

Cultural Intelligence: Individual Interactions Across Cultures

Intelligence in Recent Public Literature

P. Christopher Earley and Soon Ang. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003. 379 pages.

Reviewed by Dr. Julia Riva

Researchers, military personnel, and policymakers have used the phrase “cultural intelligence” and mentioned the urgency of developing cultural knowledge.[1] Yet, the Intelligence Community lacks a systematic framework for fully understanding what “cultural intelligence” means.

London Business School’s P. Christopher Earley and Nanyang Technological University’s Soon Ang have done the legwork by meticulously examining cultural intelligence and laying out the concepts in a way that will benefit organizations and individuals engaged in global affairs. Officers who want take a break from the usual fare of books about espionage and counterespionage can broaden and update their knowledge by reading this book. It presents a conceptual framework useful to their work, whether they are interacting with an asset from an obscure tribal group in Central Asia or developing a paper to guide policymakers’ thinking about leadership and non-elites in post-communist regions.

Earley and Ang define cultural intelligence as “a person’s capability to

adapt to new cultural contexts” (59). Their key objective is to address the problem of why people fail to adjust to and understand new cultures. Behavioral, cognitive, and motivational aspects are central to their cultural intelligence framework. By integrating multi-disciplinary perspectives, research data, and practical applications, the authors add significantly to organizational behavior literature.

Intelligence Community course developers, in particular, will benefit from Earley and Ang’s ideas to improve seminars and training sessions that involve examining cross-cultural factors in national security missions. Training programs and publications must be constantly updated and revised to reflect changing socio-cultural, political, and economic landscapes. Programs that are ineffective in addressing cultural adaptation can be costly to organizations.

The ten chapters of *Cultural Intelligence* are divided into two parts. The first part focuses on the theoretical and conceptual aspects of cultural intelligence, including its cultural, motivational, and behavioral dimensions. The second part is devoted to practical applications of the authors’ cultural intelligence framework in international organizational settings. The concluding chapter not only includes pragmatic applications of the framework, but also outlines future directions in cultural adaptation research. Some of the chapters are written by the authors’ colleagues in the field.

Chapters three to six are key to understanding the basis for a cultural intelligence framework. They are particularly useful for case officers, analysts, and course developers, because they address the questions such officers must ask themselves when encountering unfamiliar cultural situations and constructs. According to Earley and Ang, cultural intelligence has *content* and *process* features. The general structure of cultural intelligence includes cognitive, motivational, and behavioral elements. If a person is weak in those three areas, he or she lacks cultural intelligence. To function effectively in a new cultural context, a case officer, for example, must be able to understand the new setting based on complex cultural cues, be committed to understanding the new culture and overcoming his or her limitations within it, and be able to apply specific actions demanded by specific cultural situations.

The *process* aspects of cultural intelligence involve analysis at three levels of increasing specificity. The top-down analytical approach begins with the *universal level*, which refers to people’s innate knowledge (86). Below

that, the *culture level* draws on specific aspects of culture to mediate between the universal level and the final level, the *setting level*. The setting level requires knowledge that allows one to respond to specific context, people, and event timing.

Chapter seven is another useful chapter for Intelligence Community course developers because it compares different approaches to measuring officers' cross-cultural competency. Various assessment tools are reviewed. Cultural intelligence assessments help "identify those who are most at risk of failure, rather than looking for the ideal expatriate" (187). The book proposes that multiple assessment methods—including interviews, questionnaires, and observations—are necessary to measure an individual's cultural intelligence.

Cross-cultural training approaches, programs, and methods are reviewed in detail in chapter 10. The US government first commissioned cross-cultural events and manuals, and continues to be a major purchaser of such knowledge (262). Steering clear of one-size-fits-all training methods, the authors point out that cultural competence neither is fixed nor comes "naturally"; it requires constant refinement and learning. Training needs will vary depending on the frequency of contact with foreigners, length of time in contact with a foreign culture, and type of interaction with members of another culture.

Cultural Intelligence provides a framework for understanding cultural adaptation complexities that confront both organizations and individuals. Intelligence Community managers, course developers, and trainers will gain insight into how to develop culturally intelligent officers by integrating behavioral, cognitive, and motivational facets into courses with significant cultural elements. In addition, it presents practical ideas for designing and refining cross-cultural training that can improve analysis of the performances of individuals, groups, and organizations operating in foreign cultural milieus.[2] Case officers and analysts would do well to read Earley and Ang's book to gain insight into how to avoid stereotypical thinking when working in unfamiliar cultures and misreading cues through Western lenses.

In the broadest sense, *Cultural Intelligence* will strengthen the ability of officers to understand, interpret, and analyze national security issues and global affairs. It is a valuable addition to intelligence literature.

Footnotes:

[1]Robert L. Paarlberg, “Knowledge as Power: Science, Military Dominance, and US Security,” *International Security* 29, no. 1 (2004): 122–51; Williamson Murray and Robert H. Scales Jr., *The Iraq War: A Military History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

[2] See, for example, Josh Kerbel, “Thinking Straight: Cognitive Bias in the US Debate About China” in *Studies in Intelligence* 48, no. 3 (2004).

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