

# Intervention and Culture: An Anthropological Approach to Peace Operations

ROBERT A. RUBINSTEIN\*

*The Maxwell School of Syracuse University, NY, USA*

Culture is increasingly an important consideration in peace operations. Efforts to ameliorate culture-based difficulties between organizations participating in missions and between mission elements and local populations are proliferating. These focus on providing guidance about what to expect and how to act toward individuals from other cultural groups. This article shows that such advice is insufficient for understanding how culture affects peacekeeping. A general framework is presented for linking cultural elements to a deeper symbolic level from which peacekeeping derives its legitimacy, standing, and authority. The importance of the root metaphor of the United Nations as an institution for creating a world in which national interests and cut-throat geopolitical power relations are trumped by collective action is explicated. Peacekeeping is shown to be linked to this root metaphor through a number of behavioral inversions. When those inversions are not part of a peacekeeping mission, the entire instrument of peacekeeping is destabilized.

**Keywords** Peacekeeping • United Nations • intervention • symbol system • cultural inversion

SINCE THE MID-1980s, multilateral peacekeeping has become the research focus for an increasing number of anthropologists. This is not surprising. Peacekeeping has always brought together people from a variety of different backgrounds, thus creating challenging conditions for cultural interaction. As a consequence, peacekeeping provides a site for exploring a variety of questions about how culture affects social life. For instance, bringing together troops from different national militaries creates opportunities for cross-cultural misunderstanding between members of different military organizations, as does placing these troops among a people with whom they are culturally unfamiliar (Rubinstein, 1989, 1993). When peace missions involve nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or

international agencies, the opportunities for cross-cultural conflicts multiply (Rubinstein, 2003a; Slim, 1996). No matter the size or scope of a peacekeeping operation, it is fraught with potential for miscommunication and conflict to arise among individuals and organizational elements in the mission and between these and local communities (Duffey, 2000; Heiberg, 1990). Such operations also create the conditions under which criminal activities or the institution of neocolonial relationships can emerge (Ghosh, 1994; Rehn & Sirleaf, 2002).

In this article, I explore some of the ways in which intervention is necessarily embedded in a matrix of symbolic meaning. I then apply this view to peacekeeping, and use it to explore the role of cultural dispositions in creating the conditions in which peacekeeping achieves success. Anticipating the analysis in the article, the argument presented can be summarized as follows. Increasingly, 'cultural awareness' and 'cultural sensitivity' are seen as important to peacekeeping. This cultural concern manifests in two areas: first, in efforts aimed at decreasing organizational-cultural misunderstandings among elements of peacekeeping missions; second, in activities intended to increase the understanding of the local cultures in which the missions are deployed. In both areas, efforts focus on relatively surface aspects of culture. This is insufficient for understanding how culture affects peacekeeping. A more general framework is required for understanding how cultural elements fit into the deeper symbolic framework from which peacekeeping derives its legitimacy, standing, and authority for action. This deeper framework is found by engaging the root metaphor of the United Nations as an institution for creating a world in which national interests and cut-throat geopolitical power relations are trumped by collective action. The symbolic capital of peacekeeping is linked to that root metaphor through a series of reversals and inversions that tie peacekeeping missions to the root metaphor. When those inversions are not part of a peacekeeping mission, the entire instrument of peacekeeping is destabilized.

## Culture in Intervention

Intervention always involves claims about legitimacy, standing, and authority that are socially constructed and culturally constituted. This means, in part, that interventions take place in the context of a system of understanding and action that is dynamic and contingent. That is, the range of possible action and its interpretation are the result of an ongoing interactive process among individuals, communities, and their environments. It is from this repetitive, mutually affecting interaction that cognitive, affective, and directive frameworks of understanding – durable dispositions and expected

behaviors – emerge over time (Bourdieu, 1990; Maturana & Varela, 1988). The meaningful patterned activities that follow from these dispositions are cultural practices.

Interventions take place within a complex social setting that is part of a web of meaning. As a result, the actions of interveners are always doubly meaningful. The intervener maintains a perspective on the issues at hand and, by taking action to try to change that situation, takes a position on the situation (Betts, 1994). At the same time, those who receive the intervention make it meaningful from within their own experience and cultural framework. Sometimes, this can lead to interveners having understandings of what they are doing that are very different from those of the people who are subject to the intervention.

