

Lone Swede in an International Military Staff Context: A Qualitative Interview Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the experience of Swedish officers when serving as the only Swedes in a multinational staff context. The methodological approach was qualitative and inductive according to the Grounded Theory method, and the empirical material is based on twenty completed interviews. The informants possessed a wide range of experience in a number of leadership positions as well as extensive participation in international operations. The building of contextual self-esteem is the central theme that emerged in the data analysis that may improve our understanding of officers serving as the only Swedes on an international staff. Contextual self-esteem and its structure can be understood through the following four processes: interpretation, adaptation, influence, and withdrawal. These occur to a greater or lesser extent depending upon both the individual and the context. Contextual self-esteem increases over time as experience of international operations expands. The longer the duration of a mission, the greater the influence becomes in contrast to adaptation, although all the processes are significant. The findings may be valuable in educational settings regarding challenges faced while serving alone during international military missions in multinational contexts.

Defence forces' participation in international operations in extremely varied social and cultural environments imposes greater demands on the social and cultural awareness of military leaders. At the military strategic staff level, the individual officer exists in a complex multinational context as both senior and subordinate, and staff members often originate from other cultures. These staff members are led by high-level officers from military powers such as France, Germany, Great Britain, or the United States. Senior executives at the strategic level also have an indirect relationship with individuals at lower organisational levels within national contingents, along with local people in the host country. Cultural meetings are further complicated by staffing with both military and civilian personnel. Moreover, senior executives collaborate with international bodies (UN, NATO, EU) and political representatives of other nations.

Special focus is placed on cultural interoperability, as this is a precondition for cooperation and coordination within multinational staffs. Cultural interoperability refers to

...the ability by which the capabilities of various national military contingents interact positively, in order to solve the cultural diversity problems so as to achieve common tactical and operational objectives and accomplish the end state specific to the multinational military operation (Ispas, & Tudorache, 2017, p. 162).

Culture is a relatively well-studied phenomenon (Hagen, Moelker, & Soeters, 2006). However, within the military area, research on culture was not initiated until the 1990s, along with the emergence of multinational structures in international military cooperation. Over the course of a decade, multinationalism became one of the most important strategies in Europe for meeting new military demands (Gareis & vom Hagen, 2005) and new challenges that were imposed upon military leadership.

Hodgetts, Luthans, and Doh (1991) have studied the meanings and various dimensions of culture through an international management perspective. These authors believe that international management concerns factors of how to adapt effectively to different cultures. The influence of culture on individuals' behaviours must be understood, as culture affects how people think and behave. Alvesson (2004), like the above authors, believes that cultural dimension is central to all aspects of organisations, especially when different entities interact. Cultural interoperability is, by this perspective, about issues of trust and legitimacy, similar interpretations between diverse organisations and groups, and identity in relation to different countries and/or organisational abilities (Berggren, 2005).

During international operations, multinational structures are inherent in the organisational framework. Alvesson (1993) defines organisational culture as meanings, assumptions, ideas, and symbols collectively shared by members that develop over time. He believes that organisational culture has several purposes: to give meaning to what occurs, and to guide those who are encompassed (or wish to become encompassed) by the current culture in regard to which behaviours are acceptable and which are not, what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is bad, and what is desirable and what is not. When institutions become more integrated and interdependent, the questions of identity and cultural uniqueness tend to become more prominent, and frictions on the cultural level tend to occur (Hagen et al., 2006).

Many Swedish officers possess extensive experience in international contexts and cooperation with colleagues from other partner and host countries. One experience that has been noted is the perceived challenge of being the only Swede at the strategic level on multinational staffs (Nilsson, Fors, & Larsson, 2007; Nilsson, Wallenius, & Larsson, 2006; Nilsson, 2011).

From the abovementioned theoretical starting points and questions raised by previous empirical studies, the purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of Swedish officers' experience of serving as the only Swedes in a multinational staff context.

Method

Study Design

The methodological approach was qualitative and inductive according to the Grounded Theory method (Glaser, 2011, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In order to understand the design of the study—including the generation of a theory—an awareness of the method's ontological, epistemological, and methodological perspectives must be acquired. This means theories are formulated towards the end of the research and as a result of data analysis.

