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**SOCIO-CULTURAL ASPECTS OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION:
THE PARTICULAR CASE STUDY OF SOME ROMANIAN TROOPS
DEPLOYED IN AFGHANISTAN**

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***Abstract:** This paper aims to highlight the importance of nonverbal communication in intercultural relations manifested between some of the Romanian combatants and members of the Afghan community. This type of communication occurred throughout the NATO mission in Afghanistan. The topic of nonverbal communication in relation with the Afghan culture has been precariously approached by the specialized literature, therefore attesting the urge for focusing on it and for analyzing the possible cultural shock that emerges on the very first contact with a fundamentally opposite culture. The paper is based on a qualitative research, having a sample of fifteen Romanian soldiers, and its main objective concentrates on the detection and assessment of the potential cultural perception of the shock felt by the Romanian military participants in the NATO mission in Afghanistan, together with the identification of the causes that produced it. This research may contribute to signaling the relevance of considering this actual matter, taking into account the tendency of reconfiguring some of the current armed conflicts and the great number of Romanian soldiers that are or will be exposed to interactions with representatives of other cultures, radically different from their own.*

***Keywords:** nonverbal communication, intercultural communication, theater of operations, cultural shock, Afghanistan*

1. INTRODUCTION

Considering the number of Romanian troops that are exposed to interaction with representatives of other cultures, in the context of the reconfiguration of contemporary armed conflicts, the focus on this topic is of great importance. This significance resides in the possibility of eradicating the causes of communication barriers based on elements of the non-verbal communication, prejudices and ethnical stereotypes. The results of the present research are equally useful for the Romanian troops participating at missions in Afghanistan, and for all those who, in some situations with various degrees of certitude, interact with the Afghan population.

From this perspective, in an open society, interaction with the representatives of diverse socio-cultural environments may also represent a matter of daily practice, because at the same time with the manifestation of globalization, not only at

economic level, but also at social, demographic and cultural ones, people’s chances of social advancement in a free society increase, too. The opening of borders offers the opportunity for frequent encounters between members of different cultural backgrounds. The relevance of this research is given by the very absence of an analysis in this area and, implicitly, by the significance which the non-verbal communication may hold in interpersonal interactions between Romanian soldiers and the Afghan population, whenever verbal communication is poor. Moreover, a research of this type, aimed to combine the concept of non-verbal communication with the status of Romanian soldier, is absent from the specialized literature.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Due to the global interest in the topic of non-verbal communication as well as its real value for

the inter-human and intercultural relations, there were numerous international studies and articles published in the past years; nonetheless, the Romanian specialized literature includes a limited number of such references, especially with regard to the association of nonverbal communication and the military. On one hand, the non-verbal communication still remains not profoundly studied within the Romanian Armed Forces, exempting a few specific researches: Lesenciuc *et al.* (2011), Coman (2011), Levonian & Lesenciuc (2014), Lesenciuc & Saghin (2015), Ivanciu & Popica (2015), Drăghici (2015) etc. On the other hand, within the allied foreign armed forces, not only that the non-verbal communication has been thoroughly studied, but handbooks were, also, issued for different armed forces categories. A probatory example is the U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences. As studies of this institute in the field of non-verbal communication, it worth being mentioned those signed by Segal (1994), Kline (1996), Peterson *et al.* (2006), Abbe *et al.* (2007), Blascovitch & Hartel (2008), Yager *et al.* (2009), Rosenthal *et al.* (2009), DeConstanza *et al.* (2015) etc.

For the present study the authors used the qualitative type of research, and although the number of respondents was reduced, the research was extensive due to the area of interest we focused on. This research is relevant for the identification of nonverbal communication barriers in relations with the locals during international military missions, in the context in which communication actors hold different cultural backgrounds.

We recorded 15 individual interviews, each of a length of about 30 minutes; the soldiers were of different military ranks and their average age was 36.2 years old. Regarding the interviewees' gender, 13 were males and 2 were females. The Romanian soldiers participated in the ISAF missions (International Security Assistance Force) under the NATO lead, between the years 2007 and 2015, and they were deployed in the following military bases: KAIA, ISAF HQ, KANDAHAR, LAGMAN and MESCAL.