In the case of ‘female circumcision’, for instance, Western interveners may conceive of their efforts to abolish this practice as supporting universal human rights, while those who experience the intervention may instead view it as an attack on their identity (Lane & Rubinstein, 1996). In peace-keeping, the divergence of understanding may present a major difficulty. In the multilateral operations in Somalia, for example, representatives of the international community at one point saw their mission as strictly humanitarian: the saving of lives through the distribution of food. In contrast, many Somalis believed that the operation was intended to convert the Muslim population to Christianity or viewed it as an attack on their communities and political leaders (Hirsch & Oakley, 1995; Sahnoun, 1994; Stanton, 2001). In addition, military and civilian elements of the Somalia missions used different understandings of ‘security’ and ‘management’, and this made coordination within the mission especially difficult (Duffey, 2000; Rubinstein, 2003a).

Implicitly or explicitly, all interventions involve the assertion by the interveners that what they are doing is the right thing to do. This has three components. It involves claims that the activities are legitimate, that the intervener is the right person or group to carry out those activities, and that they have the authority to do so. *Legitimacy* is the belief that the actions being undertaken are appropriate. Judgments of appropriateness of behavior depend heavily on sensibilities about what actions are permissible and reasonable in a particular circumstance. Such judgments are based in the durable dispositions created by cultural practices and are embodied in what Bourdieu (1990) calls *habitus*; that is, they are culturally constituted.

Not everyone can carry out the actions that can be legitimately taken in particular circumstances. For instance, in the United States, in mainstream understandings of health and illness it is legitimate to treat a person who has an infectious disease – perhaps a sore throat and a fever caused by a streptococcal infection – with an antibiotic. Yet, not everyone has the proper status to do so. Only a particular class of people, licensed medical professionals, can carry out that particular intervention. Thus, when a person or

group makes an intervention, they are claiming to have *standing* to do so. Such a claim involves an assertion by the interveners that they have the appropriate status to carry out the intervention. Claims of standing are, once again, culturally constituted. For instance, mediation has become a significant tool in the area of dispute resolution. But, who has the standing to be a mediator? In the United States, the mainstream understanding is that, to have standing as a mediator, the intervener should be neutral, and age and other characteristics are largely irrelevant. But, in some other societies, as among traditional Jordanians, in order to have standing as a mediator, the intervener must have a stake in the conflict and preferably be a respected tribal elder (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993; Salem, 1997).

Finally, by their actions interveners assert that they have *authority* to intervene. This is a claim about power. Yet, as with legitimacy and standing, power is a culturally constituted resource. There are many types of power, ranging from the material to the normative (Foucault, 1980; Kertzer, 1988; Rubinstein & Tax, 1985). Which form is operative and supports intervention affects how people understand and react to that intervention.

In sum, interveners may appeal to impartial standards or claim that interventions uphold universal human rights or a consensus of the international community. But, how people organize themselves in relation to an intervention, as well as the meaning that they both give and take from the intervention, results in large measure from social and cultural dynamics. As I suggest later, for peacekeeping, legitimacy, standing, and authority are all rooted in a meaning system in which the United Nations is invested with a 'moral warrant' (O'Brien & Topolski, 1968: 13).

## Dynamic and Contingent Cultural Knowledge

Because interventions are culturally constituted, it is important for those who seek to make a difference through intervention to learn about the social and cultural aspects of the groups where they are intervening. Such knowledge will help interveners appreciate how their efforts might be received. It also allows interveners to shape their actions to more appropriately fit the culture of the groups they are working with. I stress that cultural descriptions – such as accounts of artifacts, activities, values, and beliefs – convey information collected by a researcher in a specific temporal and spatial context. Such characterizations can be helpful if their use is strictly anchored in specific circumstances.

The dynamic nature of social and cultural settings is something most of us recognize intuitively. For peacekeeping, this means that the cultural context and understanding of mission activities change over the life of the mission,

and even these will have different local nuances, so that perceptions of the mission vary throughout its area of operation. As Stanton (2001: xi) said of the mission in Somalia:

Troops deployed at the beginning of the intervention saw a significantly different picture than those deployed toward the end. Units in Mogadishu saw a different conflict than those in the hinterlands. There was no one 'Somalia experience;' rather, Somalia was a kaleidoscope of different experiences.