Selection of Informants

In accordance with the guidelines for generating a theory on an empirical basis (Grounded Theory), as developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the selection of informants was executed with the criteria of gathering the greatest possible variety of multinational collaboration experience within a military staff work context. Interviewees, both men and women, were contacted via e-mail and consisted of individuals with a wide range of experience in the Swedish Armed Forces. Such a selection may be described as a convenience sample inasmuch as it is not random, but instead utilises chosen contacts for the selection of informants (Morse, 2007). The empirical material is based on twenty interviews. Military ranks in this study ranged from Lieutenant Colonel (n = 6), Colonel (n = 6), to Brigadier General (n = 8). Only one of the participants was a woman. Of twenty interviews, nine were collected in 2007 and eleven were collected ten years later. The research project was not the same during both 2007 and 2017, although both were financed by the Swedish Armed Forces. The overall study aim was similar in both cases and included a broad theme of multinational collaboration in military settings. The interview guide consisted of the same themes, focusing on collaboration and communication with colleagues from other countries.

Data Collection

The interviews conducted for this study adhered to an interview guide consisting of open-ended questions, followed up with individually-tailored items such as 'Tell me more', 'In what way?', 'Can you give me an example?', etc. The chosen themes are as follows:

- **Background questions**
 - Age, job experience, qualifications, private life
- **Experience of being the only Swede in an international military staff context**
 - Describe your experiences (both positive and negative)
- **Experience of communicating and retrieving information within the staff**
 - Communication within the staff
 - Information flow among staff
 - Participation in collaboration
- **Experience of decision making in an international staff context**
 - Influence on decision making
 - Formal and informal processes

- Under time pressure/during ordinary work
- Experience of intercultural and cultural influences
- Experience of intercultural strategies as a Swedish military officer

– **Other aspects you would like to add?**

As mentioned previously, the interviews were conducted during the period 2007– 2017. The reason for this longitudinal data collection was to investigate whether or not we could recognise intercultural development within the Swedish Armed Forces. Thirteen interviews were conducted at the informants' workplaces, two were conducted by telephone, and seven were conducted at the Swedish Defence University. Two of the interviews were conducted by telephone due to practical reasons. The interviews, each lasting between 45 and 90 minutes, were all conducted by the authors.

Data Analysis and Presentation

All interviews were recorded and transcribed in full, after which they were analysed in accordance with the Grounded Theory application (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 2011, 2015). The first step in this analysis consisted of what is known as 'open coding', which involves the identification of units of meaning or codes for each individual interview. These could, for example, include special lines of thought, feelings, or actions related to the interview's sphere of enquiry. An example of a quote is provided below.

Mm, I think the opportunities when you are the only Swede are greater than if you were in a larger group. As a lone Swede in an international context, the others can see that I have a different background, a different way of thinking, a different type of knowledge. And when I speak, they see it as a competent complement, or they see it as a confirmation that 'what we are doing is right', or they regard it as new knowledge.

This quote was coded as '*Swedish, competent complement*'. Step two of the analysis consisted of evaluating and categorising the codes according to similar content. From the above example, the code '*Swedish, competent complement*' was then sorted into the category '*Interpretation of own inputs as lone Swede*', which, in the third step, was sorted into the over-arching category '*Interpretation*'. The fourth and final step involved a comparison between over-arching categories, standard categories, and codes, generating a core variable '*Construction of contextual self-confidence*', which is presented in the Results section below and is followed by all the over-arching categories, standard categories, codes, and illustrative interview excerpts.

Results

Construction of Contextual Self-Confidence

The construction of *contextual self-confidence* is the central theme that concerns the understanding of officers serving as lone Swedes on international staffs. This encompasses belief in one's own ability and competence and is built up through the gaining of personal experience over time. Its successful construction depends, to a considerable extent, on with which cooperating parties from partner and host countries the officers serve. 'The more experience we have, the more confident we are' is a common illustration of international military experience, according to our informants. Contextual self-confidence and its construction may be understood through the following four processes: interpretation, adaptation, influence, and withdrawal. The single staff-officer interprets the cultural cues of

a given situation, which are regarded as viable attitudes and behaviours, whereupon he or she initially strives to adapt to the prevailing norms. As contextual self-confidence increases over time in parallel with increased experience of international operations, the amount of influence increases in contrast with adaptation. Withdrawal is suggested to constitute a temporary coping strategy that facilitates the two former processes (adaption and influence). These processes occur to a greater or lesser degree depending upon both the individual and the context. In spite of the implicit time perspective inherent in the development of contextual self-confidence, all processes appear to be important. The categories will be defined in the section below along with the codes, and a selection of quotes will be provided as illustrations.