3. DATA ANALYSIS

The first questions aimed at finding out the Romanian soldiers' motivations to participate in peace support operations in Afghanistan, a not very friendly theater of operations, with a local culture significantly different from their native one and which might put them in difficulty, in certain contexts. The answers were equally diverse, natural and expected. If most soldiers brought up

both financial advantages and curiosity, the wish to encounter a theater of operations or the cooperation with allies in a conflict situation, a third of them declared that they were motivated only by their need for self-assertion, for testing own limits in various contexts and for enriching personal and professional experience, whereas only one of the respondents motivated his participation in the mission only for financial gains. Our conclusions to this initial phase of our research were that assertion, curiosity, exceeding own limits or leaving obscure institutions behind for a while, were the most important reasons for the soldiers' taking the risk of participating in missions, and these answers were reflected in 14 out of the 15 interviewees. Out of the reasons mentioned above, for two thirds of the respondents, the financial gains prevailed, based on their disappointment with regard to the amount of payment received in their own country.

3.1 Mission planning. Concerning the mission planning, we intended to find out to what extent the data and skills achieved prior to the deployment to an unknown theater of operations, as well as the training specific to the mission cautioned the participants against a possible cultural shock on their first contact with the afghan culture. Bringing up the extent to which their military responsibilities in Romania prepared them for such a mission, 9 of the respondents considered that they were not useful. The other 6 respondents affirmed that the responsibilities they had in Romania were similar with those required by the mission abroad and they had generally been prepared, although mention should be made that their preparation was exclusively attributed to their military positions and specialization.

When asked about details of the mission planning, answers varied based on the branch where soldiers belonged (air force or land forces). The 10 soldiers belonging to the air force mentioned that there had been an initial theoretical training, achieved through one-day meetings, for several months, at the Air Force Staff, where they were presented the bases, the accommodation to the Afghan environment, especially to climate, information related to finances, logistics, medical facilities or humanitarian international law, as well as a short briefing about the Afghan culture. Secondly, the interviewees mentioned the practical training, consisting of firing training with the type of weapons existent in the military bases abroad, NBC (Nuclear-Biological-Chemical) training and engineering training. The training was about two weeks in length.

The soldiers belonging to the land forces benefited mostly of practical and specialized

training, consisting of various simulations and tactical situations, meant to implement the SOPs specific to their military positions, firing sessions with weapons they were about to use in Afghanistan, and intense physical training. The theoretical training included almost the same aspects like in the air force troops' case, but minor focus was set on the Afghan culture. One of the respondents stated that the purpose of their training was the achievement of cohesion among the troops, taking into account that they belonged to various bases and their military positions aboard required reciprocal trust, their lives depending on their comrades. Regarding the soldiers' knowledge of the Afghan culture at the moment of their selection for a mission in Afghanistan, most of them answered negatively. Only one respondent mentioned the fact that he had general knowledge of the Afghan culture obtained, out of his own curiosity, from colleagues that had been deployed there. The increased percent of negative answers is due to their lack of preparation with regard to conflicts of the past decades and the cultural differences implied by them. This type of preparation was out of the question since it was implied that soldiers participating in missions of this type were responsible for their personal preparation, such missions being, in most of the cases, a volunteering act, based on the reasons mentioned above.

To the question referring to the existence of an intensive module focused on the Afghan culture, 12 interviewees answered that it had been included in their theoretical training, though it was rather short, in terms of DOs and DON'Ts. Out of their answers, we can extract the following mentioning's: it is not polite to refuse an Afghan; the left hand should not be used during meals; it is not advisable to stare or talk to an Afghan woman (without the permission of the man who accompanies her), it is not good to lose temper toward Afghans, it is not desirable to ask an Afghan man about his wife.

Only two respondents declared that, apart from this brief presentation, they were also directed to some bibliography on Afghan culture elements and available courses for supplementary preparation. On the opposite side were the three interviewees who stated that this module of preparation had not been offered to them, and that they had obtained information on this topic from some brochures offered to them by colleagues that had had the experience of a mission in Afghanistan, or from others' stories.

