Managing Multicultural Teams in UN Peacekeeping Operations: Reflections from a Field Office Police Commander in South Sudan

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Abstract	Original Research Article

This study examines the challenges and insights of managing multicultural teams in UN Peacekeeping Operations through the firsthand perspective of a field office police commander in South Sudan. Using a qualitative single-case study approach grounded in a reflective practitioner perspective, the research illuminates the complexities of leading diverse teams in high-pressure operational environments.

The analysis is informed by cultural intelligence (CQ) theory, Hofstede's cultural dimensions, and social identity theory, which help explain cultural differences, hierarchical norms, and group identity influences on team dynamics.

The findings reveal that unpredictable security conditions, limited infrastructure, and extended family separation amplify cultural misunderstandings, interpersonal tensions, and operational difficulties.

Lessons learned emphasize the importance of cultural awareness, adaptive leadership, and empathy to build trust, cohesion, and morale. The study demonstrates how applying theoretical frameworks in combination with practical, context-sensitive strategies can help leaders meet mission goals while supporting the well-being and motivation of a diverse workforce.

By linking practical experiences to the theoretical framework, this research provides actionable insights for current and future peacekeeping leaders, highlighting how effective leadership in multicultural, high-stakes settings requires both strategic understanding and human-centered responsiveness.

Keywords: Adaptive Leadership, Field Office Police Commander, Multicultural Team, South Sudan, UN Peacekeeping Operations, United Nations Mission in South Sudan, United Nations Police.

Introduction

Leaders increasingly operate within complex and heterogeneous organizational environments that generate critical insights for policy formulation, institutional reform, and effective practice across comparable contexts. Such environments present multifaceted challenges that require high levels of adaptability, cultural competence, and strategic

decision-making. The experiences gained from navigating these complexities provide an important empirical foundation for refining leadership theories and developing context-sensitive policy interventions that extend beyond specific organizational settings.

One particularly demanding leadership context is that of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPO). United Nations peacekeeping missions are characterized by volatile security environments, politically sensitive and multidimensional mandates, and highly diverse workforces composed of personnel seconded by troop- and police-contributing countries. Leaders within these missions are appointed and deployed to execute mandate-driven responsibilities, often under conditions of limited resources and significant operational pressure. Their functions extend beyond technical, operational, and administrative tasks to include coordination, mediation, and the integration of multinational efforts toward the attainment of shared mission objectives.

A defining characteristic of leadership within UNPO is the management of multicultural and multidisciplinary teams drawn from diverse sociocultural, linguistic, and professional backgrounds. Such teams comprise personnel shaped by differing national doctrines, institutional cultures, and operational practices. While this diversity can enhance innovation and operational effectiveness, it may also give rise to challenges related to communication, trust, cohesion, and decision-making. Consequently, leaders' capacity to effectively manage diversity is central to operational performance and to the successful implementation of the mission mandates.

Against this backdrop, this article offers a practice-based reflection drawn from the professional experience of a United Nations Police Advisor (PA) who was subsequently appointed as Field Office Police Commander of the Yambio Field Office (FOPC) in Western Equatoria State, under the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). The article examines leadership approaches employed in providing strategic direction and operational oversight to a multicultural team of thirty Police Advisors, to generate empirically grounded insights relevant to leadership practice in complex peacekeeping environments.

In response to academic requirements, the examination is structured into three interconnected thematic segments. The first segment delineates the theoretical framework, centering on cultural intelligence theory, which is further enriched by Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory and social identity theory. This framework explores the impact of various leadership practices on the management of multicultural police teams within UN Peace Operations (UNPOs). A conceptual model has been developed to link leadership competencies, contextual factors, team dynamics, and operational outcomes, drawing on the author's field experience as a Field Operational Police Commander (FOPC) in South Sudan.

The second segment offers a brief overview of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), outlining its background and mandate, with particular focus on the contributions of the United Nations Police (UNPOL). It subsequently addresses the challenges encountered in managing multicultural teams in high-pressure, conflict-affected settings, while also proposing remedies and extracting valuable insights and lessons learned regarding team management within UNPOs. The final segment wraps up the article with a cohesive summary of the findings.

Methodological Foundation (Research Design)

This study adopts a qualitative single-case study approach informed by a reflective practitioner perspective. It draws primarily on my firsthand professional experience as an FOPC, complemented by field observations gathered during the mission. This research design is well-suited to developing in-depth, context-specific insights into the management of multicultural teams in UN peacekeeping operations. It allows for a close examination of leadership dynamics shaped by cultural diversity, institutional constraints, and a fluid operational environment, elements that are difficult to capture through quantitative methods alone. By combining reflective practice with systematic observation, the study offers nuanced, practice-based insights that

remain analytically transferable to other multinational peacekeeping contexts.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study advances knowledge by offering a field-based, practitioner-led examination of how multicultural teams are led within United Nations peacekeeping operations. Grounded in the author's direct experience as an FOPC in South Sudan, the analysis connects leadership theory with institutional policies and the realities of operational practice. By examining leadership within a complex and high-risk peacekeeping setting, the study refines existing approaches to managing multicultural teams and generates practical and policy-relevant insights aimed at strengthening leadership effectiveness in multinational missions.

Theoretical Framework

Effective leadership in multicultural teams depends on the ability to recognize how cultural differences influence behavior, communication, and collaboration. During my service as a UNPOL Police Advisor and Field Office Police Commander, I observed that these cultural dynamics strongly shaped day-to-day coordination and overall team performance. This study draws on cultural intelligence theory to examine how leaders and team members adapt across diverse cultural settings. Hofstede's cultural dimensions are used to contextualize national-level cultural differences, while social identity theory helps explain patterns of cohesion, in-group affiliation, and intergroup tension within the mission. Together, these perspectives provide a focused framework for reflecting on the relationship between cultural awareness, leadership practice, and team effectiveness in UN peacekeeping operations.

Cultural Intelligence Theory

From a leadership perspective, cultural intelligence (CQ) theory, developed by (Ang & Van Dyne 2008; Earley and Ang, 2003) describe the ability to understand, respect, and effectively interact with people from different cultural backgrounds. It's about leaders adapting their behavior and communication to think and act in cross-cultural situations (Wang & Goh, 2020).

