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Transformative Training in Soft Skills for Peacekeepers: Gaming for Peace

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ABSTRACT

Personnel in peacekeeping missions come from diverse organizations and nations, yet must coordinate together in each peacekeeping mission. Diversity in organizations (militaries, police forces, civil organizations), gender and culture (national, ethnicity, religion) make communication and cooperation difficult yet vital in order to achieve peacekeeping missions’ goals. Current training puts few resources into training personnel in the critical soft skills of communication, gender awareness and cultural awareness that facilitate working together. Experiential learning through role-play is recognized as the best way to improve soft skills but is expensive and logistically difficult. Role-playing in a digital environment, specifically a Serious Game, can provide experiential learning that is low cost and accessible to all. Training peacekeepers in soft skills digitally requires deep knowledge of soft skills in peacekeeping. Yet we know little about the experiences of soft skills by peacekeeping personnel on peacekeeping. This article draws on in-depth interviews with 177 experienced military, police and civilian peacekeeping personnel around Europe. The research demonstrates the limited and uneven nature of training in soft skills, identifies the soft skills needed by the interviewees on missions, and demonstrates that the majority of the interviewees want more training and practice in soft skills relevant for peacekeeping.

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Introduction

All scenarios in complex peacekeeping missions require a number of diverse actors, all with distinctive structures, cultures and practices; yet all need to communicate and to cooperate to respond effectively. For this, they must understand not only the other organizations’ structure, culture, organizational language and practices, but also be sensitive to the impact of diversity in terms of gender and culture, both within the organizations and also outside them in the local communities. Globally, there are more military peacekeepers, followed by police peacekeepers, and then civil administrators and NGO workers. What is in short supply is training that enables personnel from these very different organizational types to work effectively together, taking into account the cultural diversity of the personnel from different countries and also the issue of gender, i.e. the difficulty in recruiting and retaining female peacekeepers in organizational cultures that are shaped by the majority male personnel and in many ways are not welcoming to women. Role-playing is the most effective training for building empathic interactional soft skills but is challenging in cost and logistical terms when done face to face; virtual role-playing is increasingly been turned to as an effective medium for this type of experiential learning.

We know little about the experience of these interactional soft skills by peacekeeping personnel on peacekeeping missions – which skills peacekeepers identify as important, why they are perceived as important, and what personnel do when faced with the need to deploy soft skills, especially in the absence of training in this area. There is a particularly marked absence of comparative qualitative data on the experiences of peacekeepers in this area.

This article specifies the gap in training in soft skills for peacekeepers and the potential for virtual role-playing training and practice in soft skills. I draw on 177 in-depth qualitative interviews with European personnel with experience of peacekeeping deployments from the Irish, Finnish, Polish and Bulgarian militaries and Northern Irish, Polish and Portuguese police forces, and
from a number of NGOs.\textsuperscript{3} The interviewees' experiences demonstrate the limited and uneven nature of training in soft skills. They identify the most important soft-skills needed by the personnel on missions, specifically communication, gender awareness and cultural awareness. The interviewees discussed how they improvised in light of the lack of training in this area on the ground. The vast majority of the interviewees want more training in soft skills relevant for peacekeeping.

**Training Needs, Soft Skills and Role-Playing**

Most peacekeeping missions are still under the auspices of the United Nations, and with a diverse range of nations and cultures actively participating in peace operations, standards, methods and effectiveness of training approaches vary considerably.\textsuperscript{4}

The UN Integrated Training Service (ITS) is part of the UN DPKO and issues comprehensive peacekeeping pre-deployment training standards for civilian, military and police personnel. While efforts have been made at the UN level to provide standardized pre-deployment and specialized training materials for international peacekeeping contingents (through its online peacekeeping resource hub for example), the potential for accessible and standardized training has yet to be realized. This is particularly the case for training that is currently unevenly and limtedly accessible – training in soft skills such as communication, cooperation, gender awareness, cultural nuances, and culture and language differences.\textsuperscript{5}

In European countries, preparation for deployment lies within the responsibility of EU member states. There is a network of training centres overseen by the European Security and Defence College (ESDC), which approves modules offered by member states, most of which are run annually. This network in recent years has paid attention to the need to improve the quantity and quality of soft skills training by working towards unified standards of pre-deployment training (PDT) and training curricula. However, in the vast majority of cases training in soft skills, which in practice is primarily focused on cross cultural competency, with more recent attention paid to gender, is limited to a few hours course of training during the pre-deployment preparation for the mission.

The dominant modes of delivery of soft skills training for peacekeeping personnel are through classroom based courses in peacekeeping training centres\textsuperscript{6} or digitally\textsuperscript{7} (in the language of the ESDC, AKU's or Autonomous Knowledge Units'), but there is no comprehensive approach, and as of yet, gaming is not used for soft skills training.