3.2 The mission. Once deployed in the theaters of operations, the soldiers had to face a multitude of changes: climatic, social, cultural, organizational etc. Based on these realities, the

following questions are more than natural: are there any difficulties of accommodation to the new changes? If yes, how do they manifest and how long is it necessary for them to disappear? Out of the total of respondents, one third affirmed that they had experienced a certain amount of discomfort in getting accommodated, manifested through feelings of 'fear' (R.C.), 'paranoia' (R.C.), 'disorientation' (C.I.), 'tension' (A.T.), 'fear' (C.P.), motivated by too big cultural differences, lack of culture knowledge or the impact of images related to the Afghan culture with which they were familiar from mass-media. The other two thirds denied the accommodation difficulty, but this fact was motivated through their limited contact with Afghans during the first part of their mission, through their more intense personal preparation regarding this culture or through the experience of a pervious mission in a Muslim culture.

On average, taking into account their military positions, the soldiers needed between one week and one month for accommodation. It resulted naturally, due to the accomplishment of their daily duties, routine, talks with colleagues who had already earned experience in this culture, their families' and friends' support, as well as, so as one respondent had declared, "a dose of madness that makes you ignore the danger and think of that place like of any other workplace" (A.V.).

In order to determine the extent to which the cultural shock was caused by nonverbal communication elements, we asked the soldiers about the frequency of their contacts with the Afghans. Two thirds of them answered that their contacts were frequent; 6 of the respondents met the local people nearby the base, and only 4 soldiers met Afghans who were working on base, either in the cleaning area or enrolled in the Afghan Police or Army. Out of the 6 soldiers that had established direct contacts with the locals, 3 answered the previous question on the difficulty of accommodation, saying that they had experienced feelings of fear and tension, whereas one of them stated that he had not shared these feelings due to an earlier experience with a Muslim culture. Therefore, our deduction was that the proportion to which soldiers established contacts with the Afghans is directly connected with their displaying some inhibiting and defensive feelings. Contacts with the locals working on base do not generate such feelings due to strict checking applied to Afghan nationals and equally, to their familiarization with the western culture. Opposing to this situation, one third of the Romanian soldiers had kept a low level of contacts with the Afghan population, based on their military positions, encounters being rare and only inside the base. The

next questions aimed the details of these encounters with the Afghans, from the nonverbal perspective. Thus, taking each instance of nonverbal communication we will present the soldiers' appreciations.

As far as kinesics elements specific to the Afghan culture are concerned, the respondents admitted they did not have thorough knowledge. Therefore, we could only extract some basic aspects they had to take into account during encounters with the Afghan locals such as: avoidance of using the left hand, avoidance of showing the soles toward the Afghans or showing respect when saluting, by putting their hands over the heart to prove openness and honesty.

However, speaking about the most usual nonverbal elements used inappropriately by the Romanian soldiers in the presence of Afghans, we noticed that these are used without knowing their interpretation in the local culture. It is about the two recognized and unanimously understood gestures, used mainly in the western countries, especially in the U.S.A., for the OK term, meaning "everything is all right": the former consists of the raised thumb and the other finger kept tight in the fist, and the latter gesture is represented by the thumb and the pointer kept in a circle, while the remaining fingers are raised and stretched. The significance to these gestures is totally different for the Afghan culture, the former gesture is obscene, similar with the American one with the middle finger lifted, and the latter transmits to an Afghan the message that his value equals zero. Regarding these gestures, not even one Romanian soldier knew their local significance; while more than two thirds of them admitted that they had used the gestures and that the Afghan had reacted normally to them. This reality happens due to the familiarization of Afghans with the allied forces' behavior.

Related to proxemics, one third of the Romanian soldiers, in their interactions with the Afghan inhabitants, noticed that the locals had the tendency to get very close to them, an unusual posture for the Romanians: "... they were coming so close to us that we were almost touching. I felt it like a violation of my personal space" (C.I.). Another interesting aspect mentioned by one of the soldiers was that this tendency of coming close was applied mainly toward women from other cultures. It was probably caused by the major cultural differences regarding relationships between men and women in the Western countries. Inquired upon this aspect, two thirds of the soldiers said they had noticed that the woman was always going behind her husband, at a distance of a few meters. One of the respondents pointed out, a little bit amused by the occurrence, that the most evident

gesture of public tenderness was for a man to allow his wife to follow him at a rather short distance of two meters. "Two instead of five!" (V.V.).

Facial expressions are universal, and their understanding is the same everywhere. A grimace or a smile has the same meaning in Romania and in Afghanistan, as well. Nonetheless, there was one instance which none of the Romanian soldiers could explain: manifestation of emotions and the losing of temper. Asked about these facts, less than one thirds of the participants knew that the public manifestation of emotions was a sign of weakness and equally a reason for losing the respect of others.