In the opinion of Alifuddin & Widodo (2022), cultural intelligence encompasses skills in perceiving cultural differences, adjusting behavior, and making decisions that consider cultural nuances, which are essential for successful collaboration in globalized settings. This is why Ang et al (2015) argue that understanding culturally different others requires a distinct set of abilities because of cultural variations in how people from different parts of the world express themselves verbally and nonverbally. This assertion suggests that cultural intelligence is one of the valuable determinants of effective leadership success. In other words, it is safe to infer that cultural intelligence has implications for effective leadership. Either it influences the successes or failures of managing a multicultural team.

Four Core Components of Cultural Intelligence (CQ)

Scholars such as Ang et al (2006) identify CQ as a multidimensional capability made up of four interrelated components that enable effective leadership functioning across cultures.

Motivational CQ

This dimension reflects the drive to engage with cultural differences. It includes genuine enjoyment of intercultural interaction, motivation linked to external rewards such as career advancement, and confidence in one's ability to adapt and perform effectively in unfamiliar cultural settings.

Cognitive CQ

Cognitive CQ refers to what leaders should know about cultures. It combines broad, general knowledge of how cultures operate (values, norms, institutions, communication patterns) with a more specific, insider understanding of how particular groups within a culture behave, such as differences related to age, gender, or professional roles.

Metacognitive CQ

This component concerns how leaders think about and manage cultural knowledge. It involves

deliberate preparation before intercultural encounters, real-time awareness of how culture shapes behavior and interpretation, and reflection after interactions to reassess assumptions and adjust understanding based on new information.

Behavioral CQ

Behavioral CQ is the ability to translate cultural understanding into appropriate action. It includes adapting verbal communication (tone, pace, formality), using and interpreting non-verbal cues effectively, and applying culturally appropriate ways of performing speech acts such as apologizing, expressing gratitude, or declining requests.

Together, these four components explain how leaders become motivated to engage across cultures, acquire and evaluate cultural knowledge, and translate that understanding into effective behavior.

In the opinion of this paper or article, in UN peacekeeping, CQ isn't just an academic concept; it's operationally critical because peacekeeping teams (UNPOL/PAs) are inherently multicultural and operate within complex local cultural contexts. Leaders who understand cultural context reduce misunderstandings within the team and between peacekeepers and locals. They also create psychological safety, fostering trust and effective collaboration among multinational members. Conversely, leaders who lack both conceptual and practical understanding of cultural context are likely to weaken the team spirit that has implications for the mission mandate and objectives.

Existing studies suggest that when cultural intelligence is weak, peacekeeping missions are more vulnerable to operational errors that can erode local trust and mission credibility. This was evident in earlier operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Somalia, and Kosovo, where limited cultural understanding among multinational contingents contributed to misunderstandings within teams and with local communities, sometimes amplifying tensions and negatively affecting mission outcomes (Huh, 2008).

In contrast, the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) is frequently recognized as a successful case of peacekeeping. During its fifteen-year deployment from 2003 to 2018, UNMIL facilitated Liberia's transition from prolonged civil conflict to a state of relative stability through extensive disarmament efforts, civilian protection initiatives, security-sector reform, electoral support, and the promotion of human rights (Forti & Connolly, 2018). In a similar vein, the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), often cited as another successful UN peacekeeping operation, played a decisive role in guiding the country from violent conflict toward stability. The mission supported large-scale disarmament, assisted in the reconstitution of national security institutions, facilitated democratic elections, helped reestablish state authority, and promoted post-conflict recovery, reflecting a broader shift toward comprehensive peacebuilding (United Nations Department of Public Information, 2003).

These cases illustrate how context-sensitive and culturally informed approaches can enhance the effectiveness of peacekeeping missions. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that this success story of these missions cannot be fully appreciated or assessed without acknowledging the collective achievements of UNMIL and UNAMSIL teams, including those of UNPOL, which reflect the cultural intelligence demonstrated by their leaders. It is logical to infer that the success of the two missions stems from the accomplishments of these individual teams, highlighting the importance of managing multicultural teams. In other words, this paper contends that neglecting the management of multicultural teams would represent a significant oversight in understanding the factors that contributed to UN success stories in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Although these examples are not a direct empirical evaluation of CQ theory, they offer compelling contextual evidence of its relevance in multinational peacekeeping settings. The intricate environments of UNMIL and UNAMSIL demanded that leaders and teams recognize unfamiliar cultural signals, adjust their leadership approaches, maintain motivation among diverse contingents, and effectively manage personnel from varied cultural backgrounds, all key aspects highlighted by CQ theory. Consequently, the achievements of these missions support the usefulness of cultural intelligence as a framework for

understanding effective leadership in UN peacekeeping operations.

Like earlier peacekeeping missions, including UNMIL and UNAMSIL, UNMISS functions in a culturally diverse setting where successful leadership hinges on understanding and adapting to different cultural norms and practices. Given that UNMISS personnel come from a wide range of countries, each with unique communication styles, operational methods, and cultural perspectives, effective leadership and team performance rely on managing and bridging these differences, just as was necessary in previous missions.

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory

Developed by Geert Hofstede in 1980, the theory explains how deeply held cultural values shape behavior within societies and organizations. It has been widely applied by institutions, scholars, and decision-makers as a tool for improving intercultural communication, designing context-appropriate strategies, and reducing the likelihood of cultural misunderstandings (Nickerson, 2025). In organizational studies, especially the leadership aspect, the framework offers a useful lens for identifying differences in values, norms, and expectations across cultures. It further supports leaders in developing policies and communication approaches that respect cultural diversity while upholding fairness, which is critical for achieving organizational goals.

In the context of UNPOs, Wale's (2015) assertion holds relevance. She argues that the theory supports informed management of individuals from diverse cultures to reduce misunderstanding and conflict while optimizing communication and collaboration. Communication and collaboration are among the essential elements or ingredients that influence or account for fostering cohesive team spirit, crucial for enhancing the overall mission mandate and objectives. For this to happen, the author implies that leaders should acquire a conceptual understanding of the theory. Unfortunately, not all who come to the mission or peacekeeping environment have leadership skills knowledgeable about this theory. This is one of the reasons behind this article: to

provide enlightenment based on firsthand experience.

The theory identifies some essential ways in which national cultures differ across societies by highlighting core value patterns. In its most commonly used form, the model outlines six dimensions: power distance; individualism versus collectivism; masculinity versus femininity; uncertainty avoidance; long-term versus short-term orientation; and indulgence versus restraint. Together, these dimensions capture cultural tendencies that shape attitudes toward authority, social relationships, handling of uncertainty, goal setting, perspectives on time, and the degree to which personal expression is encouraged or controlled in pursuit of organizational aims.