Delivery of the type of soft skills necessary for successful complex collaboration in peacekeeping missions is challenging; soft skills are difficult to teach in conventional educational settings. Such new skills and competences are commonly defined as ‘twenty-first century skills’ in opposition to the twentieth-century skills based on the 3Rs of Reading, wRighting, and aRithmetic, and include a new set of competences beyond the obvious information and communication technology (ICT) literacy, most pertinent to this study, communication, collaboration, social and cultural skills.\textsuperscript{8}

Learning soft skills is different from conventional knowledge learning and as the UN increasingly turns to digital delivery, and as training in soft skills is increasingly seen as possible and particularly suited to digital game delivery routes, much can be learned from this literature on Serious Games. i.e. games that have an educational as well as an entertainment purpose. To learn soft skills, knowledge needs to be contextualized (i.e. situated learning)\textsuperscript{9} as de-contextualized knowledge gathering is not an effective way of learning and understanding things. Soft skills are best taught through ‘experiential learning’ which engages individuals in real-life experiences that result due to interaction between humans and environment in the form of seeing, feeling, and doing, and this can be done in real life or artificial environments.\textsuperscript{10} Thirdly, learning soft skills is interactive and about achieving specific learning goals and accomplish specific tasks within the context of a story. This is best done by assuming roles and using different resources within different scenarios. Learning by doing is a way of learning factual information in the context of how this information will then be used but must be relevant, meaningful and interesting to the students.\textsuperscript{11} Soft skills training offers the opportunity for ‘discovery learning’ which has been identified as being where students ‘interact with their environment by exploring and manipulating objects, wrestling with questions and controversies, or performing experiments.\textsuperscript{12} Based on this it is suggested that if individuals discover things on their own, they are then likely to remember the concepts that they are trying to learn.\textsuperscript{13}

The experiential, interactive and discovery nature of peacekeeping is what makes role-playing an excellent way to develop or enhance empathy and soft skills for peacekeeping missions. Divergent understandings of the mission can undermine effectiveness when organizations as diverse as NGOs, militaries, and private security actors are required to work together to achieve the goals of a mission. By role-playing characters from an organization with a different structure and culture from your own, a greater understanding of the perspective and issues and limits of the other organization can result, producing more effective communication and cooperation in the field. For instance, lack of mutual appreciation and rivalry has marked NGO-military relations in the past but this is primarily due to lack of understanding and common lexicon. Role-playing in an immersive environment is highly effective at broadening the ability to identify and hence empathize with someone who is different in key ways from oneself. Similarly, militaries and police from different cultures have significantly different approaches internally and externally and role-playing in situations where there is a chance to learn about these different approaches either through interaction with in the game or through role-playing a character from a different police organization, can have tremendous positive effects on communication and cooperation in the field.
How to gender mainstream peacekeeping

However due to logistical and cost barriers, only a tiny fraction of personnel going on peacekeeping missions are able to avail of role-playing training. Digital technologies greatly reduce these logistical and cost barriers. The GAP project is an instance of a Serious Game offering a twenty-first-century environment, in this instance a 2D visual novel game (another platform considered but not developed was a virtual reality game) within which peacekeeping personnel can experience scenarios through role-playing people from other organizations, nationalities and of both genders.

In the digital environment, the ‘Proteus Effect’, where role-playing someone who has an identity other than one’s own offline identity (gender or organization or culture), has been shown to have an impact on one’s behaviour after going offline. In a study, the effect of playing an avatar that was more attractive than the offline player was to boost confidence, as measured through choice of dating partners who were significantly more attractive than the initial base choice of partners before engaging with the digital environment. Moreover, it was found that the behavioural changes stemming from the virtual environment transferred to subsequent face-to-face interactions. GAP similarly measures impact by incorporating a before and after game-play quiz that measures levels of gender awareness, cultural awareness and communication skills before and after playing and learning.

The reflection and discussion with peers during the game and around the game, as it is offered in a blended learning (online and classroom) format, plays a significant pedagogical role in getting participants to reflect on their own assumptions and hidden biases, and to develop empathy for persons different in key ways in terms of identity (gender, nationality, organization) as role-play requires reflexive thinking and the adoption of different perspectives. Providing an opportunity for role-playing a diversity of standpoints provides an opportunity to question assumptions and recognize the role of social forces in shaping individuals and institutions. GAP explicitly aims to increase the diversity, including more women, in peacekeeping organizations and missions, and addressing bias (in GAP’s case through role-playing) can ‘bring into view the nature and purpose of institutions and processes by which the power of some groups over others in institutions is built and renewed’.