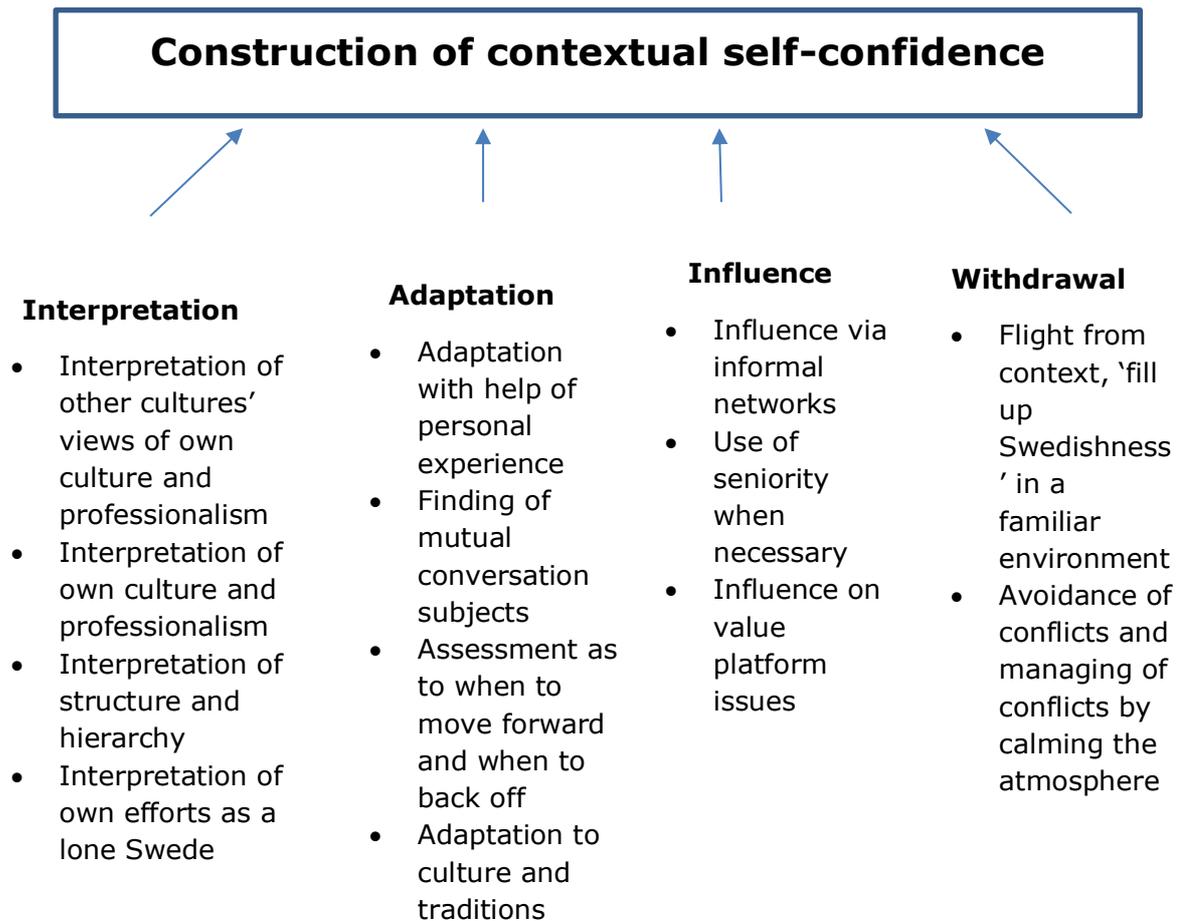


Table 1 Construction of Contextual Self-Confidence

Interpretation

According to the interview analysis, interpretation is an attempt to understand or explain what somebody does or why something happens. Interpretation was based on the majority of the informants' own understandings and expectations of how their interactions with other cultures occurred at the time and were expected to occur in the future. Interpretation precedes the next step—adaptation. Four categories have been identified as pertinent to the relevance of the interpretation of multinational staff work for the building of contextual self-confidence. These categories are: (1) interpretation of other cultures' views of own culture and

professionalism, (2) interpretation of own culture and professionalism, (3) interpretation of structure and hierarchy, and (4) interpretation of own efforts as a lone Swede.