Let's briefly take a look at each model.

Power Distance dimensions

The power distance dimension explains how societies perceive and accept unequal distributions of authority and influence. In cultures with high power distance, hierarchy is viewed as normal and legitimate; authority is rarely questioned, formal procedures are common, and strong respect is shown toward rank and seniority (Hofstede, 1991). In other words, leaders may expect team members to obey without questioning their authority, an approach counterproductive to the principle of respect for cultural diversity.

By contrast, low power distance cultures favor more egalitarian relationships, where decision-making is shared, leadership is approachable, and organizational structures are relatively flat (Hofstede, 1991). In other words, leaders are open to suggestions despite symbolic authority.

When examining UNPOs, which often exhibit a hierarchical structure yet rankless, leaders who operate from a high power distance perspective are unlikely to foster compliance and cooperation among their team members. In many cases, team members utilize policies that facilitate redeployment to other Field Offices or take advantage of announced vacancies through the application process. This was a significant factor in my decision to leave my role as Curriculum Design Officer in the Training Unit, under the Capacity Building Pillar at Mission

Headquarters, to pursue the FOPC position in Yambio FO. Conversely, the concept of low power distance, which aligns with the principles of participatory leadership, is undoubtedly pertinent for UNPOs. Leaders who adopt this orientation cultivate team spirit by respecting cultural diversity, a fundamental principle that underpins all UNPOs committed to fostering a congenial multicultural working environment.

Individualism vs. Collectivism dimensions

The individualism–collectivism dimension examines how strongly people in a society see themselves as independent individuals versus members of a larger social group, as well as the extent to which they feel responsible for and reliant on that group. In more individual-oriented cultures, personal goals, autonomy, and individual rights are emphasized, with primary concern given to oneself and close family members (Hofstede, 1991). In short, it is just about the leader, not so much the team. This concept is problematic as it overlooks the challenges and contributions of team members. In my experience, this often arises from a leader's desperation for an extension of their tour of duties. I distinctly remember a leader from the Training Unit within the Capacity Building Pillar whose desperation for a third extension led to a lack of sensitivity to the team's collective efforts. He inadvertently conveyed a misleading impression about the credits due to the team members' collaboration. Ultimately, his request for the third extension was denied. While the insensitive posture does not explain the reasons behind his denial, the article suggests that it may have served as anecdotal evidence contributing to the decision.

Collectivist cultures, in contrast, emphasize the importance of group harmony, shared goals, and mutual support. In these contexts, identity is closely tied to a sense of "we," with strong relationships, loyalty, and social obligations often taking precedence over individual preferences (Hofstede, 1991). This distinction highlights the principle of respecting cultural diversity, one of the core tenets the UN advocates for effectively managing multicultural teams in UNPOs. In most cases, leaders granted third extensions for their tour of duties are distinguished by this attribute. As a matter of fact, the committee responsible for recommending approval takes serious cognizance of the collectivist cultures that embrace respect for cultural diversity.

Uncertainty Avoidance dimensions

This dimension examines how people and institutions respond to uncertainty, unfamiliar situations, and unforeseen events.

In cultures with high uncertainty avoidance, there is limited comfort with ambiguity and risk. Unpredictability is managed by relying on clear structures, formal rules, and detailed regulations. Both organizations and individuals tend to prefer stability and consistency, using established procedures to reduce anxiety about the unknown (Hofstede, 1991).

On the flip side of the same coin, cultures with low uncertainty avoidance are more comfortable with ambiguity and change. Uncertainty is seen as a normal part of life, and fewer formal rules are needed. People in these contexts are generally more flexible, adaptable, and at ease in loosely structured or rapidly changing situations (Hofstede, 1991).

Within UNMISS, variations in uncertainty avoidance should be viewed as an asset rather than a weakness. Skilled UNPOL leaders make deliberate use of these differences by drawing on high uncertainty-avoidance tendencies to reinforce clear procedures, discipline, and organizational continuity, while also relying on low uncertainty-avoidance perspectives to encourage flexibility, creativity, and effective responses in volatile situations. When these cultural orientations are consciously balanced, UNPOL team leaders are better positioned to develop resilient, culturally aware teams that uphold professionalism and ethical standards while operating in South Sudan's challenging and dynamic environment.

Masculinity vs. Femininity dimension

The masculinity–femininity dimension, sometimes described as gender role orientation, looks at how strongly a society emphasizes traditional distinctions between male and female roles.

Cultures associated with masculinity tend to stress clearly defined gender roles and place importance on

traits such as assertiveness, bravery, physical or mental toughness, and competition (Hofstede, 1991). On the contrary, more feminine-oriented cultures are characterized by flexible gender roles and values such as humility, care for others, cooperation, and overall well-being.

Societies with high femininity scores generally place strong importance on traditionally feminine values. In practice, this may be reflected in supportive social policies, such as generous maternity provisions and widely available childcare services (Hofstede, 1991). Conversely, societies with lower femininity scores often show greater visibility of women in leadership positions and higher levels of female participation in entrepreneurship and decision-making (Hofstede, 1991).

The clarion call for gender mainstreaming in UNPOs, which is aimed at tackling or addressing the traditional global notion of male hegemony, resonates with the principle of equality continuously advocated by the UN. Managing a multicultural team in UNPOs is critical to influencing the achievement of the mission mandate and objectives. The UN is a culture of diversity; as such, a team leader appointed to manage a multicultural team cannot afford to lose sight of the awareness of the masculinity–femininity spectrum, which helps leaders understand gender dynamics in their team.

Long-Term Orientation vs. Short-Term Orientation

The long-term vs. short-term orientation dimension reflects how a society perceives and values time.

Long-term oriented societies concentrate on future goals, often delaying immediate rewards in favor of lasting achievements. Such cultures value qualities like perseverance, patience, careful planning, thrift, and the ability to adapt for sustained progress (Hofstede, 1991).

Short-term oriented societies focus more on immediate outcomes and present needs, prioritizing quick successes and satisfaction. These cultures tend to emphasize tradition, social obligations, and results that can be achieved in the near term (Hofstede, 1991).

For this dimension, which is applicable for managing a multicultural team in UNPOs, leaders guided by the principle of respect for cultural diversity should be able to adjust expectations, communication, and timelines according to the team's cultural orientation to improve cooperation, morale, and operational effectiveness.

Indulgence vs. Restraint dimensions

The indulgence versus restraint dimension examines how a society approaches the satisfaction of human desires and impulses. Essentially, it reflects whether a culture encourages enjoyment and freedom or emphasizes self-control and regulation (Hofstede, 1991).