Nevertheless, it is easy to forget that there is temporal and spatial variation in the cultural contexts in which interventions occur. Treating the cultural context as a stable, homogeneous phenomenon commits the 'fallacy of detachable cultural descriptions' (Rubinstein, 1992). This fallacy entails three things that can hobble an intervention. When culture is taken to be a stable 'thing', interveners base their work on systematically oversimplified understandings of complex situations. This oversimplification of complex cultural settings leads to an assumption of homogeneity for people in the society. This can lead interveners into having uniform expectations about how people in a society will interpret and react to the intervention. In contrast, we know that there is great variation in the ways that culture is understood and enacted among people within a society. The assumptions of stability and homogeneity together lead to thinking about people in terms of stereotypes; that is, presuming that the important aspects of a culture can be captured in a description that need not be revised, and that this description applies uniformly to all people in the society, makes it possible for the intervener to work with an understanding of the society that uses some aspects of cultural and social life to represent what is actually a very much more complex reality. Since it is to this simplified, closed model that the intervener's experience is related, the model becomes impervious to modification and leads to the use of dehumanizing stereotypes (LeVine & Campbell, 1972).

In Somalia, for example, there developed among Canadian peace military personnel a view of Somali teenagers as looters. Those youths who were captured stealing from the camp stores were treated as such. Treating these teenagers within the 'looter' frame of reference, rather than the 'prisoner of war' frame of reference, had consequences for how they were processed and handled and determined how peacekeepers thought about these Somalis' rights (Bercuson, 1996). In this case, the Canadian soldiers were caught in a cycle in which they were prepared for hostile behavior on the part of Somali teenagers, whom they saw increasingly as seeking only to steal from them. Each attempt reinforced this narrow stereotype and increased the tensions between the soldiers and the Somali youth. Because the soldiers were interpreting actions in this stereotyped way, their views were never open to modification based on experiences with the Somali youth. This closed, stereotyped view of Somali teenagers was a contributing factor to the torture and murder of Shidane Abukar Arone in March 1993. A feedback cycle such

as this one is stereotyping in action. Amplifying the negative aspects of the social situation while making participants less open to new information creates a process of 'autistic hostility' (Newcomb, 1947).

## Towards Culturally Responsible Interventions

To what kinds of information must interveners be alert if they want an effective intervention based on people's culturally embedded understandings and wish to avoid the pitfalls of the fallacy of detachable cultural description? On what kinds of information can they rest the design and implementation of an intervention so that it is honest and respectful of the people they wish to help, while avoiding stereotyping those people? These are questions that frame efforts to bring culture into peacekeeping at both the level of the mission and the level of the interaction with the community where the mission is deployed. The approach to answering these questions has been essentially the same on both levels, whether it is trying to figure out how to better coordinate military-civilian mission components or how to interact better with the local population, thus 'winning their hearts and minds'.

A common approach to this problem is to start with 'briefs' that form the basis of a working understanding about the area and organizations involved in an intervention. An example of this is the book of general descriptions of international governmental organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and the military, together with even briefer descriptions of characteristics of individual agencies and organizations, compiled by Aall and her colleagues (Aall, Miltenberger & Weiss, 2000). Of course, it is not possible to describe in such a book all of the actors in peace operations. And, the organizations and institutions described in the book change over time in response to experience.

Some useful recommendations do result even from such cultural briefs. For instance, troops deploying to the Middle East are told not to show the soles of their feet, not to remove their sunglasses when interviewing a local person, and to avoid seeing a woman without her *hijab*. These recommendations are akin to the 'travelers' advice' offered in popular business books. They are certainly not harmful and may even be helpful to some degree, but they provide no generative understanding that can be used to think through novel situations which interveners inevitably face. Yet, relying on such briefs can also have some curious results. For example, in February 2004, after noting that 'we studied Iraq's customs, culture and religion as much as we could', Shigeru Ishiba, Director of Japan's Defense Agency, announced that Japanese troops going to Iraq were being told to grow moustaches so that they would 'blend in' among Iraqis (Yamaguchi, 2004). The ways in which

advice like this can go wrong are numerous, and, even if totally benign, it too provides no basis for responding intelligently to novel situations.

