Joint Staff, special operations, other State bureaus, the U.S. Coast Guard, and so forth) that may be important sources of countervailing value perspectives in the pursuit of reframing policy, strategy, and operational designs.
- A study as to how organizations in multinational settings rate themselves and others.
- A study as to how important non-governmental organizations see themselves with respect to governmental agencies.
- A study to discover how results of surveys, such as these, help national security agencies understand inter-governmental approaches to complex issues (at local, state, and federal levels).

Notes

2 Kim S. Cameron and Robert E. Quinn, Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture Based on the Competing Values Framework, Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA, 1999.

4 Robert E. Quinn and John Rohrbaugh, “A Competing Values Approach to Organizational Effectiveness,” *Public Productivity Review*, Vol. 5, No.2, 1981, pp. 122-140. (This was the original study that set the theory for development of the OCAI).

5 Cameron and Quinn, summarized from pp. 33-40.


7 Cameron and Quinn.

8 Ibid.