


Interpersonal competence and social resilience

*Applying cultural and social skill development to
community building in female Veterans struggling with
reintegration*

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The views and opinions expressed in this presentation are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of Norwich University



You May Ask - WHY ARE YOU
HERE?

What do you have to add that you haven't already? I mean really, how many times can you talk about the importance of culture to linguists and not get tuned out? And what's with another long title?

My Inner Voice
even says "*Why am
I/we are here and
why the topic?*"

Because this time, among other points I will make, I am trying to breakdown our addiction to that word culture.

I feel like I am big pharma

I have worked hard to create that dependency, and now, I have started my own 12-step “cultureholic” program of weaning culture from my person and from those I have steered wrong.

My name is Robert Greene Sands and I am a cultureholic.

So, hopefully 5, counting this presentation

Still the incessant inner voice, *“Why are you here and why the topic?”*

Assessing Language, Regional Expertise & Culture (LREC) Performance:

Not like threading a camel through the eye of a needle



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I mean who could
forget this
presentation?

*Inner voice, "we
could"*



Channeling Malinowski

How being like an early 20th century ethnographer on a tropical island, with or without the pith helmet, can make a more effective linguist



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Or this one?

*"that one too
except for the pith
helmet"*

Fair enough BLUF –

- a) Social interactions (linguistic or otherwise) shape/form identity of participants at the intersection of interaction
- b) “translation” of these interactions is interpretation, and not the good kind –growing intimacy of identity of “other” aligns meaning
- c) Patience of opportunity is a virtue to understanding those different –otherwise, awareness of the power of our social interactions on identities (a) is the best start we can hope to have
- d) We are our own worst enemy for “knowing” other because we are captive to knowing ourselves – bias is like ivy climbing a rose trellis, it hides, obfuscates and strangles our appreciation for the rose
- e) the concept “culture” is total ivy
- f) Never, ever think life in general doesn’t offer learning

No really, why am I here and why the topic?



Where to start?

How about #F - Never, ever think life in general doesn't offer learning

and yes, sometimes *it is about you (or me), or us*. Our learning is all about the journey

In 2015, I read a "lecture" given by Michael Agar, cognitive anthropologist, author of *Language Shock* in 2006 at UCSB- "Culture: Can You Take It Anywhere?"

- profound in its message, in its approach, in its perspective, even if it came in a lecture at University of California, Surfboard

Simply, as Agar can be, the concept "culture" should be shot, beheaded or put out to pasture. In its place, we should talk about markers, identities, rich points and context



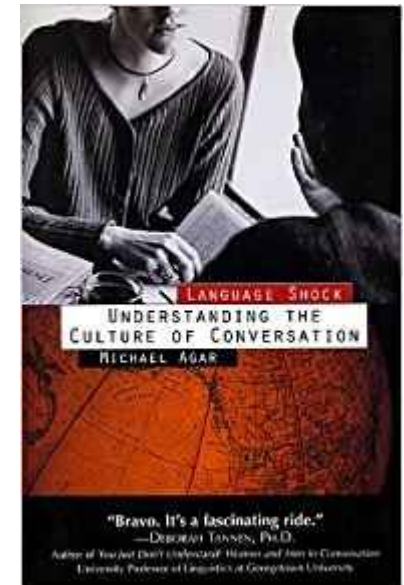
Culture: Can You Take It Anywhere?

**Invited Lecture Presented at
the Gevirtz Graduate School of Education,
University of California at Santa Barbara**

Michael Agar

Michael Agar, Professor Emeritus at the University of Maryland and Adjunct Professor at IIQM who works independently as Ethnknoworks (<http://www.ethnknoworks.com>) near Santa Fe, NM.