There is, therefore, an obvious need for a way of engaging culture so that the planning and implementation of missions avoids the trivial and the stereotypic. Such an approach begins by recognizing that how we act, speak about and represent an intervention and its target makes a difference. It does so because that discourse is interpreted both by interveners and by those at whom the intervention is directed in ways that are consistent with the web of meaning used by these groups, whether these are organizational cultures or local, community cultures. Hence, concentrating on specifying descriptive cultural elements at play in peacekeeping is not an adequate way to take culture into account. These need to be contextualized and embedded in an understanding of the meanings that are entrained by the symbolism within the mission and used by the local community.

Being alert to the cultural matrices within which intervention is set requires attention especially to two aspects of culture (Hofstede, 1991). First, culture consists of learned systems of meaning, transmitted through natural language and other symbol systems, having representational, directive, and affective functions, and capable of creating cultural entities and particular senses of reality. Through these systems of meaning, groups of people adapt to their environment and structure interpersonal activities. Second, as noted above, culture exists in the meaningful, patterned activities of individuals and groups – cultural practices.

In order to remain open to variations in the social and cultural settings in which they work, interveners must attend to the symbols used in a site to convey meaning. These symbols may be words, pictures, activities, or objects that convey meanings conventionally recognized by group members. Symbols do not exist in isolation; rather, they are part of a symbolic system. Also, symbols often link to repetitive, conventionalized group activities that take place in particular temporal and spatial settings. These activities are rituals that serve to reinforce conjoint action and create common perceptions.

Group members learn the proper ways of acting in various settings – the legitimate actions and expectations – through their own experiences, by observing the behavior of other members of their community, and by understanding the dynamics of actions that are held up as especially laudatory. People who engage in such actions can be called the ‘heroes’ of a group, though these may actually be fictitious, such as characters in a movie, or mythical (Bateson, 1988; Hofstede, 1991). Activities of other group members serve in themselves as exemplars of good cultural practice. In addition, people communicate about these cultural practices through language (itself one of those practices). For those who do not directly experience the activity, verbal and linguistic representations communicate that behaviors are comprehensible, plausible, justifiable, and socially acceptable. As a form of cul-

tural practice, linguistic activity occurs in durable patterns that characterize a community. These durable patterns are sometimes understood as communicative styles. Interveners must be aware of the different communicative styles that are used within the community in which the intervention takes place and within their own organization. Taken together, the cultural practices, symbols, and other cultural materials are entailed by and support root metaphors through which communities make meaning (Gupta, 2000; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Pepper, 1942). It is these cultural materials that form the basis of culturally specific analogical processes and through which peacekeeping developed symbolic capital.

## Peacekeeping on the Ground

Building on the preceding account of intervention as deeply enmeshed in systems of meaning, my claim is that understanding peacekeeping requires engaging it as a form of cultural practice, as meaningful patterned activities with symbolic importance. In the following sections, I sketch the principal outlines of such a view. To do this, I draw on a variety of sources for illustrative material. My thinking about this topic crystallized during an ethnographic study of the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) (Rubinstein, 1993, 1998). It has been supplemented and extended by interviews that I have conducted with people who have served in peacekeeping operations in Cambodia, East Timor, Somalia, and the former Yugoslavia, and I draw opportunistically on documentary sources as well. My point of entry for this work is the recognition that one of the most immediate problems facing the institution of peacekeeping is the need to integrate individuals with diverse backgrounds, understandings, and agendas into a quasi-corporate entity: 'the mission'.

### *Symbols in Peacekeeping*

Since its inception in 1948, peacekeeping has become a site for cultural activity: a kind of organizational culture has been formed that includes cultural practices, communicative styles, and strategies. This culture is in turn rooted in the image of the United Nations as a moral agent in the international community. It is through the activities incorporated in UN missions that peacekeeping created enough symbolic capital to turn itself into a major instrument of international action. Exactly what counts as a successful peacekeeping mission is actively contested. For example, many view the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) as successful, because it prevented a return to full-fledged hostilities on the island, while others view



it as unsuccessful because it froze the conflict and proved a disincentive for the parties to reach a settlement. But, one thing that all of the missions prior to the early 1990s did (even, arguably, the 1960 mission in Congo) was to reinforce and extend the symbolic frame of reference for understanding the United Nations and its actions as tied to the root metaphor of the privileging of pacific action. Indeed, by 1988 peacekeeping had accumulated so much symbolic capital that UN peacekeeping was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

This symbolic capital was built up by establishing practices that helped members of a mission develop common sentiments about who they are and what they are doing, and offered local populations similar messages so that they too recognized and respected the UN's symbolic warrant. Symbols and behavior communicate meaning both to mission participants and to local populations who are privy to them. Elsewhere, I have given an extended ethnographic account of how this works (Rubinstein, 1993), so here I will provide only a brief précis of that analysis just to indicate how deeply enmeshed in a symbolic frame of reference peacekeeping is.