Gender Awareness

The importance of considering and mainstreaming gender was enshrined in UNSCR 1325 (2000), driven by the growing necessity to consider the impact of gender on the organizations implementing peacekeeping, and the impact on the sustainability of peace, as operations that take advantage of a gender-aware approach are more effective at fulfilling their mandates. Actively engaging women and men on equal grounds, within missions and institutions, as well as in rebuilding post-conflict societies, came to be seen as a matter of operational effectiveness and sustainability.

The importance of improving the ratio of women to men in the militaries, police and civilian organizations deployed on missions is also increasingly recognized. Organizational structure (proportions of male to females) impacts on organizational culture with the heavily masculine cultures of militaries and police forces producing an environment that is not only unwelcoming to women but one that is too often antithetical to the behaviours required of peacekeepers.

However, UNSCR 1325 has also been critiqued for the focus on ‘adding women’ and for not challenging essentialist notions about masculine and feminine qualities and behaviour. Nor does it problematize the type of hegemonic masculinity in militaries that contributes to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of local girls and women and makes peacekeeping organizations environments productive of harassment and bias. Whitworth pointed out it does not recognize the gendered nature of peacekeeping and the UN institutions and constituent peacekeeping organizations themselves. Nadine Puechguirbal argues that despite UNSCR 1325, the persistently masculine language of UN peacekeeping documents has been translated into operational practice that perpetuates a vision of gender roles that reinforces inequalities and prevents progress on gender mainstreaming.

Indeed, a feminist critique of the incompatibility of hierarchical, hegemonic masculinity with gender equality problematizes using militaries at all either for the purpose of peacekeeping or for furthering a feminist peace agenda. However, I would concur with Duncanson and Woodward that militaries (and police) are the organizations that are currently able and willing to do the job of peacekeeping, and there is still scope for organizational and institutional change both for militaries and the UN itself.

Certainly, gender mainstreaming has hit limits with the common conceptual – and operational in the organizations – limitation that gender is assumed to be a synonym for women with the implication that it is women who are the ‘problem’ and must change. As MacKinnon (1987) observed, true equality in organizations is impossible if there is a persistence of [m]en as the unmarked, default category – the generic human against which others are compared and potentially deviate. There is a growing recognition that training needs to encourage the examination of both male and female identities and to problematize the binary of masculinity-femininity. Duncanson and Woodward offer a way forward through their notion of ‘regendering’ militaries and I argue is applicable to all hierarchical, normatively masculine organizations such as police and civilian hierarchies), to be equally open to women and men, that equally values ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ traits, so much so that they cease to be masculine and feminine. In such a military, soldierying is not a masculine identity, but becomes much more fluid, and is constructed through relations of equality, empathy, care, respect, and recognition of similarities and shared experiences.'
I proffer that role-playing has the capacity to sensitize personnel to the experiences of others with an identity different to one's own, including gender. Digital role-playing provides a space to realize one's own 'hidden biases' and thus the socially shaped norms of one's own categorization of male and female, and to develop the empathy and respect from shared experiences and discussion allowed in a blended learning environment. As Lombardo and Mergaert point out, there has been dismissal of, and resistance to gender mainstreaming, as gender inequality is actively supported by the ongoing activities of a wide range of actors, some of whom benefit from current configurations of gender relations. This resistance can be 'conscious and unconscious,' and role-playing with attendant reflection, can prompt awareness of the unconscious acts that perpetuate gender inequality.

Cultural Awareness

Just as awareness of gender is to consider norms that underpin relations of power between men and women, so awareness of culture is to consider norms that underpin relations of power between the peacekeeping mission and the local populations and institutions. In fact, both can intersect, to produce particularly imbalanced relations of power between peacekeepers and local women, materially disadvantaged if not desperate, who are often exoticized and exploited by the (relatively) materially advantaged peacekeepers. Although much has been written about this imbalance vis-à-vis 'Western' peacekeepers and 'Eastern' women, in particular since Edward Said's groundbreaking work, most peacekeeping personnel are now not Western but from Asian and African countries. Yet SEA continues to be a problem when there is an imbalance of power between the peacekeeper and the local population. The role of the balance of power and the factors that make a population more vulnerable needs to be part of any training in cultural awareness.

Role-playing has potential for increasing sensitivity to culturally shaped inequality, which is particularly important in peacekeeping scenarios, as unequal power dynamics shape patterns of social mobility and access to social, political and economic resources. Peacekeeping missions must be understood within the social, cultural and political contexts in which they occur because the risks and vulnerabilities that individuals face amid conflict are as much a product of their social context as their physical environment. For many in conflict and post-conflict situations, it is their vulnerability, determined by a number of social factors such as gender, ethnicity, class, age, and disability that contribute to disproportionate impact. Too often, peacekeeping personnel's assumptions about race and gender mean they apply different values of worth, credibility, dangerousness, and deservingness to local actors in conflict and post conflict situations.