Indulgent societies tend to permit people to freely pursue pleasure, leisure, and enjoyment of life.

Restrained societies place limits on gratification, encouraging individuals to follow social rules and prioritize discipline over immediate satisfaction (Hofstede, 1991).

In highly indulgent cultures, people often spend more on luxury items and engage in leisure activities without strict limitations. On the other hand, restrained cultures emphasize frugality, savings, and focusing on essential needs rather than indulgence.

Depending on the context, UNPOL leaders can enhance communication, operational flexibility, and recognition strategies by understanding whether team members tend toward indulgence or restraint. This approach fosters cohesion, morale, and effective mission performance within a multicultural team. During my time in Yambio, I effectively managed a conflict that emerged during one of our Thursday meetings, which stemmed from differing attitudes towards rules and gratification. I guided the discussions by framing them around the UNPOL mandate rather than individual preferences, mediating by emphasizing our shared goals that align with the overall mission.

Social Identity Theory

Pioneered by the scholarly works of (Tajfel, Turner, Austin, & Worchel, 1979), the social identity theory explains how individuals define themselves based on their group memberships, such as nationality, religion, or social class. The theory suggests that people often boost their self-esteem by associating with groups they identify with and distancing

themselves from those they see as outsiders. This tendency can result in favoritism toward their own group, as well as prejudice and stereotyping against others (McLeod, 2023).

Within a multicultural team, as in the case of the UNPO teams, it is natural that individuals often feel a strong connection to their own cultural or national backgrounds. This sense of belonging can foster pride and solidarity within those subgroups, but it may also create favoritism toward one's own group and bias against others, which can result in miscommunication, friction, or uneven engagement in team tasks. Therefore, team leaders appointed to manage a multicultural team must understand that this dynamic is critical for fostering collaboration and maintaining operational effectiveness. In other words, to effectively manage a multicultural team in UNPOs, team leaders and commanders must be culturally sensitive. Otherwise, jeopardizes the cohesion of the team, which has implications for the UNPOL mandate, and by extension, the mission's overall mandate.

In essence, social identity theory provides team leaders with a framework to anticipate potential intergroup tensions and strategically create a cohesive, inclusive, and effective multicultural team despite differing backgrounds (McLeod, 2023).

My recapitulation or reflection on certain experiences validates the reality of this theory. Despite the unequivocal echo for the respect for cultural diversity, one of the core tenets of the UN, which encourages or aligns with the principle of equality, was, in some cases, practical, while just a theory in other cases. For instance, during my experience as FOPC-Yambio FO, I observed that some team members, sharing the same social identity, though not necessarily from the same country or nationality, tended to conduct patrols and co-locations together. In our weekly team leaders' meeting on Monday, I subtly referenced my observations without singling out specific UNPOL officers, emphasizing the importance of respect and the value of cultural diversity in our work. Feeling that a single mention was insufficient, I reiterated my concerns in our Thursday meeting, which included all UNPOL officers. I distinctly remember receiving commendations from a few team members for my foresight in addressing an issue that had been overlooked in the past but was being actively resurfaced under my leadership. In other words, this proactive approach, which was acknowledged by team members, highlights that awareness and deliberate leadership interventions can mitigate out-group bias and promote the UN's core principle of equality in practice.

Integrating Theoretical Perspectives to Enhance Cultural Intelligence (CQ)

Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory provides a macro-level lens by identifying systematic cultural differences, and the social identity theory, which operates at a micro-level, explaining how individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups, often favoring in-groups and potentially creating bias or tension within heterogeneous teams, complements the cultural intelligence (CQ) theory. These perspectives provide a practical, operational framework for leaders to navigate these complexities.

Together, these frameworks enable UNPOL team leaders to anticipate potential sources of misunderstanding (Hofstede), recognize and manage in-group/out-group dynamics (Social Identity), and respond proactively with culturally intelligent strategies that foster cohesion, operational effectiveness, and respect for the UN's core principles of equality and diversity.

Clarifications of Key Concepts

For this study, the key concepts are structured as follows:

Multicultural Team Composition

In a UNPO or missions, a multicultural team comprised of peacekeepers such as UNPOL, PAs, Military Observers, and Civilians from diverse nationalities, cultural backgrounds, and languages who practically operate according to different teams structured to contribute toward the attainment of the mission mandate. In my experience as FOPC in Yambio, Western Equatoria, South Sudan, I was appointed after an intensive Capacity Building Interview (CBI) to provide leadership guidance for 30 UNPOLs or PAs from Kenya, Nepal, Russia,

Malawi, Burkina Faso, Rwanda, South Africa, Turkey, Liberia, and Vanuatu. So, imagine this cultural composition and what it took me to successfully manage this multicultural team, evidenced by the achievement of two certificates of commendation for distinguished leadership.

Contextual Factors

In the context of UNPO, contextual factors connote UN institutional policies, field conditions, security, and operational environment. The institutional policies, which are mission context-driven, provide guidelines, operational, and administrative regulations and instructions that govern the daily activities of UNPOL officers or PAs in the mission, including Field Offices. In the case of UMISS, UNPOL officers or PAs, first and foremost, are governed by the mission mandate (from the Security Council) that authorizes UNPOL to protect civilians, support the rule of law, and advise/assist the South Sudan National Police. This mandate, issued through resolutions, sets parameters for what UNPOL can and should do on the ground. Standard Operating Procedures, Police Commissioner Directives, UN-wide conduct standards such as zero tolerance for sexual exploitation and abuse, respect for human rights, and host-state law where applicable (as guided by overarching UN policies embedded in peacekeeping doctrine, Manual on Police Monitoring, Mentoring & Advising in Peace Operations, etc. govern the operations of UNPOL.

The team's adherence to these policies comes from the motivation of the team leader, which cannot be possibly done without managing a multicultural team. In my experience, managing a multicultural team was part of my responsibilities to motivate my team members' compliance with these policies.

The field conditions also reflect the security and operational environment in South Sudan. The mission description or destination is "Calm but unpredictable", meaning the general security situation is relatively stable now, but sudden, unforeseen incidents can occur at any time, requiring constant alertness and flexible responses. To be more descriptive with tangible evidence, permit me to dichotomize "Calm" from "Unpredictable".

Calm

Relative stability at the moment: There may be no active fighting, widespread violence, or large-scale unrest in the immediate area. Daily operations can proceed without the constant threat of attacks.