During a mission, each military member wears a badge unique to the mission. This integrates members from many different national services into the mission. Included in the badge are often a variety of symbols that denote the international nature of the operation. These include multiple national flags or reference to the United Nations through its symbols or words. Wearing these symbols of the mission helps members of peacekeeping missions to be recognized by others as a member of 'a group', and their own recognition of this social status integrates them into it. As well, it helps local populations identify peacekeepers as belonging to the group, and they link those peacekeepers to the larger metaphorical space that the United Nations occupies in the social world of that population.

In addition to the badges, members of peace operations receive medals and ribbons in recognition of their service. These awards also create in-group/out-group distinctions, but, equally importantly, they also help to create collective representations within the mission. They affect participants' models of legitimate military action, and they also affect the various national services' cultural models of military service.

By creating a common orientation to the mission and helping to structure an in-group, symbols serve to integrate individuals into that group. Sometimes, the integrative task is explicit, and the badge includes symbols of national identity as well. In 1990, the People's Republic of China began to contribute troops to UNTSO. Nine officers joined the Observer Groups. Within one, Observer Detachment Damascus (ODD), the Chinese presence led to the redesign of the mission badge. Previously, the ODD badge showed the United Nations symbol and elements of the French, Soviet, and US flags. To this was added the Chinese flag. These and other symbols help integrate individuals into peacekeeping missions.

### *Ritual in Peacekeeping*

Peace operations rely on ritual activities at a variety of levels of their operations. Below, I will discuss how this happens at the macro level, but here again I look at what goes on within a mission. The ribbons and medals mentioned earlier are awarded in ceremonies. Changes in the organizational life of a mission are marked by ceremonies indicating, for example, a change of command or the joining or leaving of members.

On the ground, the tasks assigned to peacekeeping troops also take on a ritualized form. These include the activities of *maintaining Ops* (Observation Posts) or *being on patrol*. Many of these activities were part of the original observer missions and continue to be important in complex peacekeeping (Stanton, 2001). Ritual activity helps create a shared sense of meaning among the mission members, and it links them to a large collectivity and history as well.

As one United Nations Military Observer in UNTSO put it:

The mission in Damascus was the same as I thought of it. But the way they do it is therefore different. You can't use military force. You can't use any military power. I mean as a professional. When you think of the conflict, then you think of using artillery, tanks, whatever you have, the standard equipment [of] an army. The perception is different and they use the weapons for this and not defense. (Marine, Lt. Col.)

In the same way that religious symbols and rituals enacted and deployed during the Muslim fast of Ramadan or during the Catholic mass symbolically tie participants to a larger collectivity, both temporally and spatially (d'Aquili, Laughlin & McManus, 1978; Kertzer, 1988), so the language, symbols, and rituals enacted in peacekeeping missions link peacekeepers to historic missions, to other missions elsewhere in the world, and critically to the mythologized institution of UN peacekeeping as a whole.

## Legitimacy and Cultural Inversion in Peacekeeping

Some time ago, O'Brien & Topolski (1968) offered a complex analysis of the symbolic and ritual basis of the UN's standing as an actor in world affairs. Any symbolic and ritual activity contains within it complexities and contradictions, and an adequate treatment of those complexities is essential to the working out of the symbolic power and legitimacy of the institution. There is not sufficient space here to give a full analysis, so I extract from O'Brien & Topolski's account and refer the reader to it.