Prejudice is rife within and between organizations in peacekeeping and between the peacekeepers and the local population, and leads to abuses of power. Razack argues this is to be expected given that peacekeeping operates under a logic of neo-colonialism, with those living in sites of conflict seen as needing the 'civilizing' influence of the UN mission, with local institutions neglected and the country treated as a 'blank space' for the UN model.

However, a rejection of a neo-colonial approach does not necessitate the rejection of peacekeeping missions, just as rejection of the dominance of the militaristic masculinity does not necessitate the rejection of the use of militaries in peacekeeping missions. Just as ‘regendering the military’ can destabilize the masculine-feminine boundary, Fernández Moreno et al. similarly argue that the experiences of the Brazil-led MINUSTAH destabilizes the colonial/post-colonial binary and compels us to 'emphasize the hybridism and ambivalence of all identities,' and to recognize the multiple improvisations and negotiations inherent in the encounters between the liberal peace operation model and its multinational agents. Again, in training, role-playing provides an opportunity to develop empathy and appreciation of the perspective of those whose identity is different from one's own.

The necessity of cultural awareness among the international peacekeeping personnel is as needed as that between the local populations and peacekeepers on the ground in missions, where communication and cooperation is greatly enhanced if cultural awareness and sensitivity is present.

There must be, first, basic knowledge of, respect for, and accommodation for key appropriate behaviours (such as different ways of eating according to customs of other peacekeeping personnel and local populations) and knowledge of key religious behaviours and events and their impact on behaviour, such as prayer rituals and Ramadan. Secondly, interaction between peacekeepers of different cultures and with local people must communicate genuine respect for symbols and world views that are different from one's own, including the role of memory, history and identity in the case of the local populations. This also holds for interaction with peacekeeping personnel from organizations that have different structures, institutional cultures and organizational identities, such as personnel from militaries or police or International civilian organizations. In the context of peacekeeping, in many respects a massive exercise in problem-solving, culture is important because it is the basis upon which people generate options for structuring their actions and creating solutions to problems.

This is recognized in the UN's core training manuals which ask that peacekeepers show a degree of reflexivity in order to increase chances of improving decision-making. Awareness of peacekeepers own perspectives ‘allows us to consider the possibility that there may be other ways of seeing a situation ... to both understand the ‘other’ culture(s), as well as being reflective about one's own culture.'
Experiential learning, specifically role-playing, requires knowledge of the relevant soft skills in peacekeeping, and construction of authentic scenarios. Qualitative data is one means of gathering the required knowledge and understanding. The evidence from the interviews for this article demonstrates the contextual, interactive, and discovery nature of peacekeeping in a complex collaborative environment. The first step to understanding the type of training needed in soft skills is to listen to the peacekeepers' experiences, as there is a gap between pre-deployment training and actual mission experience in the field.

**Methodology**

The interviews were conducted by teams of interviewers under the auspices of a European Commission funded project. The interviewing teams came from Trinity College Dublin; the University of Ulster; the University of Laurea in Finland; the War Studies University in Poland, and the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. 177 experienced peacekeeping personnel (108 military, 52 police, and 17 civilian) across 6 countries (Ireland, UK, Poland, Finland, Bulgaria and Portugal) were interviewed in depth about their experiences on deployment to ascertain what training they had received and what they wanted more of, how they experienced soft skills in the field, what were those crucial soft skills, and how they improvised when the training they received had not prepared them for the experience. 53 of the 177 interviewees were female.

The six countries were chosen because they capture geographical and national diversity within Europe. The interviews, all voluntary, took place between January and March 2017. They were 1.5–2 hours long, and were recorded and later transcribed in full.

Qualitative in-depth interviews were chosen as the best way to capture the experiences of the peacekeeping personnel. The interviewers across all six countries followed a Methodological Guide to ensure consistency of method and data collected. The guide included the timeline for interviewing and transcription, assignment of interviews amongst partners, recruitment statement, ethics guide, data management information, consent forms, interviewing technique, an interview guide, customized questionnaires for military, police and NGO/civilian personnel, and a transcription guide.

The questionnaires were organized around the soft skills identified as either not offered at all or in limited form in existing training, but also drew on issues identified in the literature as important: cooperation, communication, gender awareness, sexuality, cultural awareness, trust, and stress. The questionnaires comprised mostly open-ended questions to prompt the recall of experiences to do with the topics. The interviewer always looked for specific examples and details, e.g. if they talk about meeting locals, ask where did they meet (whose house, what location), what did they wear, were there ‘niceties’ (e.g. drinks, food offered, what was it), who did the talking on both sides (men? women? senior? junior?) how was it decided who would represent the peacekeepers (was there consideration given to who would be best received/get the most intelligence etc.), what preparation if any was given?

