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Afghan Perceptions of ISAF – Difficult Questions

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1. Abstract

In May 2012 a civilian team from SCIAD (L) deployed to Helmand for six weeks to conduct a survey into Afghan perceptions of ISAF and UK forces in particular. Approximately eighty Afghans from each of the Afghan Uniformed Police (AUP) and Afghan National Army (ANA) were interviewed, facilitated by UK forces, using a prepared questionnaire and the responses were subsequently processed to inform troops about to deploy. A number of questions were posed by the surge team. How successful was the team and what are the lessons for interviewing local nationals in an operational context?

2. Disclaimer

“Any views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not, necessarily, represent the views of either the UK Ministry of Defence or the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory or of NATO.”

3. Introduction

The reasons for Green-on-Blue attacks, or events, in Afghanistan are not fully understood. The aim for this paper is to highlight with a specific case study how somewhat idealised planning to conduct a survey quickly becomes “operationalised” in-context, yet suitable analysis can nonetheless be carried out to deliver valuable insights for military decision-making and lessons for Operational Analysis (OA).

The work described herein did not attempt to sample a representative number of ANSF personnel, rather it was instead the views of those ANSF the team managed to talk with and the interviews did not focus directly upon particular events. As such any data appearing within this document should not be construed as official MOD statistics. The paper is structured as follows: First the background and context for the survey is outlined; second the data-collection and quick-look analysis is described; third the thematic methodology and analysis is outlined; fourth environmental limitations are discussed; fifth impacts of the work are described before lastly drawing out a number of conclusions on the utility of the approach.

The Land Warfare Centre (LWC) is located at Warminster in the UK and comprises a number of discrete British Army entities. The centre is primarily a focus for army training and is adjacent to the extensive Salisbury Plain Training Area (SPTA). However one of the entities, the Directorate Land Warfare (DLW), commanded by a brigadier, focuses upon doctrine and lessons. Within DLW are two particular branches, the Scientific Adviser (SCIAD (L)) branch staffed by MOD civilians and the Land Stability and Counter-insurgency Centre (LSCC¹) staffed by Army personnel.

A study [1] in 2010 considered the possible application of OA effort to assess, in terms of operational performance, ISAF mentoring verses non-mentoring of ANSF to provide evidence to generally justify resources. However by late 2011 and early 2012 ISAF

¹ The Afghan COIN Centre (ACC) was established in 2009 at the LWC. This was renamed as the Land Stabilisation and Counterinsurgency Centre (LSCC) in 2011, to refocus upon broader aspects of COIN and Stability. The mission is to promote COIN and Stability theory, doctrine and best practise in order to optimise performance on Operations.

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planning for the transition of security to Afghan control had become established and transition was expected to accelerate. Around this time the phenomenon of Green-on-Blue attacks upon ISAF became significant. Some time had elapsed since the Bordin [2] paper in April 2011 which appeared to describe incompatibilities between ISAF and Afghans, particularly the ANSF². Within this context the LSCC proposed a number of strands under a work program to measure the effectiveness of UK mentoring³ and ANSF perceptions. Planning for the program originally began in the autumn of 2011 and much of the significant length of time until the subsequent deployment, by SCIAD (L) staff⁴, was taken up with completing the procedural aspects of civilians about to deploy to an operational context. The data collection plan [3] for the programme outlined the various strands of work and the overall aims for multiple approaches to measuring effectiveness and perceptions. The perceptions study strand, the work being described here, also sought to identify whether the issues raised in [2] were pertinent to the UK.

4. Data Collection and Quick-look Analysis

The study involved conducting semi structured interviews with a number of ANSF troops (interviewees), of varying ranks, at varying locations, with units at varying stages of their development, in order to understand the perceptions of UK troops and the social dynamics taking place within the partnered context. A questionnaire was also produced to support the interviews and this included a number of closed questions. It was not possible to actually pilot the interview protocol prior to field data-collection; however the questionnaire was generally discussed with an Afghan interpreter prior to the interviews.