Routine operations possible: UNPOL officers, peacekeepers, and other personnel can carry out patrols, mentoring, training, and administrative tasks under a degree of normalcy. For example, UNPOL conducts co-locations at designated local police stations, markets, and community sensitization, including Boda-boda (commercial motorbike riders or operators in Yambio.

Community engagement is feasible: Officers can interact with local populations, police partners, and civil authorities with some confidence in safety.

Unpredictable

Volatile environment beneath the calm: Even if things seem stable, sudden incidents, like intercommunal clashes, armed group activity, criminal incidents, or political protests, can occur with little warning. For example, in Yambio, the removal of former Governor Alfred Futuyo on 10 February 2025 affected UNPOL activities (Patrol and Co-locations), which came as a surprise (Radio Tamajuz, 2025).

Rapid escalation possible: A calm day could quickly turn dangerous due to latent tensions, disputes over resources, or armed movements. For example, in November, gunfire resulted from a misunderstanding between security forces, causing fear as shots were heard in Masia, Napere, Ikpiro, and nearby areas that eventually restricted UNPOL activities (regular patrols and co-locations) (Radio Tamajuz, 2025).

Demand for vigilance and flexibility: UNPOL officers and Police Advisers must stay alert, ready to adapt plans, and able to respond quickly to unexpected threats or crises. The situation of the removal of the former Governor of Western Equatoria and the misunderstanding between security forces, UNPOL adapted to another operational plan that focuses on mobile co-locations to get law enforcement updates from the Yambio Police Station, Masia Police Station, and Greater Tambura.

These descriptions explain the general security situation in which UNPOL officers across Field Offices are operating.

Leadership must effectively balance routine responsibilities with the need for preparedness in emergencies, including evacuation or support for civilians. Do these contextual factors impact a leader's ability to manage a multicultural team? Undoubtedly, the answer is yes. The inherently stressful nature of this working environment likely influences the social and emotional intelligence related to the cultural competence of UNPOL officers. This is the complex situation that the FOPC must navigate to ensure the team remains focused on achieving the objectives and mandate of UNPOL in Western Equatoria.

UNMISS Background, Mandate, With Special Emphasis on UNPOL Contribution.

This subsection briefly reviews the background and context of UNMISS, its mandate, with special emphasis on the UNPOL contribution toward the mission mandate.

Background

The United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) was created on 8 July 2011 through Security Council Resolution 1996 (2011), shortly after South Sudan gained independence. Since its establishment, the Security Council has repeatedly renewed the Mission's mandate, acknowledging that instability in South Sudan continues to pose a threat to international peace and security (UNMSS, 2025). Under its current mandate, defined by Resolution 2779 (2025), UNMISS operates around four core priorities: protecting civilians; enabling humanitarian assistance; supporting the implementation of the Revitalized Peace Agreement and broader peace process; and monitoring, investigating, and reporting violations of international human rights and humanitarian law. The Mission is also tasked with advancing a three-year strategic vision aimed at preventing a return to civil war, fostering sustainable peace, strengthening inclusive and accountable governance, and

supporting credible, peaceful elections in line with the Revitalized Peace Agreement (UNMISS, 2025).

Context

The roots of South Sudan's independence date back to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed on January 9, 2005, between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement. This agreement ended decades of conflict and paved the way for a self-determination referendum. In January 2011, an overwhelming majority voted for independence, leading to the formal creation of South Sudan on 9 July 2011 (UNMISS, 2025).

Despite this milestone, the country descended into crisis in December 2013, when violence erupted in Juba and rapidly spread nationwide. The conflict resulted in widespread human rights abuses, ethnically targeted violence against civilians, and serious violations of international humanitarian and human rights law. The humanitarian consequences were severe, with mass displacement and a dramatic rise in food insecurity within months of the outbreak (UNMISS, 2025).

As fighting intensified, tens of thousands of civilians sought refuge in UNMISS bases across the country. In response, the Mission opened its facilities to protect civilians, an unprecedented measure that placed extraordinary pressure on its capacity. To address this, the Security Council expanded UNMISS' military and police strength and, in 2014, refocused the Mission's mandate on civilian protection, human rights monitoring, and humanitarian support (UNMISS, 2025).

Although a peace agreement was signed in August 2015, renewed fighting in July 2016 underscored its fragility, resulting in significant loss of life, destruction of property, sexual violence, and further displacement. A renewed attempt to end the conflict came in September 2018 with the signing of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) and the formation of a transitional unity government. However, repeated extensions of the transitional period, incomplete implementation of the Agreement, and delayed elections have hindered progress (UNMISS, 2025).

Today, South Sudan continues to face worsening political and security conditions, marked by ceasefire violations, clashes among signatories, political repression, and the destabilizing effects of the conflict in neighboring Sudan. The humanitarian situation remains dire, with millions experiencing acute food insecurity, widespread flooding, and large inflows of refugees and returnees.

Against this backdrop, concerns remain high about the potential collapse of the peace process and a renewed outbreak of large-scale violence.

Mandate

Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2779 (2025), UNMISS is mandated to implement a long-term strategic framework focused on preventing a return to large-scale conflict, reducing violence, and supporting South Sudan's path toward lasting peace (UNMISS, 2025). The Mission's mandate emphasizes building national resilience, addressing key peacebuilding deficits at both community and national levels, strengthening inclusive and accountable governance, and supporting the organization of peaceful, credible, and inclusive elections in accordance with the Revitalized Peace Agreement.

Acting under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, UNMISS is authorized to take all necessary measures to carry out its responsibilities, which include:

Protection of Civilians

UNMISS provides proactive and responsive protection to civilians at risk, particularly in areas affected by ongoing or emerging violence. This includes deterring politically motivated attacks, protecting displaced populations, and maintaining security in and around Protection of Civilians sites through mobile deployments, active patrols, and early warning mechanisms. The Mission places particular emphasis on safeguarding women and children, preventing and responding to sexual and gender-based violence, supporting community-based peace initiatives, enabling safe movement, especially in and around Juba, facilitating durable solutions for displaced persons, and monitoring the environmental impact of its operations.

Facilitation of Humanitarian Assistance

The Mission contributes to creating a secure environment that allows humanitarian actors to deliver assistance safely and without interference, while ensuring the safety and freedom of movement of UN personnel, facilities, and assets (UNMISS, 2025).