A cross sectional sample of the interviews were coded, drawing up initial codes, and these were then refined in an iterative process of coding the data. A Coding Guide was shared with the designated researchers to implement, to ensure consistency across the interviewees from each location. This was a step by step guide to the process of coding which breaks the material down into components that can then be re-compiled/assembled to understand particular themes. Each interviewer/coder worked at three levels of coding: overarching themes and then sub-themes and sub-sub themes.

A Coding Table was provided which contained codes for overarching themes, sub themes and sub-sub themes for each of: communication, cooperation, gender, sexualities, cultural awareness – mission organizations, cultural awareness – local population, leadership, preparation, training, perceptions of others (with an extensive list of others).

The decision to focus on gender awareness, cultural awareness and communication was determined by an initial focus in the project on gender and culture, and underpinned the decision to over sample female interviewees.

The coding and the analysis of the data drew on a ‘grounded theory’ approach, so there was a theoretical orientation and then an iterative working back and forth between the data and theory. There was a theoretical orientation in terms of what was important, drawn from the literature and the initial work in the project on existing training, and also from the feminist methodological orientation of the Principal Investigator that emphasizes ‘standpoint theory’. The goal was to give the space to each interviewee to express their subjective, everyday, experiential ‘knowing’, so that their perspectives based on their own social and political experience could be captured by the interviewer. In particular, on the issues of gender and culture, the coding and analysis were informed by the idea that the perspectives of marginalized individuals can help create more objective accounts of the world (including the salient soft skills required), as they are able to recognize patterns of behaviour that those immersed in the dominant group culture are unable to recognize. The emphasis on stories and experiences was driven by both the need for authentic detail for the storylines and themes in the GAP game, and theoretically by the understanding that small shifts in awareness and behaviour, such as initially practiced in a role-playing game, can lead to transformative change, particularly if those shifts are the focus of attention and discussion, tackling the issue of shifting structured world views that take the existing status quo as ‘normal’ or ‘the way things are’ and are part of resistance to change.
The interview data identified three soft skills as crucially important for peacekeeping: gender awareness, cultural awareness, and communication. The vast majority of the interviewees articulated a need for, and a cost in not having, skills that facilitated communication and cooperation with other peacekeeping personnel and the local population. Pre-deployment training was felt to be overly focused on security, and either lacking in any training in soft skills or the soft skills training was limited – occasional lectures – or piecemeal – available in some organizations but not all. This has produced problems stemming from lack of in-depth and standardized training. Peacekeeping personnel have responded to this situation by improvising, drawing from experience and personal qualities, with mixed results for the missions.

There is a hunger for more training in soft skills, most notably around culture and communication. Only half of all interviewees had some training in cultural awareness. Those who had received training commonly saw the training as information based and inadequate for the environment on peacekeeping missions, both in terms of cooperation with other militaries and with the local populations. The majority of respondents expressed a desire for more nuanced training in cultural awareness and competency. A minority had received training in gender awareness, and while almost all the female respondents saw more gender awareness training as necessary, only a minority of men did.

Three key challenges for training emerged from the data.

1. The need for more nuanced training in cultural awareness.
2. The need for training in communication with populations of diversity.
3. The need to reduce ‘gender blindness’ and association of gender with ‘woman’.

(1) The Need for More Nuanced Training in Cultural Awareness.

The most common feedback from interviewees was the need for cultural awareness training to focus on communication and optimizing diversity, rather than limiting training to information sharing. Cultural training was seen as needing to encompass respect and understanding of the local populations, but also understanding and respect of the culture of colleagues from other organizations in the mission.

All respondents lacked training in practical issues, daily-life differences, seriousness of approach to religious affairs, and awareness of issues they may face. Some of the most important were: culture of eating, issues with time, approach to honour and respect, facilitating observance of religious holidays such as Ramadan, and understanding the culture of gift exchange. Despite the fact that some of them were told that ‘people there may often be late’ or ‘you need to give them something to gain trust’, interviewed peacekeepers had to figure it out on their own that failing to grasp sensibility of such issues can seriously obstruct and even imperil the mission.

The overwhelming majority of respondents felt unprepared and disadvantaged by their lack of skills in how to interact effectively with the people they met on the mission. Cultural awareness, gender awareness and communication skills are commonly thought of in academic research, and in organizational preparedness, in terms of interacting with the local populations in deployments, and the training available deals with culture in this way. However, equally as important is cultural awareness, gender awareness and communication skills between organizations deployed on the mission, and even within them. Militaries have significant commonality in terms of structure and organizational culture, but can also differ significantly. The Irish and Finnish militaries would seem to have a lot in common (small militaries and nations, military dedicated to peacekeeping, both European nations). However, the Irish military is a professional organization, whereas the typical Finnish military peacekeeper is a reservist whose primary organizational/work identity is his or her civilian occupation. This has caused tensions in how to operate in joint patrols, with the Irish notably more comfortable in potentially volatile situations, as their whole work identity and training is geared to being a professional soldier. However, the Irish peacekeepers failed to see that the Finns, with their higher level of gender awareness, both as a military and nation, could have improved the Irish personnel’s ability to be aware of the impact of the heteronormatively masculine culture of the peacekeeping environment on both women and men, and also of the impact of gender in interacting with the local population. Equally the Finns failed to see the value in gaining the trust of the local population (in a relatively stable mission) and that this involved stopping into shops and getting to know individual locals, in an alien environment. There were differences which were discussed in terms of frustration when they were in fact complementarities between the two militaries which cultural awareness training could reveal as resources stemming from cultural diversity.