1. Interpretation of other cultures' views of own culture and professionalism

A number of informants at higher organisational levels described how they are approached in ways that implicitly suggest they have lower statuses abroad when compared to military personnel from, for example, the NATO countries. At lower organisational levels, the relationship is described as being the reverse. Statements bear witness to how, as a Swede, respect is considered to be given in the host country as well as to local cooperation actors. *'They see us [Swedes] as trustworthy, competent, and professional'* was a commonly reported statement among informants interviewed in both 2007 and 2017.

It seems that most of the Swedish informants operating at higher levels rather expressed a military identity that, in some sense, conflicted with the norms of the overseas forces, as they experienced themselves as strangers because their own values, attitudes, leadership styles, etc. did not always prove to be suitable among other cultures. The interview analysis points to the consensus that Swedish officers find it uncomfortable to be valued on the basis of power mirrors, since Swedish concepts such as *jantelag* and *lagom* tend to characterise the Swedish approach (skills instead of status-related issues are often at the forefront, and no one should stand out from the crowd). We illustrate this with the following quote from a colonel, interviewed in 2017: *'Swedes are consensus-seeking and the others [other nations] are too hierarchical'*.

2. Interpretation of own culture and professionalism

Several informants discussed their own culture and professionalism in relation to other cultures during work at military strategic staff levels abroad. Most considered themselves as representing humanitarian values and healthy norms, in contrast to many others.

Yes, we remember our culture, we Swedes are quite honest, not a lot of corruption, we do not steal fuel, we do not earn profits from the mission, we do not take UN equipment, we do not exploit children and women; we take care of ourselves, we do not have a lot of suspect relationships in the village, we do not do black market deals and such things, but there are many others who do not think this is a problem and behave in the most inappropriate manner (a colonel interviewed in 2017).

It is believed that Sweden has a good reputation among the local population in host countries. Gestures, body language, and actions indicate that Swedes are highly regarded among others. In particular, some informants believe that Swedish neutrality and the Swedish way of working are well respected. Reports testify to how Swedes are experienced as professionals, do not give up, have patience, and live up to human rights values and neutrality. Overall, the Swedes have a 'very good reputation'.

3. Interpretation of structure and hierarchy

As mentioned above, serving on an international staff has been characterised by constant interaction with individuals from other cultures at the strategic level. Several informants described the characteristics of colleagues (superiors and/or subordinates) as foreign, which can be derived from the others' views of the leadership role, leadership style, and strict code of conduct. The organisational climate of an international staff is clearly described as more formal than that of Sweden, as it focuses on rank and respect. Many executive officers limit their discussions and would never address subordinate staff or give them any special scope for action. Several informants stated that the executive role is stricter and clearly defined—

'The boss controls everything'. Discussions between organisational levels are more inhibited than are those with Sweden, and managers are expected to be decisive and confidence-inspiring. Thus, it can be very 'difficult' to show what one feels in every situation. For example, informants' descriptions indicate that behavioural characteristics such as 'appearing talkative' are sometimes perceived as signs of weakness.

Interview responses also testify that communication is quite tough between different hierarchical levels. An informant believes one must be strong enough to 'take shit' without worrying whether one is well-liked or not. Another informant claimed he would never have been admitted to some platoons for discussion or that a brigade chief who 'goes down' to discuss with a battalion would be perceived as being completely outside the norm. Some informants described how, as Swedes, they often feel very lonely abroad. There are also descriptions of how executive officers from some countries believe that a subordinate state possessing contradictory views is stubborn and unusual. Not having opinions, in some sense, conflicts with the Swedish tradition because Swedes, as described in the interview material, believe that they give, take, and support. However, reports testify to how they, at times, find that there are reasons to be strict, as hierarchical structure favours clarity. Nevertheless, an authoritarian leadership style with a wide range of subordinates undermines group dynamics and indicates that subordinates do not dare to talk openly with one another. An informant interviewed in 2007 stated, '*... people could sit with very good ideas that they did not dare to say them because of their low status...*'

However, responses also reveal how managers from West-oriented nations possess a more informal manner of command in terms of transparency, discussion, and listening. Some informants bear witness to how such a leadership style is relatively easy for Swedes to take on board.