*Oh, yeah, this isn't
about you*



Everybody belongs to many identities
(languacultures–LC) - national /ethnic, bowling
team, or female Veterans, sometimes more than
one identity at a time

The female Veteran “LC” only becomes “visible”
when it is encountered by an outsider or LC₁ and
then “translated” - LC₂ of LC₁

Visibility is based on familiarity LC₂ is of LC₁ -
more visible (many rich points), the bigger the
difference, the less visible, the smaller the rich
points

This visible “culture” exists only as a translation
enabler between LC₁ and LC₂

LC₁ (or ethnographer) defines a boundary that is
partial and fuzzy, and transactional - typically
involving some categories of persons engaged in
activity sequences

In any kind of interaction with person, situation or
group, more than one culture will always be in play
- think plural “languacultures”

Each of us inhabit many identities - LC₂s

LC₁ & LC₂
Relational, partial,
fuzzy, transactional
& plural

The exchange of “cultural” information baked into the social interaction appealed to the ethnographer in me

I was excited

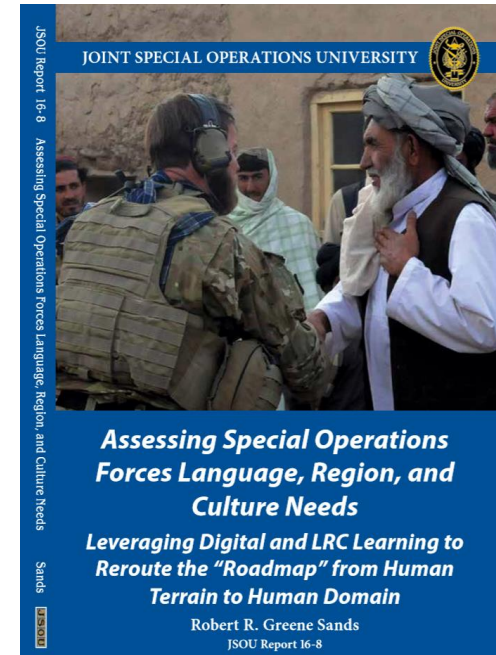
I wrote articles using Agar with the zeal of the idealist, started and finished a monograph on Language and Culture Learning.

I decided to revamp my anthropology and culture field study course at Norwich University based on Agar

Most of my students are senior enlisted SOF/SF

Traditionally, focus on their Final paper was mission, security relations, at national, tribal, ethnic level and wanting to do a specific “culture” or country study

Then Agar happened to their professor and their world now involved Syria, Kurds, North Korea, and the continuing security problem “the Afghanistan War that didn’t end”



Oh, yeah, this isn't about you

My course became an 8-week brainwashing –the student was LC1 and their 25-page paper was an expose of the LC2s that existed in a location/country

They read Agar and my *Clash of Cultures* in Week 1 and by Week 3 there is no singular “culture” - no Afghan, Kurdish or Uyghur culture

Heads exploding

They end up reading Agar multiple times

I write in their grading comments each week, “For this paper, culture’s dead. I don’t want to know what makes a Ukrainian. I want to know about the LC2s that exist when Ukrainians aren’t being Ukrainian, which is most of the time.”

“When do you identify as American,” I ask them. “As much as you identify as male, military, SF, father, etc, or even less

More heads exploding



THE **CLASH OF CULTURES**

ROBERT R GREENE SANDS

When do you
identify as
American in Des
Moines, IA?

I push them to think like an ethnographer, use their experiences as another resources, interview as many as they can find

If no interviews, they develop interview protocols : who would they interview and why, what questions they would ask and expected answers - how to elicit the right kind questions to get at LC2 behavior

- a) What are the rich points?
- b) How do you know what LC2 identity is in the interaction?
- c) What is the context of the interaction? How many LC2s are present?

Understand social and cultural landscape first, before moving to behavior

Why can't SF be ethnographers?

Next book – they can be

Why can't Special Forces be ethnographers?



In the midst of it all - The Plot Thickens

Start non-profit in North Carolina



Life has a plan - *good thing one of us does*

2016 – 2019

Pamlico Rose Institute for Sustainable Communities
(Pamlico Rose) featuring old houses and Veterans

Mission –build a strong foundation of wellness and resilience-building programs to help female Veterans overcome the effects of trauma and ease the struggle with transition, including social and community reintegration, from military to civilian life

Need - Female Veterans struggle with the effects of trauma from their military experience as do male Veterans

Often trauma for female Veterans not due to combat, but military sexual trauma or other gender-related issues

Many Veterans struggle with consequences of trauma, PTSD, depression, substance abuse, anxiety, etc.