When significant ethnic cultural difference is added in, as when there are militaries from several continents deployed together, the tendency has been for peacekeepers from different militaries to keep their distance from each other. Differences in approach
The vast majority struggled with communication as they are required to interact with such a vast array of people, organizationally escalate from lack of knowledge of the appropriate behaviour in the cultural environment. enlisted personnel are the front line in interaction on patrols, this can have serious consequences and incidents can be caused or information and complained that officers get what training is available. Given that the nature of peacekeeping means that knowledge of, and accommodation of, cultural and religious practices was seen by international police as something that they should be assigned the early shifts was one pragmatic step that sent a strong message and several felt they were unaware of and were not prepared for, and had to figure out as they went along. Recognizing that personnel who were fasting during Ramadan faced in their work with their colleagues. Untangling gender and cultural dynamics was particularly fraught. Women police officers had to deal with situations where they were relegated to staying at the police station and even asked to make tea by male colleagues from cultural backgrounds that had protective masculinity as part of their gender identity. Knowing how to handle such situations for women, and appreciation of gender identities and expectations and their impact on their female colleagues by male police officers, requires training in gender and cultural awareness.

Differing police resources and cultural styles can cause tension and potential problems as well as offering resources if recognized and managed. A Northern Irish police officer recalled in Kosovo a situation where his colleague from the US wanted to deal with potential trouble makers at an inter-ethnic basketball match by taking one trouble-maker and beating him up at the game to send the message that violence would not be tolerated. The Police Service of Northern Ireland officer had no formal authority over his colleague but had the national and organizational cultural awareness and communication competence to recognize the problem and dissuade him of this tactic and to accept a more community oriented, non-violent, approach of visible presence and interaction to pre-empt and de-escalate any potential incidents.

Knowledge of, and accommodation of, cultural and religious practices was seen by international police as something that they were not prepared for, and had to figure out as they went along. Recognizing that personnel who were fasting during Ramadan should be assigned the early shifts was one pragmatic step that sent a strong message and several felt they were unaware of and unprepared for this. In practice, cultural training was frequently provided by language assistants, who could offer far more than literal translation. However, personnel had to be cautious as the language assistants usually came from one or other of conflicting nationalities among their colleagues, as well as the local populations. Besides the fact that different nations send individuals with varying degrees of traditional police skills training and civilian training, the majority learned that handling different styles of interaction and awareness of the impact of gender norms and cultural norms was the key challenge faced in their work with their colleagues. Untangling gender and cultural dynamics was particularly fraught. Women police officers had to deal with situations where they were relegated to staying at the police station and even asked to make tea by male colleagues from cultural backgrounds that had protective masculinity as part of their gender identity. Knowing how to handle such situations for women, and appreciation of gender identities and expectations and their impact on their female colleagues by male police officers, requires training in gender and cultural awareness.

Within the military, rank influences who gets access to cultural training – many enlisted officers received none or minimal information and complained that officers get what training is available. Given that the nature of peacekeeping means that enlisted personnel are the front line in interaction on patrols, this can have serious consequences and incidents can be caused or escalate from lack of knowledge of the appropriate behaviour in the cultural environment.

(2) The Need for Training in Communication in Populations of Diversity.

The vast majority struggled with communication as they are required to interact with such a vast array of people, organizationally
and culturally. Unlike gender awareness and cultural awareness, of which there is limited informational training, communication training was not received at all by the vast majority of respondents.

With the exception of training as part of CIMIC (Civil–Military Coordination) roles and for the Irish Navy involved in search and rescue missions in the Mediterranean, no formal communication skills training were mentioned by the participants. Language skills are seen as key. For non-English speaking militaries, police and civilians, competence in the English language is regarded as a key communication skill. For all, basic language skills in the language of the local populations is seen as desirable. In their professional duties, it was widely recognized that minimizing jargon when dealing with civilians or other organizations was seen as important for militaries, police and international civilian workers.

From all organizations’ perspective, improvised solutions in communication with personnel from other organizations and the local population focused around sharing basic information about family, food and showing interest in the other person’s family and food. Sport was also a key common topic, and in one instance, rescued a Portuguese police officer who was surrounded by Palestinian youth who were convinced he was an Israeli spy. It was only when he frantically thought of ‘Rinaldo’ [Portuguese footballer] did he manage to convince his apprehenders that he was Portuguese and the atmosphere swiftly changed from threatening to joyous discussion of Rinaldo’s achievements.