The legitimacy of the actions of the United Nations rests in major part on the organization's symbolizing a world order not dominated by national self-interests (O'Brien & Topolski, 1968). The root metaphor is of 'a pacific

Table 1. Cultural Inversions in Peacekeeping\*

| <b>Traditional military: Self-interested power politics (business as usual)</b> | <b>Peacekeeping: A possible new world</b>                                   |
|---|---|
| No foreign troops on sovereign soil   | Other countries' troops on sovereign soil                                   |
| Separate from potential adversaries   | Work with potential adversaries   |
| Retain national command of troops   | Command officer from other country  |
| Stealth and surprise  | Transparency of action  |
| No contact with civilians   | Intense interaction with civilians; cooperation with civilian organizations |
| Basic war-fighting skills used  | Negotiation and persuasion  |
| Victory through force   | Conflict management or resolution through pacific means                     |

\*This table extends Hansen, Ramsbotham & Woodhouse (2004: 12).

world order' in which the weak are empowered, the hungry fed, disease conquered, and conflicts settled peacefully. In short, the legitimacy of the United Nations rests in part on its supporting a cultural inversion: it creates a sociopolitical space in which actions that would be unacceptable or foolish for an ordinary state are considered normal and acceptable. Peacekeeping developed within the sway of this root metaphor. As peacekeeping developed, traditional military activities were used to support this image of the world transformed. Traditional military ritual and symbolism was appropriated and given new meaning in the context of peacekeeping. Through this and the highly ritualized and symbolic actions of the Security Council (see O'Brien & Topolski, 1968: 1–77), peacekeeping contributed to the elaboration of an image of an international community acting in a neutral, consensual manner to sustain a stable world community. The use of the military without weapons in the service of peace is a core image carried forward from the root metaphor of a pacific world order.

At the macro level, ritual activity is essential to the establishment of missions. The Security Council creates missions through conventionalized actions. These actions include various forms of consultation among members and the conduct of formal sessions of the Council. Language plays an important role here. The language used in resolutions to authorize or reauthorize operations conforms to a ritualized style.

The extensions of this basic inversion can be seen in the on-the-ground practices that characterize peacekeeping. Table 1 displays the symbolic oppositions that form the basis for the legitimacy, standing, and authority of peacekeeping missions. I present this as model of meaning, not as a descrip-

tion of every empirical circumstance in which peacekeeping takes place. In a sense, these oppositions represent the orienting dispositions that create the frame of reference within which peacekeeping was conceived by the international community, as well as the frame of reference within which it was interpreted by local actors, at least until the early 1990s.

These cultural inversions create a space for alternative political representations to develop. The inversions establish the symbolic world in which peacekeeping gains legitimacy, standing, and authority. I have indicated above that these inversions work to support peace operations at the group and mission level, and I have written in detail elsewhere about how this happens (Rubinstein, 1989, 1993, 2003b). Although there is not space to develop the analysis here, I point out that individual actions are important to the success of peacekeeping. How an individual acts in fulfilling his or her role in a mission depends in part upon the motivational state, which is linked to the larger symbolic meaning at the group, mission, and national levels (Rubinstein, 2003b).

### *Peacekeeping Under Fire*

Since the early 1990s, peace operations have been deployed more frequently than they were in the preceding 40 years. These later missions are often described as more complex than earlier inter-positional peacekeeping operations. Yet, many of the complexities faced by recent peace operations can be seen in earlier operations (Findlay, 2003; Heiberg, 1990; Urquhart, 1993). The existence of these complexities was, I believe, kept out of our consciousness by the apparent simplicity of those missions and by the relative lack of attention being paid by the international security community to local-level concerns. The work of peacekeeping is now acknowledged to involve a variety of activities. These include inter-positional peacekeeping; using various degrees of force to bring parties to a ceasefire (called peace enforcement); delivering humanitarian aid; and intervening in collapsed states to help administer society.

The florescence of peace operations came following the end of the Cold War, which resulted in an unbounded optimism about the prospects for cooperation within the UN (Urquhart, 1989) and for the roles that multi-lateral interventions might play (Boutros-Ghali, 1992, 1995). There was a real change in the actions of the Security Council – though, as I suggest below, perhaps not a change for better. The new political dynamics meant that there was less of a concern that missions have the consent of the parties than there was with earlier missions. As a result, the Security Council imposes many of the newer missions, deploying them does not depend on the ‘host’ parties agreeing to receive them, and the Council more easily authorizes missions to use force under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.