4. Interpretation of own efforts as a lone Swede

Loneliness is reflected in the fact that, as a result of the hierarchical and thus social distance between different organisational levels, one cannot turn to one's peer group for professional and/or social support. Furthermore, the hierarchical climate in which the status and the power mirror often prevail indicates that closeness of individuals at the same organisational level becomes unusual. Swedish officers seem to have relatively minor opportunities to impose influence as a result of their not being full members of NATO and having previously maintained comparatively low UN profiles. At the strategic level during missions, Swedish officers find themselves in a complex multinational context. The organisational culture is described as strictly hierarchical, with a great distance between organisational levels. Higher-ranking Swedish officers describe a 'leadership environment' that is perceived as different than the more democratic culture at home. In this organisational context, Swedish staff are often the minority, and feelings of insecurity and loneliness were frequently reported in both 2007 and 2017.

Adaptation

By adaptation, the actions of the individual are meant to correspond to the expectations of his own group and groups he meets. Adaptation is also a balancing of the decisions that are to be made for the current situation. Adaptation to cultural conditions and different emerging situations was deemed important by all the informants. This adaptation may be achieved in various ways. The category 'adaptation' consists of four subcategories: 1) Adaptation with the help of personal experience, 2) Finding of mutual conversation subjects, 3) Assessment as to when to move forward and when to back off, and 4) Adaptation to culture and traditions.

1. Adaptation with the help of personal experience

In the interview material, experience was highlighted as meaningful for encounters with other cultures. Several interviewees agreed that one cannot readily study cultural knowledge, but rather that cultural knowledge is more closely about insights that are considered difficult to acquire prior to their establishment in the host country. Thus, the experience of meeting with other cultures is considered to be more significant than formal education. One interviewee expressed the importance of experience as:

...it was an extremely instructive time because I was in the middle of a major political event. It was the first time I had been that close and could see the big elephants dance and start to understand what the conflicts were really about...Insight is something you cannot achieve by study or maybe even training. It's something you get through experience (Brigadier General interviewed in 2007).

Experience is largely said to be what officers carry 'in their luggage' when traveling abroad. Individuals with experience in international duty are considered to find it easier to adapt to new conditions. One informant, interviewed in 2017, with experience working in Africa and during the Balkan War, explained, *'You can say that the more experience each person has, the shorter the step into place...so it can be very hard at the start when you're not used to it'*.

2. Finding of mutual conversation subjects

Strategies aim toward improving the ability to 'adapt here and now' to the requirements of the situation. A number of respondents found that, by identifying common topics, mutual trust could be created. It seems to be important to meet others 'on the same level' in the conversation as well as to encourage win-win situations. One respondent, interviewed in 2017, testified to how a common topic facilitated collaboration, stating:

And then it's fun if you can, in some way, take on the role of the Swede, instead of trying to do the opposite. That you must then, as you say, deal with the individual and only you are Swedish? It doesn't matter there, but only that you are Swedish, that's all. Then it was right and prepared in some way. Outside headquarters. Inside, it did not matter, there it was complicated in general. But with the Indian guy, I had a lot to do with who I thought was quite decisive. But when we sat there, it turned out he was also an artillerist. So, we found a common point of contact in Bofors artillery. Controversial but that was where we could talk about artillery. He thought he was great.

3. Assessment as to when to move forward and when to back off

In a military staff context, it is important to identify when the atmosphere is threatening, downhearted, or under pressure. An analysis of the interview responses points to the importance of maintaining patience and sensitivity in regard to various emotional challenges. An interviewee with experience being planning officer on a German vessel in Lebanon stressed the importance of knowing when to move forward with issues as the lone Swede in a German staff as well as when to back down:

You must have a sense of humour and feel when you can move and when to back off because you cannot make yourself completely impossible. There is one reason I continued to be planning officer the entire period, because obviously I did a pretty good job. If you push too hard then you get replaced, and Sweden does not benefit much if you are replaced. But at the same time, I cannot sit like a German nodding doll. So, balance is the key—and a sense of humour (Lebanon in 2007).