In a peacekeeping role, ensuring the appearance as well as the practice of impartiality and neutrality requires consistency in message when engaging with differing sides to conflict. No matter who they were dealing with, most peacekeepers felt it was important to communicate non-aggression, both verbally and non-verbally. However, as with cultural awareness, officers were more likely to receive the limited training available. One Irish officer recalled passing on training in body language to personnel to put the palms of their hands towards the potential aggressors, not their knuckles, as this sent a subliminal message of a firm but non-threatening stance.

Most expressed a desire to have the opportunity to practice communicating – in essence, experiential training in communication. A police officer mentioned it would be useful to have practice at interacting with local people at road blocks, which would happen frequently.

(3) The Need to Reduce ‘Gender Blindness’ and Association of Gender with ‘Woman’

In research and training, gender awareness is most frequently thought of in terms of the cultural differences around gender between the international peacekeepers and the local populations, particularly if the society has more traditional gender norms than the nations comprising the peacekeeping mission. The role of gender in shaping the interaction between, and experience of, peacekeeping personnel is typically approached through equality policies, emphasizing the legal requirements and prohibitions, rather than the role daily interaction plays in shaping the institutional culture of the mission. It is also typically focusing on gender as being about ‘woman’. Most of the interviewees in their stories conflated ‘gender’ with ‘woman’ though there is a small and slowly emerging awareness of the role ‘masculinities’ play both in terms of interacting with the local culture(s) and in terms of interaction between the organizations comprising the peacekeeping mission.

Although gender was discussed by all respondents as having an impact on the ability to successfully interact with the local populations in a mission, there was an interesting ‘blindness’ to the accounts from most of the male respondents who primarily focused on the local populations. The majority of the female respondents were explicit that gender played a role in how they interacted with others and how others responded to and interacted with them, and that this included peacekeeping personnel as well as the local populations.

Most of the male interviewees, when explicitly asked, recounted situations where gender had a negative or positive impact just as they did culture. A key difference was that with culture they asked for more training, but did so much less frequently for gender. Many felt that gender was dealt with once they had a lecture on it pre-deployment, yet the stories they recounted revealed the daily and persistent impact of gender on their colleagues and their ability to be effective with the local population. The female civilian respondents, including police trainers, reported that their male colleagues were blind to the impact of their gender in the daily details such as freedom of movement – the practical and social difficulty of going to a hotel or bar as a lone woman to eat, drink and relax – and professional authority – when they had to do their job in the face of sexist opposition from male colleagues, both international and local.

Most of the militaries and police have actively recruited women in the last 25 years but although there is acceptance of their presence, it can still be grudging, and older personnel in particular find it hard to adjust. The interviews make evident that the transition to a mixed gender organization has been bumpy for almost all of the organizations interviewed, with a lot of men subtly ‘policing’ the boundaries of the masculine culture of the organizations, mainly through sexist humour, and criticism of women’s physical ability and willingness to get their hands dirty.

Most of the organizations had annual gender awareness training as is typically required due to equality legislation within modern militaries and police, but this training is lecture based and is widely viewed as being only about women, and a ‘box-ticking
exercise’. There is no special gender awareness training given to personnel going on deployment, although sometimes it is discussed in terms of cultural awareness. Only a few from each organization expressed a recognition that gender awareness training is needed for peacekeeping, the exception being Finland, where gender was raised as important for peacekeeping missions in a number of ways, and by both male and female interviewees. There was a low awareness among most of the male interviewees from all organizations of the gendered nature of conflict situations and the persistence of a hegemonically masculine culture within their own organizations.

When gender was discussed, it was primarily in terms of operational effectiveness in terms of female officers having the ability to access and communicate with the female local population in traditional societies. There was significant variation across nations in the degree of acceptance of mixed gender peacekeeping deployments, particularly for the militaries, with the Polish and Bulgarian interviewees, both men and women, having a tendency to express support for essentialized ideas of masculine ‘strength’ and female ‘weakness’ and questioning women’s ability to be soldiers. The Irish, Northern Irish and Portuguese respondents accepted the ability of females to be soldiers and police officers but assumed that they would ‘fit in’ to the (unspoken masculine) norm of a military or police peacekeeper. The Finnish military were the most likely to problematize gender in their own organization, the organizations they cooperated with, and the local populations, and specifically saw the dominant norms in their own military and the organizations they worked with on missions (military, police and large international organizations) as masculine in culture and not friendly to women.