Support for the Peace Agreement and Political Process

Through good offices, technical assistance, and regional coordination, UNMISS supports the implementation of the Revitalized Peace Agreement and works to prevent renewed political violence. It promotes the meaningful inclusion of women, youth, civil society, and marginalized groups in peace and governance processes, supports ceasefire and security monitoring mechanisms, assists with electoral preparations and voter education, and helps prevent election-related violence. The Mission also advances gender-responsive community violence reduction efforts and strengthens rule of law and justice institutions, with gender considerations integrated across all peacebuilding activities (UNMISS, 2025).

Human Rights and Humanitarian Law Monitoring

UNMISS monitors, investigates, and publicly reports on violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, including serious crimes. It strengthens monitoring of sexual and gender-based violence, tracks hate speech and incitement to violence, and supports accountability efforts through information sharing, technical assistance, and capacity-building initiatives (UNMISS, 2025).

UNPOL Contribution

The UNPOL is a key component of UNMISS, contributing to the Mission's mandate by reinforcing security, governance, and the rule of law in South Sudan. UNPOL works closely with the SSNPS to build capacity, provide mentorship, and strengthen professional policing standards, thereby helping to prevent violence, maintain public order, and protect

vulnerable groups, including women, children, displaced persons, and report incidents of human rights violations (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2024).

In addition, UNPOL also promotes community-oriented policing and effective engagement with local populations, facilitating safe delivery of humanitarian assistance and fostering trust between authorities and communities (Africanews, 2025). By offering technical guidance, training, and advisory support, UNPOL enhances accountability, supports the impartial implementation of the Revitalized Peace Agreement, and contributes to secure and peaceful electoral processes (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2024).

Through these efforts, UNPOL strengthens the Mission's broader objectives of peacebuilding, governance support, and sustainable stability, serving as a critical link between UNMISS, local authorities, and the communities it protects.

Mandate-Driven Multiculturalism and Integrated Perspective

Cultural diversity is central to UNMISS's operations, shaping daily communication, leadership, and mission performance, rather than being a peripheral concern. The Mission's complex mandate, multinational workforce, and ongoing engagement with diverse local communities require leaders to exercise high levels of cultural intelligence, adaptability, and commitment to UN values, turning diversity into both a challenge and a strategic asset. Within this context, UNPOL's successful mandate execution directly influences the effectiveness of multicultural teams.

By reinforcing security, governance, and the rule of law, UNPOL establishes a stable environment that clarifies roles, reduces stress, and fosters a shared sense of purpose among officers from varied cultural and professional backgrounds (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2024).

Social identity theory explains how shared mission goals cultivate a superordinate peacekeeping identity, reducing intergroup tensions, while Hofstede's cultural dimensions highlight the need to navigate differences in hierarchy, collectivism, and gender norms. Cultural intelligence theory

underscores the importance of interpreting cultural cues and leveraging diversity. By translating operational successes, such as civilian protection, mentoring SSNPS officers, and supporting peace processes, into practical examples, UNPOL leaders enhance team cohesion, morale, and performance in complex, high-stakes environments.

Managing a Multicultural Team: Challenges from Firsthand Experience

Consider the crux of the paper, this section provides the author's firsthand account of the challenges encountered in managing a highly diverse, multicultural team of 28 Police Advisors and UNPOL officers representing Kenya, Turkey, Nepal, Rwanda, Russia, Sweden, Bangladesh, Liberia, Malawi, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Burkina Faso, and Vanuatu, deployed at the Yambio Field Office in Western Equatoria, South Sudan. As in other field offices, the composition of this team illustrates the rich cultural diversity inherent in UN peacekeeping operations, which presents both opportunities and complexities for leadership. Navigating differences in professional backgrounds, national norms, communication styles, and operational expectations requires adaptive leadership, cultural intelligence, and a nuanced understanding of group dynamics. By reflecting on these field experiences, this section highlights the practical implications of managing multicultural teams in challenging operational environments, demonstrating how cultural awareness and strategic leadership are critical for fostering cohesion, effective collaboration, and mission success.

The Concept of Rankless Mission

One of the most contested organizational narratives within UNPOL in UNMISS is the concept of a "rankless mission." Formally, UNPOL operates under a hierarchical command and control structure; however, this hierarchy is moderated by a policy framework in which Police Advisors receive equal Mission Subsistence Allowance (MSA) regardless of their national rank or previous command status, except for a limited number of contractual professional posts. In theory, this system is designed to promote equality, collegiality, and merit-based

leadership, emphasizing professional competence, experience, and qualifications over national rank.

In practice, however, the rankless mission concept often generates tension, particularly in multicultural teams composed of officers socialized in strongly hierarchical law enforcement or paramilitary traditions. My own experience illustrates this challenge. Following a successful capacity-building interview, I was redeployed to the Training Unit under the leadership of an Inspector of Police from Zimbabwe, despite holding the rank of Commissioner of Police in Liberia and being the most senior-ranking officer in the unit. While the appointment aligned with UN principles of functional leadership, it created subtle discomfort and embarrassment among colleagues and the team leader, reflecting the difficulty of reconciling formal equality with deeply ingrained rank consciousness. Managing this situation required deliberate emotional intelligence, humility, and proactive cooperation to preserve team cohesion and professional effectiveness.

The challenges associated with the rankless mission became more pronounced following my redeployment as FOPC in Yambio, where I exercised leadership oversight over 28 UNPOL officers. Unlike FOPCs in Juba, Bentiu, and Wau, positions designated as professional posts with enhanced remuneration and clearly reinforced authority. FOPCs in Yambio and several other field offices receive the same MSA as ordinary Police Advisors engaged in patrol and co-location duties. This structural parity, while consistent with the rankless philosophy, weakened the symbolic authority traditionally associated with command roles and complicated the exercise of leadership in culturally diverse teams.

Within this context, some team members, often acting within the boundaries of their cultural orientations, were more inclined to question decisions, renegotiate instructions, or selectively comply with directives. In conventional law enforcement cultures, such behavior would be interpreted as insubordination and addressed through disciplinary measures. In a multicultural UN environment, however, these actions are often framed as expressions of cultural difference, professional autonomy, or individual rights, making

it difficult to address them decisively without risking perceptions of bias or cultural insensitivity.