Female Veterans suffer at same or higher % of these consequences



Meeting Need

Location - Rose Haven Center of Healing, dedicated to serving female Veterans—, Historic District, Washington, NC— 3 blocks from Pamlico River

1892 farmhouse, adjacent barn and 1½ neighborhood block of produce and meditation gardens

Intent - Safe and non-threatening place to develop community and to engage community

Program - Total Life Fitness

Two programs based on promoting wellness and healthy living (Total Life Fitness) in female Veterans

3-4 day TLF retreats - already started
3-month residential Recovery and Reintegration (R&R) experience for recovery female Veterans— coming with completion of farmhouse



Safe Haven

In times of crisis, different people react in different ways. Some might try to escape. Others might attempt to batten down the hatches and ride out the storm in a safe haven

Cullun Bunn

Rose Haven



Center of Healing



First takeaway -

Agar's work dealt not with military but on issues affecting society's marginalized and underrepresented

My last four years have been in the virtual classroom while writing a book and articles adapting Agar to the benefit of military populations

Life imitates life - Deployed to North Carolina 2016—2019

Recent epiphany—from personal to activist ethnographer and as social scientist building a wellness and resilience for female Veterans struggling with trauma,

My relevant LC1 identities - White, male, CEO, anthropologist with earring, from the north, building programs for female Veterans

LC2 –female Veterans w/ each with their own plural identities and some with history of MST

Two + years of social interaction and chasing discovery of rich points-aids bias mitigation



Deployed to North Carolina



Second takeaway – Rich points

Rich points highlight cultural disconnects with LC2, a result of unfamiliarity and/or bias

In Sebastian Junger's *Tribe*, male Veterans come back from war and find in other Veterans the support network that understand conditions like PTSD – brotherhood of warriors

VFW, American Legion, DAV, even the VA offer “membership” and ears to listen with little judgement

The many Veteran – based retreats cater to male Veterans

Male Veterans wear the military experience on their “sleeve” and head and most with little prodding exchange service stories

That status is a marker and as such a powerful motivator for Veteran self-identification and access to a ready-made support network, LC2

Brotherhood of Warriors

Reintegration struggle

Female Veterans more often than not don't self-identify, at least readily to others - less than positive association with their service.

Their Veteran status frequently lays buried

Military experience not defined by shared combat, but by gender

Most often, PTSD is the result of MST, even if not trauma

Veteran survivors of MST more generally isolate and there are very few female Veteran retreats

Only 25% of female Veterans use the VA

Current force is about 15% female, the largest it has even been. Even if self-identification was more prevalent, smaller and rural areas like eastern North Carolina lack representation

Substance abuse, depression, homelessness, suicide

A Band of One



Third Takeaway – Wellness, resilience and community

Total Life Fitness works across mind, body, and spirit, and promotes community involvement through meaningful and persistent attention to daily activities and events that feature nutrition exercise, meditation, transcendence, art, gardening attention to health and the environment, and engaging nature. Developing behavioral skills such as mindfulness and anxiety management and intercultural/interpersonal skills adds benefit to TLF activities, promoting healthy living and managing symptoms of trauma

Key to Life Fitness for female Veterans is finding and developing community – threaded through fitness activities

One of the primary takeaways from pilot retreat and opportunistic need assessment over two years is building support network of trusted members

Cross/inter “cultural”/personal competence critical to building community

- Minimize LC1/LC2 boundaries
- Create meaningful social interaction
- Develop empathy - important to recovery populations is finding worth in self through helping others
- Mitigate bias



Wrap up – in no particular order

If we have to use “culture” - we live as members of languacultures

We live in shifting, dynamic and negotiated webs of social meaning

Social interaction is our access to that meaning and translation of interaction is the measure of membership

For those who support programs to aid female Veterans, identifying markers and rich points of LC2 is critical

For female Veterans, intercultural/interpersonal competence is important to building community and important to promote through learning and application

We are all ethnographers

Questions? Comments? Social Interaction?

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