*Peacekeeping in Trouble*

What developed from the new missions authorized by the Council is a record of arguably failed interventions in 'failed states'. The interventions in Somalia, Rwanda, Yugoslavia, and East Timor are examples of peacekeeping that was less than successful. There has been a lot of study of why these peace operations have been disappointing, as the UN, national governments, and NGOs have conducted lessons-learned analyses. Accounts include a combination of a range of considerations: lack of political will, under-financing of missions, insufficient force, poor logistics and coordination, and mission creep, to name a few. Each of these plays a role in creating the conditions under which peace operations do not work as well as they might. I think that, paradoxically, the conditions that made it possible for such a rapid growth in peace operations also created the conditions that diminish their chances for success.

Missing from discussions about why peacekeeping is in trouble has been an appreciation of how these operations have lost much of their culturally constituted and symbolically achieved legitimacy, standing, and authority.

*Cultural Inversions Destablized*

Earlier, I suggested that the development of peacekeeping as cultural practices, symbols, and other cultural materials was entailed by, and in turn supported, root metaphor(s) (Gupta, 2000; Pepper, 1942) about a new cooperative, pacific world order. Symbols and metaphors have as one of their characteristics a quality of ambiguity, in that they support many meanings. Symbols, ritual, and metaphor are all examples of polysemic cultural phenomena (see Kertzer, 1988; Lakoff & Johnson, 1988). However, while they support many meanings, they will not support *any* meaning. I think that an important reason that peacekeeping is in trouble is that new missions have too often worked outside of the core meanings of the symbols of peacekeeping. They have come close to, if not crossed, the edge of what the root metaphor can support.

At the macro level of the international community, the discussions at the Security Council have changed in ways that limit both participation and discussion. Reisman (1993: 85–86) describes this change as follows:

as the Council has become more effective and powerful, it has become more secretive. Like a parliamentary *matryoskhka* (doll), it now contains ever-smaller 'mini-Councils,' each meeting behind closed doors without keeping records and each taking decisions secretly. Before the plenary Council meets in 'consultation,' in a special room assigned to it near the Security Council, the P-5 have met in 'consultation' in a special room now assigned to them outside the Security Council; and before they meet, the P-3 composed of the United States, the United Kingdom and France, have met in 'consultation' in one of their missions in New York. All of these meetings take place *in camera* and no

common minutes are kept. After the fifteen members of the Council have consulted and reached their decision, they adjourn to the Council's chamber, where they go through the formal motions of voting and announcing their decisions. Decisions that appear to go further than at any time in the history of the United Nations are now ultimately being taken, it seems, by a small group of states separately meeting in secret.

This change shifts the Council's deliberations from highly controversial, yet conventionalized, discussions in which plans for consensual, joint action appeared to be formed. As O'Brien & Topolski show, such activity is important to creating the image of the United Nations as a moral force for a cooperative, pacific world. The new reality Reissman describes has the opposite effect. It creates an image wherein self-interested power politics re-emerges as the rule, breaking with the symbolic traditions of peacekeeping and altering the public approval of peacekeeping. (My claim here is about the image projected by the Council's contentious discussions during the Cold War. It is obvious that power politics, especially between East and West, operated during the Cold War. However, the practices of the Council created an image that the missions it authorized emerged from a truly consultative, consensual process.)

The reintroduction of power politics into peacekeeping has also affected how peacekeepers experience the missions to which they are assigned. In the contemporary milieu, the practices that maintained legitimacy, standing, and authority are destabilized, at first by the Security Council's actions and then by the actions of national governments. As a result, the basic inversions that support the symbolic capital of peacekeeping are undone, thus pushing peacekeeping outside of the core frame of reference that used to support it. Not only the mission, but the entire institution is thus challenged. Drawing again on the model shown above, Table 2 describes the current situation.

These destabilizing actions deflate the space for alternative political representation by allowing cultural inversions and psychological reversals to revert to more usual states. In this confused environment, peace operations may create the opportunity for various *business as usual* practices to develop. These include various economic distortions, along with crime and prostitution (Chopra, 2000; Ghosh, 1994; Rehn & Sirleaf, 2002).

Elsewhere, I have explored how failure to appreciate the diverse organizational cultures of the groups involved in peace operations creates the possibilities for miscommunication and the intensification of confusion about a mission's legitimacy, standing, and authority (Rubinstein, 2003a). In complex missions, the local identities derived from organizational cultural experience create schisms among members of the mission. These images are supported by cultural dispositions.