Broadly, the interviews attempted to canvas ANSF personnel on their perceptions of UK troops in order to characterise their effectiveness and to identify what behaviours, characteristics, and general situations, if any, have the potential to be provocative. Both ANA and AUP, of varying rank and experience were to be interviewed, with oversight by UK troops, at various locations. The interviews were to be conducted by SCIAD (L) personnel during a surge theatre-visit either on a one-to-one or one-to-many basis depending on time and available personnel.

A number of potential locations were generally identified in advance together with likely travel arrangements and accommodation. However it was accepted from the onset that the detail of precise days, times and subjects could not be identified in advance. The visit received the required approvals and broad support for the concept, albeit with some scepticism as to the likely reliability of Afghan responses.

In addition to the prepared questionnaire the SCIAD (L) team produced a number of prompt-cards for the closed questions. These displayed a Likert-type response scale using roman numerals and both Pashtu and Dari descriptors. The team also prepared a common verbal introduction for themselves (supported with a map of the UK to indicate where they came from) which emphasised that we were civilians and our reason for the interview (essentially described as above). Responses were noted on paper-questionnaires or in note-books by hand and generally the hand-record was consolidated as a write-up onto laptops within 48 hours.

Upon arrival in-theatre (HERRICK 14) the team had to engage with the military “onward-integration” process for eight days rather than three and in addition it became clear that

² Afghan National Security Forces

³ A mentor guides and advises, building individual, leadership and collective ability within the ANSF unit. Mentors must be selected for suitability and then trained for their specific role.

⁴ SCIAD (L) Principal Analyst and SCIAD (L) Principal Scientist

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movement between sites was likely to take two or even three days as a consequence of our priority. Hence, given the significant reduction in useful time, the team quickly decided to split our effort to survey AUP⁵ and ANA⁶ separately and concurrently to maximise opportunities to interview as many ANSF as possible.

Quick-look analysis was initiated whilst in-theatre, completed upon return and formed the basis of a report [4].

Whilst already generally reported in the press the results for this work confirmed the particular demographics for the ANSF, broken into AUP and ANA. Most ANA present in Helmand originated from elsewhere in Afghanistan whereas most AUP originated from Helmand. The interpreters assigned to support this activity were entirely from outside Helmand but comprised both natural Dari and natural Pashtu speakers. On the one hand the interpreters became familiar with the questions and learned to anticipate however they were happy to re-adjust when asked to seek further explanation from the interviewees. There were occasions where the interpreter appeared to be somewhat dismissive and casual with the interviewee. One-to-one question sessions lasted around 20 to 30 minutes and tended to depend upon the depth of perceived responsiveness by the interviewee – on some occasions it was clear that the interviewee was either overawed by the event or appeared to possess a limited suitable vocabulary to adequately respond.

For the closed questions the perception of UK troops was generally Good or Very Good. Whilst this outcome might not be a surprise, there appeared to be a difference between the two ANSF groups (ANA and AUP).

During the consolidation and Quick-look analysis phase a number of misconceptions emerged for the deployed team. The “data-collectors” came from technical backgrounds strongly orientated towards a blend of engineering, mathematical and statistical science rather than psychology or social science. A number of concepts, embodied (explicitly or implied) within the question-set accepted by the collectors, stood out as disconnected with the values of the interviewees. These concepts included: time/age, training/education, trust, professionalism, scoring onto a scale, expression of a personal view-point, long-held and seemingly irrevocable recollections, stories from others mapped onto self and lastly “future” in terms of their ability to predict or anticipate. On the other hand there was little disconnection with some concepts, for example to make a difference for young people to grow up into better environment.

5. Deeper Methodology and Thematic Analysis

A group of Dstl social-science analysts carried out deeper work for the LSCC post deployment. For the closed questions a mixed ANOVA was conducted on the Likert ratings to examine whether there were differences in how UK troops were viewed according to whether respondents were from the ANA or the AUP. These results confirmed the Quick-look analysis; however when examined further, using pair-wise comparisons and 95% confidence intervals, this difference was only found for specific questions.