4. Adaptation to culture and traditions

Sweden is thought to use a much more comrade-focussed work environment than countries abroad, and thus going overseas and observing how those environments work may be useful. It is suggested by some informants that Sweden is quite a small nation up in Northern Europe, and thus Swedish officers must accept the facts and follow the customs wherever they are; they cannot visit an American or British staff and tell them how to operate—they simply say, 'We do it our way, we are so much bigger!' It is perceived as a general idea among the majority of informants that Swedes have been very skilled at adapting and adopting international methods and manners. According to informants' reports, it is sometimes a matter of understanding that they cannot change all situations, and at times all there is to do is to get there, show one's skills, and just do the job, as these aspects are all that may be considered possible—nothing more and nothing less: to just do one's job. For that reason, adaption may require setting prestige aside. This is said to be in line with the Swedish leadership model, 'Developmental Leadership', in which employees' motivation and inspiration are focussed on rather than the leader's own prestige. In order to act as a good leader and let others stand in the forefront, an informant stated the following in 2017:

That's when you have to put yourself aside, your own prestige, because you're never going to be the person who has come up with the idea, though it was you really. In this case, you have to dare to put prestige aside and let other people shine.

Influence

Influence, which may be direct or indirect, encompasses decisions and strategies aimed toward streamlining a decision-making process in order to contribute to a solution. Direct influence means, for example, that a Swedish actor during the influence phase is an active participant in a culture-oriented situation, thus contributing to the context by shaping it and not necessarily adapting to it. The indirect form is expressed in the framework factors and actions that directly influence actors' behaviours, such as mandates and tasks. Influence consists of the following categories that may occur in both the direct and indirect forms: 1) Influence via informal networks, 2) Use of seniority when necessary, and 3) Influence on value platform issues.

1. Influence via informal networks

Relationships in an international military service are structured formally as well as informally both during normal business hours and during spare time. Accompanying spouses may organise activities (such as dinners) outside working hours on an informal basis. The focus is placed on the building of informal relationships, and negative behaviours must be avoided in order for the risk of negative effects on formal relationships to be avoided. Even in formal meetings, personal knowledge may be crucial for well-functioning staff work. An informant interviewed in 2007 stated the following about networking:

However, I want to stress that you are not alone, as you have your partner or wife with you. Alternatively, the opposite, then, your husband, if it is a female attaché. Moreover, when it comes to building networks, your partner is very important, because a group is formed among those who are accompanying, the wives, ... they live their own lives, and they have their own activities, and they socialise with the wives of those in power in the country you are in. And in this way, you can also, for example, invite people to dinner. So, I think the accompanying family member also has a very important contribution to make in terms of networking.

2. Use of seniority when necessary

According to several informants, it was considered important that rank and seniority be taken into account for the avoidance of cultural and organisational crises. In most military missions, informants stated that meetings progressed in a smoother manner if a major met a major or if the Swede possessed a higher rank. The felt experience that the message reached the recipients more effectively in this situation was shared by a number of informants. It was also deemed important to show respect through socialising with senior officers. According to some informants, it is important that one is able to act authoritatively, which is achieved by playing on one's rank or seniority if the situation so requires. A naval officer serving in the NATO context testified to the same phenomenon:

Influence, which may be direct or indirect, means decisions and strategies with the aim of achieving something, and in some cases, you can do very little. It was a lot more formal [boss vs. employees] there than it is here because it is expected by everyone and you have to meet the expectation factor. If you come in as a Swede or as a marine director, you have to join in the little game that is going on. It is the same in the world of diplomacy that, as a Swede, you are ambassador and you talk civilly to your driver, but it is common abroad that you sit outside in the car and are totally silent—all the other ambassadors in the world do that. If you, as a Swede, can be friends with him is something else (interviewed in 2007).