Conclusion

There is a clear gap in training for personnel (military, police and civilian) deployed on peacekeeping missions. One hundred and seventy-seven experienced peacekeepers identified communication, gender awareness, and cultural awareness as crucial skills in which they did not receive appropriate training. They either improvised solutions to, or in lacking awareness of what was needed, were less effective than they could have been in their role on the mission. Role-playing is the most effective means of learning these soft skills as it emphasizes the experiential aspect and allows for cost-free failing. However, it is costly and logistically prohibitive to roll out to all personnel going on deployment. Virtual training in role-playing holds out significant potential for experiential and interaction based training that can be universally deployed, and is in line with the growing tendency to deliver training digitally or in a blended way with real world interaction.

An emphasis on ‘soft skills’ will increase understanding of other personnel in the mission both in the international organizations and in local organizations such as police forces. Such an increase in understanding makes communication and cooperation more effective and hence improves the performance of the mission. As none of the organizations can achieve the goals of the mission alone, they are dependent on each other for the mission to be a ‘success’. More effective and efficient mission implementation will ultimately reduce the cost of such missions and ultimately increase global security. There is a cumulative effect also in that the more one plays different roles, the greater one’s ability is to put oneself in another person’s shoes or at least recognize that their motivation, communication and priorities may be different and warrant understanding. Greater empathy and greater awareness of gender, culture and the communication skills can have a transformative effect on organizations that are hierarchical, addressing long standing and seemingly intractable challenges such as making peacekeeping missions more equitable and inclusive.

1. Holohan, “Diversity Management in the Armed Forces.” A description of the project was outlined in a conference presentation (but not a paper) by the author. 
3. GAP is an EU H2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation project and the length of the project is 30 months, culminating in the delivery of a module containing the game in February 2019. GAP develops a curriculum in relevant ‘soft skills’ (including cooperation, communication, gender and cultural awareness) for personnel from diverse organizations working in the field of conflict prevention, peacebuilding and peacekeeping operations. This curriculum is embedded in a digital role-playing game and learning materials are included. Assessment in-game is by behavioural metrics, and out-game by customized measures and reflections and discussions pre and post the digital role-playing game. The learning objectives are benchmarked against international standards, and a digital ‘skills passport’ verifies the achievement of the learning objectives. GAP thus fills a gap in training and offers an efficient and cost effective way of delivering transferable and standardized training in these skills. 
4. Rubinstein, Keller and Scherger, “Culture and Interoperability in Integrated Missions.” 
5. Ibid. 
6. Curran, “Training for Peacekeeping,” Curran discusses how the development and spread of international peacekeeping training centres marks an expansion and deepening of the culture and practice of training. Of the burgeoning centres around the globe a considerable number are members of the voluntary and informal organization, the International Association of Peacekeeping Training Centres (IAPTC). Since its foundation in 1995, the IAPTC has held 24 annual conferences. The
organization describes itself as being a forum for training personnel for discussions relating to training ‘without having to deal with national interests.’

7. The alternative is training delivered via the Internet and digital technologies; Woodhouse and Ramsbotham, “Cosmopolitan Peacekeeping and the Globalization of Security,” 139–5 argue that the field of conflict resolution is being affected by the impact of information and communication technologies. The UN approved Peace Operations Training Institute (POTI) provides free and multilingual delivery of e-learning courses on peacekeeping’ and has run free ELAP (E-Learning for African Peacekeepers) and ELPKAC (E-Learning for Peacekeepers from Latin America and the Caribbean) programmes.

8. Romero et al., “Can Serious Games Contribute to Developing and Sustaining 21st Century Skills?”


12. Ormrod, Educational Psychology: Principles and Applications.


17. ESDC, A Comprehensive Approach to Gender in Operations.


19. Tannen, You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation; Whitworth, Men, Militarism and UN Peacekeeping.


22. Whitworth, Men, Militarism and UN Peacekeeping.


25. Enloe, Bananas, Beaches and Bases.


27. Laplange, “The Absence of Masculinity”


29. Lombardo and Mergaert, “Resistance in Gender Training and Mainstream Processes.”


32. Seager and Hartmann, Mainstreaming Gender in Environmental Assessment and Early Warning.

33. Razack, “Dark Threats and White Knights.”

34. During the last decade several studies examining specific aspects of culture have appeared. Heiberg, “Peacekeepers and Local Populations: Some Comments on UNIFIL,” 147–69. Marianne Heiberg in her study of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon showed that the relationship developed with local populations was crucial for mission success. See also Duffey, “Cultural Issues in Contemporary Peacekeeping” 142–68; Rubenstein, “Intervention and Culture: An Anthropological Approach,” 527–44; Rubenstein, “Culture, International Affairs and Peacekeeping,” 41–61.

35. Holohan, Networks of Democracy.


38. Strauss and Corbin, “Grounded Theory Methodology.”


40. Bustelo, Ferguson, and Forest, The Politics of Feminist Knowledge Transfer.

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