The quantitative analysis was supplemented with detailed thematic analysis [5] of the interview transcripts in order to provide a deeper nuanced understanding of the quantitative results.

⁵ Assigned to Principal Analyst

⁶ Assigned to Principal Scientist

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The interview protocol had been prepared so that the interview data would be collected in a sequenced manner. However the nature of the interview meant that they had to be conducted as conversation rather than sequenced questions. This meant that it was not always possible to understand the context of the responses to specific questions. It was also not possible to tape record the interviews which meant that the interviewer was not taking responses provided via an interpreter, which meant that the responses were not verbatim and were limited in the amount of detail that could be recorded. Ideally, for a detailed thematic analysis verbatim responses are recorded for full analysis. However, despite the limitations on the data that was recorded it was possible to apply a thematic analysis method to the data [6]. This was helped by the fact that the social science analysts had ready access to the data collectors, who were able to provide additional explanation and clarity as required.

The analysis was conducted as a two stage process by three social science analysts who analysed the data independently to help mitigate for any analyst bias and improve the inter-rater reliability of the thematic coding.

Stage one of the analysis required the analysts to review the interview transcripts for the AUP and ANA batches and identify themes that emerged from the responses, as well as recording illustrative quotes for the themes. Once the transcripts had been independently analysed there was a review meeting with the analysts and the technical lead to triangulate the analysis, identify and agree on a common set of thematic codes. This exploratory inductive approach to the analysis ensured that these *emerged* from the data rather than being predetermined by the research analysts. The four overarching themes that emerged were: Trust, Honesty, Inter-personal Relationships, Professionalism and Mentoring / Training.

In the second stage the analysts independently considered the transcripts and counted the sub-themes under each of the four overarching themes using the coding framework agreed at stage one. Recording the counts of the sub-themes provided an indication of the level of importance of a particular sub-theme as well as ensuring that potentially sensationalistic narratives within the data were not over-emphasised if they only occurred once or twice. In this stage the sub-themes were also categorised as either positive or negative perceptions. This further work enabled the analysts to then identify points of particular interest.

It should be noted that the work at stage two was an iterative process requiring the analysts to convene at appropriate stages to discuss and agree what AUP and ANA perceptions and behavioural norms were being indicated by the data. This level of analysis provided more meaning and nuanced understanding to the quantitative results and provided the evidence base for the key conclusions and recommendations on quick-wins and medium term actions that UK troops could take to mitigate for negative perceptions and build upon positive perceptions.

6. Recognising the Limitations of the Environment

Generally, however comprehensive the planning for an event such as that outlined; much time is spent getting to the start-line. Even after completing in-theatre processing for a longer than expected period, further survey time was lost to the necessity to acquire senior ANSF⁷ approval to talk with ANSF personnel which was also unexpected. In addition to the time limitation of the theatre environment for completing due process the

⁷ For the AUP the Afghan Deputy District Chief of Police personally sanctioned interviews and for the ANA the Afghan General personally sanctioned interviews.

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organisational characteristics of the ANSF impacted the original intent to spend some time interviewing in tandem⁸; One interviewer, plus one interpreter meant one-to-one interviews as the practical solution in the case of AUP interviews – the less disciplined environment made for uncertainty of the whereabouts of personnel at specific times. However for the ANA there were many group sessions – the more disciplined environment ensured groups could be assembled at a specified place and time more readily.

A small sample of UK troops was surveyed, this was typically in groups of 2 or 3 and it was generally clear that these troops confidently expressed personal but variable opinions. In addition, although also a small sample, the group of interpreters was surveyed as individuals.

Interviews were carried out in a variety of locations but always sitting as a close group, speaking in a normal conversational way but out of earshot of ISAF troops. The places consisted of offices, meeting rooms, barrack accommodation and covered outside spaces at HQ like locations rather than check-point or other “business” locations.

Selection of AUP interviewees was usually ad hoc and not according to a sampling methodology, instead those conveniently available were interviewed. In some cases the interviewees were not necessarily receiving personalised mentoring but observing it instead.