3. Influence on value platform issues

Some informants also raised value-based issues that concerned differences between different cultures, as some cultures appear to have entirely different values regarding their perception of women, children, and human dignity. Such values are described as difficult to handle, but the imposition of influence and 'change' has still been deemed worthwhile. A number of informants (interviewed in 2007 and 2017) testified about strategies used to influence value bases towards a more humanistic point of view:

...A little different value base for some things, for example, women, and that applies to [a developing country, our remark], as well. I've probably mentioned a few times that this is not okay, you may want what you like, but here it's not okay. For example, surfing pornography. We have not had to take any measures against this for a long time in the Swedish defence force and I am grateful for that, but I know that there were some occasions when my international colleagues and I had to tell them it was not okay.

Withdrawal

Withdrawal is intended to both escape cultural meetings and avoid conflicts. This category consists of the following two subgroups: 1) Flight from context, 'fill up Swedishness' in a familiar environment, and 2) Avoidance of conflicts and managing of conflicts by calming the atmosphere.

1. Flight from context, 'fill up Swedishness' in a familiar environment

Withdrawal from the unfamiliar to a more familiar cultural environment appears to be important based on respondents' answers:

Respondent: Yes, yes, yes...you feel it pretty quickly. So, my job is to mix with people in some way and assess them. This is a good ability, perhaps. We were 14 days at sea,

14 days we were at sea and then we were in for 3, 4 days. And mentally, it was very pressing to live in such an environment because, as I indicate, it was a struggle. It was a struggle against [a western country, our remark] interests and against madmen, the staff, as I felt like, what are you doing? And then everything in a foreign language too. So, what I did was that I always took 24 hours off when I came into harbour and went to the Swedish supply section. It was in the harbour with a Swedish boss and I went there and then I was Swedish for a day just because—

Interviewer: Some kind of recovery?

Respondent: *Yes, it was really mental recovery as well* (Lieutenant Colonel interviewed in 2007).

2. Avoid conflicts and manage conflicts by calming the atmosphere

One strategy used on international missions as the lone Swede appears to avoid conflicts and exert a calming effect on others who feel provoked and thus express anger or frustration. The following quote testifies to a conflict in which an individual was insulted by an e-mail sent by a Swede and felt that it would affect his future career. This is how the informant claimed he solved the conflict between the Swede and the other party:

Then I called those who were concerned, a number of subordinate officers, including those with the problem. The officer who was insulted was able to explain his part, he was very annoyed and there was a number of [western countries], who supported him, but there were some who were completely neutral, and then the Swede had to tell his side. Then I smacked my fist down on the table and said, 'Right, this is going to be the end of this.' Then I yelled at the Swede in front of everyone, told him this was not on and that once was once and twice would be once too much, just so he knew where he stood. Now it's done, then I turned to the other guy and asked 'Are you happy with this now? Can we put this behind us?' He said yes, then he started in on it again a little and then I smacked my fist down on the table again and said, 'We are discussing this here because it is our internal matter. We will handle the problem. I do not want to hear a word about it outside this room, you are not to go on talking about it. This is now cleared up in here and I do not want to hear any more complaining from you. So, are you happy with this?' Then they decided they were happy and then we sat down, relaxed a little bit, then we left and I said that now we would go out and have a coffee together (a colonel interviewed in 2017).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of Swedish officers' experience of serving as lone Swedes in a multinational staff context. The results reveal that the building up of contextual self-confidence can explain the experiences of officers in this position. Since their self-confidence concerns faith in their own abilities and competences, self-confidence must be built up over time. We perhaps expected this trend, as the data collection took place over a ten-year period and Swedish officers possess more experience in international service today than they did in 2007. This has resulted in expressions that have been perceived as stronger self-confidence in their abilities to act as lone Swedes in the military staff context. Contextual self-confidence can be understood through four processes: interpretation, adaptation, influence, and withdrawal, all of which have been discussed and elaborated upon within this paper.