Importantly, the existence of a rankless mission does not imply the absence of accountability mechanisms. UNPOL maintains clear Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), including strict enforcement of "Zero Tolerance" policies for serious misconduct. Officers are acutely aware that violations falling under this category will not be ignored by the FOPC. Consequently, overt misconduct is rare. Instead, challenges tend to manifest in more subtle, culturally mediated behaviors that are difficult to investigate or sanction formally. These include delayed resumption of duties linked to religious observances, such as Friday prayers or Sunday worship, which have become normalized as rights within the mission. While these practices are legitimate expressions of religious freedom, they can conflict with operational demands, particularly when not adequately balanced with official responsibilities.

Addressing such issues requires a nuanced leadership approach rather than rigid enforcement. In my case, regular Thursday meetings became a platform to reinforce the primacy of official duties as outlined in UNPOL SOPs, while simultaneously acknowledging and respecting religious and cultural rights. This strategy sought to foster shared responsibility and mutual understanding, rather than confrontation, in line with the realities of multicultural peacekeeping environments.

In essence, the notion of a rankless mission, while normatively aligned with the UN's values of equality and inclusivity, presents significant leadership and management challenges within UNPOL. When combined with cultural diversity, varying national policing traditions, and uneven structural reinforcement of authority, it can blur lines of command, complicate decision-making, and test the legitimacy of leadership roles. Effective management in this context, therefore, depends less on formal rank and more on cultural intelligence, moral authority, communication skills, and the ability to balance institutional rules with cultural and religious sensitivities.

In relation to the theoretical framework (Cultural Intelligence, Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions, and Social Identity Theory), together explain why leadership effectiveness in the UN's rankless mission

depends more on cultural competence than on formal rank. Although authority and allowances are officially equalized, differences in national ranking systems, power-distance orientations, and professional traditions often generate tension and uncertainty about leadership legitimacy. Officers from high power-distance cultures may question or reinterpret instructions not as defiance, but as culturally shaped responses to unfamiliar egalitarian norms, further influenced by varying levels of uncertainty avoidance and collectivism. At the same time, national affiliation, rank background, religion, and professional identity continue to shape in-group and out-group dynamics, especially when symbolic authority is weakened. My experience as both a senior officer under junior leadership and later as an FOPC demonstrates that effective leadership in this context relied less on positional authority and more on emotional intelligence, adaptability, and culturally appropriate communication. Practices such as regular dialogue to reconcile operational demands with cultural and religious obligations illustrate how shared norms and a common UNPOL identity can be reinforced, enabling cooperation and cohesion without coercion.

Communication and Language Barriers

The official languages for communication in South Sudan are English and Arabic, with English serving as the primary language for UNMISS. My team, comprising 28 members from diverse cultural backgrounds, brought a variety of native languages, as well as differing levels of English proficiency and accents. This presented a challenge for me, especially as I come from Liberia, West Africa, where my accent is often perceived as American due to Liberia's historical ties with the United States. Misunderstandings, delays in completing tasks, and misinterpretations of instructions were significant hurdles in managing such a multicultural team, where language plays a crucial role in cultural expression. I vividly remember a team member from Rwanda who bluntly expressed having difficulty understanding my English. Conversely, I also struggled to comprehend the English spoken by colleagues from Bangladesh, Nepal, and Turkey.

Mindful of their reactions, since it borders on culture, I kept quiet about the same difficulties.

Not to assume that the silence of my other colleagues suggests comfort with my English accent and proficiency, especially when speaking fast, an identity associated with a typical Liberian, I reduced the pace and speed of speaking and did my best to pronounce words clearly.

In managing a multicultural UNPOL team in UNMISS, communication challenges can be effectively understood through the theoretical framework (Cultural Intelligence, Hofstede's cultural dimensions, and Social Identity Theory). Cultural Intelligence underscores the need to recognize how language, accents, and speaking styles are culturally shaped and to adapt communication accordingly, as demonstrated by the deliberate effort to speak more slowly and clearly. Hofstede's framework explains variations in openness and directness, with some officers more comfortable providing frank feedback while others adopt more reserved approaches influenced by norms around authority. Social Identity Theory further highlights how linguistic accents and national backgrounds can create subtle in-group and out-group dynamics that affect confidence and participation. Collectively, these perspectives illustrate that effective leadership in UN peacekeeping extends beyond technical competence to include a nuanced understanding of how culture, language, and identity shape communication, inclusion, and team effectiveness in a diverse operational environment.

Professional Backgrounds and Policing Practices

In UNPOs, Police Advisors, or UNPOL arrive with diverse training, operational styles, and law enforcement cultures, which can lead to inconsistent approaches to patrols, investigations, or community engagement. Reconciling these differences while maintaining standardized UNPOL procedures requires careful cultural intelligence and sensitivity. Within my team, two colleagues assigned to the Capacity Building Development unit, responsible for training and technical advisory functions, were Gendarmerie officers, whose professional background differs significantly from conventional

policing. Drawing upon their paramilitary or military-style training combined with law enforcement experience, these colleagues faced evident challenges when mentoring and building the capacity of the SSNPS, whose style or culture of policing practices differed from those of the Gendarmerie.

In my capacity as FOPC, I had the opportunity to observe these challenges firsthand while accompanying the co-location team at Yambio Police Station. My professional knowledge, developed over 20 years of diverse policing experience, enabled me to recognize the difficulties encountered by my Gendarmerie colleague when providing technical guidance on police reporting to SSNPS officers on duty. On another occasion, I observed similar challenges faced by a second Gendarmerie officer while facilitating a lesson on Crime Scene Management. These capacity-building sessions were not merely theoretical lectures but emphasized practical, hands-on demonstrations. In my assessment, the difficulties experienced by these dedicated and committed colleagues primarily stemmed from the differences in their professional backgrounds.

Mindful of the importance of cultural diversity, including variations in policing styles, and cognizant of how individual reactions could influence team cohesion, I proposed internal training utilizing the standardized manuals and modules developed by the UNPOL Capacity Building Development Pillar. This approach allowed the team to operate effectively and harmoniously, minimizing potential friction.

I wish to emphasize that this reflection does not intend to suggest limiting the deployment of Gendarmerie officers within UN Police Operations. On the contrary, their contributions remain essential to the fulfillment of the mission's mandate. Rather, my experience highlights the importance of structured orientation and context-sensitive support to enhance the integration of personnel from diverse policing backgrounds.