Whilst the surge team discussed the questionnaire with an Afghan interpreter prior to the interviews, it was subsequently recommended that the interview protocol was reviewed by Afghan Cultural Specialists to ensure that the questions could be understood by Afghan interviewees.

7. Impact of Difficult Questions Posed in a Difficult Environment

There is always an issue of definitions that are not shared between the interviewer, interpreter and interviewee. This is addressed to some extent by adopting the conversation style. However since conversation was not being recorded it becomes impossible to tell whether definitions of terms such as ‘training’ are shared. Could the apparent difference of perceptions displayed by the two ANSF groups (i.e. one ANA and one AUP) be alternatively representative of the two interviewers?

Both the Interpreter and the Interviewer biases represented separate filters on data. For the former style and language have to be acknowledged whilst for the latter the editing and summarising before recording is also acknowledged.

The questions were designed to be asked in sequence. However the nature of the interview was carried out largely in conversation mode thus recorded answers may have been taken out of context. Yet whilst the Afghans were generally eager to be photographed it was clear that video and recording devices were out of the question.

Were the collectors disadvantaged by not being social scientists? Social Scientists are trained and practiced in collecting qualitative data using research interview techniques. This type of data collection ideally requires practiced research interview skills to ensure that the depth and breadth of information required for a thematic analysis is collected. That said the data collectors for this study were able to collect sufficient data for meaningful analysis.

⁸ i.e. both present

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The Quick-look feedback from the surge team provided timely⁹, valuable contextual indicators for UK troops about to deploy from a non-military source.

However the responses recorded in the interview notes were generally too short and quantitative to conduct a full qualitative thematic analysis.

A number of the methodological lessons from this study are being applied in new approaches that are being developed for future in-theatre research. For example, new data collection methods will use a more ethnographic approach which ensures that the data collection is more conversational and less structured than the semi-structured interview approach used in this study. In future linguist data collectors will be provided with greater training before they undertake a data collection exercise and more comprehensive written guidance will be provided. In addition, the iterative approach that was applied at the data analysis stage will also be applied at the data collection stage. In other words as the data is being collected it will be shared with the data analysts so that any modifications and improvements to the data collection method can be made during the data collection phase.

8. Conclusions

For this work, planning well enough to get to pose valid questions, however well constructed or misaligned with the reality, and conducting analysis (including self-analysis) of itself has been valuable because of the unavoidable necessity to revisit and reassess working practise.

The work was a relatively timely response to this emerging threat to ISAF forces and UK troops in particular. It has provided an operationally-relevant case-study to explore the methods and applicability of Thematic Analysis as an additional tool for Operational Analysis.

The surge concept has been successfully verified, achieving its aims and reporting a relatively timely response to this emerging threat to ISAF forces and UK troops in particular. Civilian data-collectors were able to flexibly change the collection plan according to the circumstances but clearly it took longer. As expected the conditions for interviewing were generally austere and frequently impromptu, however the significant unknown was the degree to which the interviewees would respond to difficult questions regarding their relationship with ISAF and UK troops. The result of the analysis appears to show a statistically significant difference between the two key Afghan groups interviewed. So that, notwithstanding the conditions, environment and difficult questions, a useful outcome has been achieved by civilians who suggested Afghan perceptions were not as stark as previously reported.

In summary, the key lessons are: surge with planning works; civilians executing the collection plan work; the collection team must be flexible; interview protocols for thematic analysis can work but can also be improved.

The work has generated a number of benefits which will have operational impact for UK troops and initiated an increased cross-government approach [7] to share knowledge and experiences even outside of the operational context.

This paper has not provided an example of "classical" OA it has however described a less conventional approach which has added to the OA toolbox. Operational impact has been achieved. The approach will become more effective and is likely to become increasingly applicable to the future operating environment.

⁹ For example Principal Analyst briefed the Police Mentoring Advisory Group (PMAG) from 3SCOTS in the days prior to their operational deployment which immediately followed the period of this study (HERRICK 15).

9. Acknowledgements

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