Interpretation refers to perceptions of other cultures at macro, meso, and micro levels. The results reveal that cultural interpretation applies to other cultures, interpretation of their own

culture, professionalism, structures, hierarchies, and finally, their own initiatives. It should be pointed out that the obtained results consistently relate how the informants attribute good qualities to themselves, whether they refer to the interpretation of other cultures, and their own and others' professionalism and self-esteem; on the other hand, others' ways of being were valued in primarily negative terms. Results should therefore be regarded in the light of assumptions of ethnocentrism (Sumner, 1906; Laternati, 1980) in that all informants, regardless of organisational level, seem to value other cultures based on how they do things themselves. The assessing of aspects that concern individuals from other countries, such as their qualifications, skills, standards of leadership style, etc., is conducted by referring one's own view of what is considered to be good qualifications, the right skills, good leadership style, etc. In regard to differences, it follows, of course, that what differs from one's own viewpoint is considered inadequate. Those who do not belong to the group are often perceived as 'others' or as 'different', and disagreements are likely close at hand. Hammond and Axelrod (2006) discuss the same phenomenon in terms of in-group favouritism.

Adaptation to the international military context and to different situations with intercultural narratives primarily occurs at the individual level. Hodgetts et al. (1991) argue that individuals should be capable of adapting to different cultures for the purpose of practising effective interaction. In this study, this type of adaptation does not appear to have been voluntary during the time the interviews were collected in 2007, while in the later data collection, adaptation was determined more natural. Adaptation moved on to what is called 'cultural smoothness', according to Alvinus, Kylin, Starrin, and Larsson (2014). Cultural smoothness means collaborators are aware of cultural differences and they can use these to their advantage, for example, with the aim of working together more efficiently and implementing the task, which, in the later interviews, was more apparent. Through cultural smoothness, the Swede avoids unnecessary conflicts, and collaboration may be more successful (Alvinus et al., 2014; Vangen & Huxham, 2003).

Influence occurs in a multinational military context through individual- and group-level strategies as well as consequent adaptation. When staff from other nations do not assume the same frame of reference for what constitutes 'right' and 'wrong', it is required that someone adjusts their actions and someone else organises an agenda in order to either avoid differences of opinion or negotiate a new definition (compromise). Jorgensen and Phillips (1999) argue that organisational culture and organisational identity are articulated and conveyed through discourses. Discourses then provide a special way of talking about and understanding the world. The authors imply that power over discourse also means *you* are the one who sets the agenda or formulates what constitutes 'correct' interpretations. This study demonstrates how such a match between different subcultures differs across various organisational levels (Bosman, Richardson, & Soeters, 2007). One way of determining the existence of multiple cultures within organisations is by identifying competing discourses in different areas. Fairclough (1995) defines this process as the order of discourse in which several interpretations struggle to dominate. These relationships are not given once and for all, but are continuously exposed to pre-negotiations, reconstruction, and, possibly, deconstruction. Over time, the lone Swede, as a member of the multinational military context, has been able to impose an agenda through different manners of influencing what is dictated in the results section in light of competence and experience.

Withdrawal truly refers to flight from cultural differences to something more familiar as well as distance and avoidance of excessive cultural differences and conflicts. Our results indicate that it is common for those who serve alone to move into a 'small Swedish society' for recovery purposes. Overall, organisational culture within the Swedish groupings abroad appears to be the one found in Sweden that involves being more democratic and permissive. Through strategies of withdrawal and avoidance, Swedes obtain greater opportunities to impose influence and recognition. However, withdrawal does foster an us/them relationship among other cultures (Avruch, 2001; Hammond & Axelrod, 2006).

In light of the above reasoning, it should be noted that these statements merely represent the informants' subjective descriptions of individuals from other cultures as well as their beliefs regarding how they are perceived by others. A similar study conducted from another country's perspective would likely have looked different with regard to preferences for qualifications and useful attitudes and approaches between managers and subordinate staff. It is precisely here that a great deal of the cultural consciousness challenge lies. Nilsson et al. state, among other things, that

...only through a deeper understanding of individuals and groups in their own specific context, can it be assumed that increased cultural awareness will increase, not by assessing them based on your own. This should require the ability to value others with a distance to what you yourself think is the right way (2007, p. 17).

This survey represents a qualitative study using a limited number of informants. The study is entirely based on self-reported data, which may be imprecise. As the study is of an ungeneralised character, the authors merely claim to open the door to more detailed, more developed, and more focussed studies, which may include: 1) continued qualitative studies with the aim of creating more in-depth knowledge of intercultural collaboration and interoperability; 2) studies concerning the proposed model's applicability plus large-scale quantitative studies that shed light on and compare the cultural situations of Swedish personnel at each organisational level during missions.

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