To see that culture *qua* symbolic system of meaning and extensions of root metaphors are at play in contemporary peace operations, one need only listen to the contrasting voices of those working in an operation. In many

Table 2. Destabilizing Reversals in Peacekeeping

| <b>Traditional military: Self-interested power politics (business as usual)</b> | <b>Contemporary peacekeeping: A confused world</b>  |
|---|---|
| No foreign troops on sovereign soil   | Partial or coerced consent  |
| Separate from potential adversaries   | Fight against and work with potential adversaries   |
| Retain national command of troops   | Command officer from other country but also command by national capitals                            |
| Stealth and surprise  | Stealth and transparency of action  |
| No contact with civilians   | Contact with some but not other civilians; unclear lines of cooperation with civilian organizations |
| Basic war-fighting skills used  | War fighting and negotiation  |
| Victory through force   | Use of force and pacific means  |

settings, some militaries work from the metaphor by which 'security is separation', while their counterparts work from a different metaphor, 'security is contact'. The resulting practices differ greatly.

You could have lived there for the entire duration of the mission without ever having to step off the compound. . . . I could not go out without armed guards and traveling in a convoy, and would not walk out in the street and go to the market. (senior UN staff member, Somalia, 1993–94)

Interactions were discouraged to the point of threats of fines or jail. If you were caught giving candy, a bottle of water, or anything to the Somali locals, you would be fined or jailed. (Canadian soldier in Somalia)

It has always been dangerous to operate in a war zone, and the likelihood of being stopped for extortion has always been very high. These things come with the territory. We have to live among those we help. Our best protection is our behavior. (NGO field staff member, Somalia, 1993–94)

These different interpretations created problems for coordination within the mission. In addition, the separation imposed on the peacekeeping mission communicated a stance inconsistent with the basic metaphor on which peacekeeping's symbolic capital was accrued. Once that frame was broken by the peacekeeping mission, the local population reinterpreted the way they understood the mission. The abandonment of the 'possible new world of pacific relations' frame for the more traditional power politics frame allowed the local population to move the mission from a welcome agent of the world community to an unwelcome colonial agent.

## Intervention as Cultural Practice: Peacekeeping and Meaning

Image, expectation, and reputation play important roles in all intervention. This is especially true for peacekeeping, which depends heavily on cultural inversions for the maintenance of its core meanings. Yet, there has been relatively limited attention given to how these things affect peacekeeping.

The lack of attention to culture and meaning in peacekeeping is somewhat surprising. In other areas of social life, we are not so reticent about basing judgment on such intangible and contingent considerations. In estimating economic cycles, for instance, much credence is given to consumer confidence as a basis for economic actions. This is not just because it is an empirical indicator of the strength of an economy, but because it translates into real actions on the part of consumers and investors.

In the same way, 'peacekeeping confidence' translates into real actions on the ground, both by local populations and by mission participants. We must develop processes for ensuring that, in planning and implementing future peacekeeping, we work with an understanding of culture as a dynamic meaning-producing system and durable cultural dispositions. And, we must recognize that in planning and implementing peacekeeping missions, it is important that the missions be organized so as to support the inversions that link them to the root metaphor from which peacekeeping draws its standing, legitimacy, and authority. In situations where this link cannot be made, operations should be clearly designated and marked as something other than peacekeeping.

The challenge posed is to recognize that all interventions are embedded in culture. Yet, the need to be sensitive to the issues this understanding raises is certain:

The situation began nose-diving after New Year's, and hasn't stopped since. Everyday it gets worse, leading to stones flying at the UN, and worse, deservedly so. They have written in blood red letters 'UNTAET' on the old Indonesian torture center: but the human rights office doesn't even realize it was the torture center, so the message will be lost on them. (international civil servant, East Timor)

Culture remains a vital contributor to the efficacy of peacekeeping. It is essential to ensure that the symbolism and cultural practices incorporated into peacekeeping operations support and are supported by the meanings at the core of the root metaphor of a pacific world order, symbolized by the United Nations.

\* Robert A. Rubinstein (rar@syr.edu) is Professor of Anthropology and International Relations at the Maxwell School of Syracuse University, where he directed the Program on the Analysis and Resolution of Conflicts from 1994 to 2005. This work was supported



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