With regard to eye contact, most of the Romanian soldiers knew the fact that it was accepted only in relations with men, still, without being a lengthened one, of the staring manner, and totally forbidden with Afghan women because this gesture was considered an insult to their husbands or relatives. Half of the respondents argued that they had not been warned against such occurrences during the preparation phase of the mission, whereas the other half declared that they had avoid eye contact on base of common sense. Just one of the respondents, out of curiosity, stared at an Afghan woman, fact which caused a violent verbal reaction on behalf of the man that was accompanying her. The incident came to an end the moment when the soldier turned his eyes and left the location of the incident.

Being a contact culture, the Afghan culture possesses a multitude of gestures with various meanings which we attempted to discover in the Romanian soldiers' experiences. Thus, they were asked about the touching between men and women, but also the ones between men and other men. All of the interviewees answered that they had not seen a man and woman touching each other, kissing or holding hands in the street, as it happens in the western cultures. Instead, two thirds of them noticed such gestures with men, fact which had been characterized by them as homosexuality, because the soldiers had not known that such gestures were in fact proofs of deep friendship and that they were absolutely natural. On the other side, all participants in the missions knew that Afghan women had not to be touched. Even the Afghan women working on military bases were being checked by female military personnel, and, for medical reasons, male doctors were allowed to examine them only on their approval.

As far as the Afghans' concept of punctuality and the manner in which they understand time, 12 of the interviewees argued that Afghans were not punctual and they did not have the same notion of time, and described them in terms such as: "they do not show respect for punctuality" (O.C.),

“punctuality with Afghans does not exist” (A.T.), “time for them equals zero, everything is going on beautifully, artistically. They are not stressed, because all humans die finally” (V.V.), “time has a different flow in the Afghan culture” (C.R.). A common phrase used by the members of the coalition, which most of the respondents remembered related to the Afghans’ punctuality was: “the clock is with us, time is with them”. The three respondents who did not know any aspects about this topic motivated their unawareness due to the lack of any encounters with the Afghans, in which they had to establish punctual meetings.

As for artifacts, we took interest in the Afghans’ code of dressing and the way in which it influenced the Romanian troops in their contacts with them. Related to this topic, all of the respondents described the traditional manner in which the local dressed, without knowing the names for the clothing items. One exception, though, was related to the women’s dresses, which had been known to them as burkas. Among the participants to this mission, one third admitted that they had feelings of fear in front of Afghans dressed in traditional clothes, motivating that their fear was due to their conviction that the locals were hiding something under their robes: weapons or explosives. Because of these reasons, most of the times, soldiers kept distance when passing by the locals. One soldier admitted that he feared women especially, because he had learned that most of those who performed suicidal attacks were wearing burkas.

Out of the ten Romanians who motivated the absence of such feelings, two made it clear that they had been trained to observe the Afghans’ clothes thoroughly and if the local were hiding anything under their clothes, two others, due to their military positions, knew that Afghans they worked with were thoroughly checked on base. The others mentioned their preference of not thinking about things like those, not to panic or get demoralized.

Finally, with regard to space organization elements, we asked the soldiers about the Afghans’ homes and the manner in which they were organized. Out of the fifteen interviewees, only one had been invited to a local’s home. He mentioned that he had to take off shoes, to wash his feet and hands, to sit with his feet under him and he did not refuse any treat of the house (tea, food). Regarding his positioning inside the house, the soldier stood with his back to the door or at least, somewhere to one side, close to the middle of the room. Positioning in such a situation matters a lot to the Afghans. The more one is placed toward the center of the house and far from the door, the greater the respect one is shown by the hosts.

3.3 End of the mission. At the end of the interview, we assessed the manner in which the Romanians considered that the experience of a mission in Afghanistan would help them or if it had helped them for (an)other mission(s). Out of the six soldiers who had participated in two missions of this type, five mentioned that the feelings of fear and disorientation helped them a lot, and these feelings were replaced by relaxation in the moment when they became familiar with the Afghan culture or the manner of interacting with Afghans.

Out of the nine soldiers who had participated to one mission only, seven affirmed that their participation would help them with regard to accommodation and intercultural relations. The two soldiers who affirmed that it would not helped them at all motivated this fact through the absence of an intense contact with the locals of this culture, concluding that the information which they possessed about this culture is still at a low level.

Lastly, when asked if the manner in which they perceive the Afghan culture changed after their direct experience, one third of the respondents answered affirmatively. They underlined the fact that, although they understand the other culture better now, they became fully aware that those people cannot be changed by any coalition participating to missions in their country and consequently they must learn to respect their culture as it is.

4. DATA INTERPRETATION

Through this study, we intended to identify the existence of a potential cultural shock on first contact with the Afghan culture, to observe the manner in which this shock is perceived by the Romanian soldiers participating in missions under the NATO’s lead, and, at the same time, to delimit the causes of this shock – all of which without pretending exhaustiveness or representativeness of the study.

After having presented the answers of those who were interviewed, we can draw some conclusions. The soldiers, motivated by their wish of assertion, of knowledge of a theater of operations, as well as being interested in gaining some financial benefits, participate in the selection for missions of this type, without considering the clear lack of knowledge about major cultural differences. Once they get selected and are allured by such an experience, they take part in a much too insufficient cultural training. This training is focused on their practical military training and on administrative details rather than on gaining some intercultural communicative skills, in the absence of which, real conflict with the local culture may occur. In some of the cases, the soldiers are

suggested to continue their preparation on their own, which happened in case of two of our respondents, all the others imagining “they would manage the situation somehow” (P.C.). This personal conviction comes probably from a native ability of accommodating to any situation, starting from the Romanian premise that “we try to do our job and not to make enemies” (C.P.). Naturally, before going on such missions, everyone should refer to the “global achievable perspective” (Hanvey, 1975:16), which involves two dimensions: the awareness of understanding perspective and the capacity of cultural representation. In the case of the Romanian soldiers this is unachievable, due to their lack of knowledge and development related to the host culture. Once in the conflict zone, these soldiers are not of the cultural manifestations of the Afghan population, they only delimit certain taboo areas, apart from which interaction can take place.

Although their knowledge about the Afghan culture is limited, the Romanian soldiers have no problem in tolerating the ambiguities and lack of knowledge in intercultural relations, as well as the behavioral predispositions of the Afghans. Instead of knowing or explaining the Afghans behaviors, the Romanian soldiers rather prefer to apply the common sense or tolerance to the detriment of their forming certain intercultural competences.

The cultural shock is felt more strongly by those soldiers who, on their first weeks of the missions, establish contacts with the people of this culture, who are more traditionalists, and unfamiliar with western behaviors. It is caused by the very lack of knowledge of specific cultural elements. The effects of this shock manifest through fear, disorientation or paranoia, they materialize through a permanent feeling of alert, which may even cause insomnias. Nevertheless, these effects diminish after routine comes in place, and after our Romanian belief “if it is to happen, it will, over there and anywhere” (R.C). Related to the negative reactions of the locals, the Romanian soldiers have tried to gain their friendship and respect, by behaving friendly to them, by offering them food and water, or other things.

The lack of some proper knowledge of the Afghan culture leads to the interpretation of certain behavioral predispositions through the values of the Romanian culture, without filtering them through an intercultural understanding. This reality causes the major impact which instances of Afghan behaviors, especially the ones related to relationships between men and women, men and men or their manner of understanding time and punctuality, have on soldiers.

5. CONCLUSIONS

So long as one of the basic dimensions of the modern battlefield is the multinational dimension, implying interaction with the inhabitants of the local culture, in our case, with Afghans, the development of intercultural communicative competence, especially from the perspective of nonverbal communication, is a stringent demand. At peace time, in the light of mission preparations, there is need for the development of the intercultural communicative competence, by acknowledgement of the specific Afghan nonverbal elements, so as to avoid the cultural shock that may occur and to enhance the degree of efficacy in the soldiers’ participation to multinational exercises under the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

This study has an important applicative dimension. Its results may constitute references for the redesigning of human resources in the military, in the context of an increased role of training activities or action in multinational environments.

Human resources are the most valuable to an organization, a flexible and adjustable resource, and the realignment to international standards and participation to international missions lead to the requirement of a new framework able to include the communicative dimension, fundamental for this desiderate.

The current paper may represent the preliminary to an ampler research, to be performed by specialists, in order to prove the importance of nonverbal communication in intercultural interactions of the Romanian soldiers participating in peace support operations in Afghanistan. Starting from our recorded data, the model may be extended to other types of missions, as well as other international organizations that plan and run military missions of a similar type.

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