In relation to the theoretical framework (Cultural Intelligence Theory, Hofstede's cultural dimensions, and Social Identity Theory), cultural intelligence theory is reflected in the need for UNPOL leaders to recognize and adapt to differing professional cultures, training traditions, and operational styles, particularly when reconciling conventional policing approaches with gendarmerie-based, paramilitary models, while still upholding standardized UNPOL procedures. Hofstede's cultural dimensions help explain variations in attitudes toward hierarchy, authority, uncertainty avoidance, and task execution, which became evident during capacity-building activities such as police reporting and crime scene management, where SSNPS practices differed from those of Gendarmerie officers. Social Identity Theory further illuminates how strong professional identities, shaped by long-standing institutional backgrounds, can unintentionally create in-group and out-group dynamics that affect mentoring relationships and team cohesion. As a Field Office Police Commander, addressing these dynamics through internal training based on UNPOL's standardized manuals represented a deliberate leadership intervention aimed at fostering shared norms, reducing friction, and strengthening collective identity, while affirming the continued value of diverse policing models within UN peacekeeping missions.

Interpersonal Dynamics and Social Identity

In this context, certain officers tend to align themselves more closely with members of their national contingent and with others who share similar social identities, rather than those who differ from them. This inclination can give rise to subgroups or in-group/out-group dynamics, potentially affecting overall cohesion. As previously mentioned, during my experience as FOPC in Yambio, I observed that some team members, while not necessarily from the same country or nationality, tended to conduct patrols and co-locate with those who shared the same social identity.

Bearing in mind that cultural diversity is one of the essential core values that we must uphold, I subtly referenced my observations in our weekly team leaders' meeting on Monday without singling out specific UNPOL officers. I emphasized the importance of respect and the value of cultural diversity in our work. Feeling that a single intervention might not suffice, I reiterated my concerns in our Thursday meeting, which included all UNPOL officers.

After a couple of days of the meeting, I distinctly remember receiving commendations from a few team members for my foresight in addressing an issue that had previously been overlooked, yet was becoming increasingly apparent under my leadership. This proactive approach, acknowledged by team members, underscores the idea that awareness and deliberate leadership interventions can mitigate out-group bias and promote the UN's core principle of equality in practice.

My personal experience described under this subtitle can be meaningfully interpreted through the combined lenses of cultural intelligence theory, Hofstede's cultural dimensions, and social identity theory. Social identity theory helps explain the observed tendency of some UNPOL officers to gravitate toward colleagues who share similar social identities, resulting in informal in-groups and out-groups that may undermine team cohesion, even when nationality is not the defining factor. Hofstede's cultural dimensions further illuminate how deeply embedded cultural orientations, such as collectivism versus individualism or attitudes toward hierarchy, can shape affiliation patterns, collaboration preferences, and comfort levels during joint patrols and co-location duties. Cultural intelligence theory is reflected in the leadership response to these dynamics: by consciously acknowledging diversity concerns in inclusive forums and reinforcing respect for cultural differences without targeting individuals, it shows how leadership demonstrates adaptive cognitive and behavioral CQ. The positive feedback received from team members highlights how culturally intelligent and reflective leadership interventions can reduce implicit bias, strengthen cohesion, and translate the UN's normative commitment to equality and diversity into practical, everyday operational leadership.

Differing Attitudes toward Time, Discipline, and Work Ethic

Differences in cultural perceptions of time management, compliance with deadlines, hierarchical authority, and task ownership can give rise to misunderstandings or be interpreted as uneven levels of commitment within multicultural teams. In operational environments such as UN peacekeeping missions, these divergences have direct implications for the preparation and execution of patrols, co-location duties, the timely completion of operational reports, and effective coordination with other mission components. Consequently, leaders are required to establish clear and shared professional standards while simultaneously demonstrating sensitivity to diverse cultural norms and practices.

This challenge became evident during my first week in Yambio in my capacity as FOPC, where punctuality emerged as a recurring concern among some team members. In accordance with the applicable Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), official duties were scheduled to commence at 0800 hours; however, several officers were consistently reporting between 0845 and 0900 hours. Such delays had the potential to disrupt pre-patrol briefings, delay patrol deployment, and undermine effective co-location with host-state counterparts.

To address this issue, I initially engaged the affected UNPOL officers through individual, private consultations to understand their perspectives and to reaffirm the reporting times stipulated in the SOP. While considerations of cultural diversity were acknowledged, the explanations provided did not indicate insurmountable constraints, suggesting that behavioral adjustment was feasible. In addition to these discussions, I adopted a leadership-by-example approach by being visibly present at the office entrance between 0745 and 0810 hours. Rather than offering verbal reprimands, I greeted late-arriving officers courteously, thereby reinforcing expectations through consistent personal conduct rather than overt disciplinary measures.

Over time, this approach resulted in a noticeable improvement in punctuality across the team. The change was reinforced through peer dynamics, as reflected in informal remarks among colleagues acknowledging the positive influence of the FOPC's approach. This experience illustrates how culturally sensitive, yet firm leadership practices can align diverse working norms with operational requirements, thereby enhancing preparedness for patrols, co-location duties, and overall mission effectiveness.

Within the context of managing a multicultural UNPOL team in UNMISS, the challenges associated

with differing perceptions of punctuality, hierarchy, and task ownership can be effectively interpreted through the theoretical lens. Cultural intelligence theory underscores the leader's capacity to recognize culturally shaped attitudes toward time and authority and to adapt leadership behaviors accordingly; this was reflected in the use of private consultations and a non-confrontational, example-driven approach to reinforce SOP-mandated reporting times. Hofstede's cultural dimensions, particularly differences in time orientation and power distance, help explain why some officers perceived flexible reporting times as acceptable, while mission requirements demanded strict punctuality to ensure effective patrol preparation, co-location, and coordination. Social identity theory further illuminates how influence peer and group norms contributed to behavioral change, as improved punctuality was reinforced through informal peer acknowledgment rather than formal sanctions. Collectively, these frameworks demonstrate how culturally informed, yet firm leadership can harmonize diverse working norms with operational imperatives, thereby enhancing cohesion, discipline, and overall mission effectiveness in a complex peacekeeping environment.

Variations in Gender Norms and Inclusion

Variations in cultural understandings of gender roles can influence team dynamics, the legitimacy of leadership, and interactions with host communities, especially in environments where the United Nations actively advances gender equality and the protection of women and children. Consequently, leaders are required to manage these differing perspectives carefully while consistently adhering to UN principles, mandates, and policies on gender mainstreaming.

This dynamic was clear during my field experience, when a female UNPOL officer formally filed a complaint against the Deputy Field Office Police Commander (DFOPC) and me, alleging unequal treatment. The complaint was unexpected, given that the officer held several prominent and strategic responsibilities related to gender mainstreaming. These included active involvement with the SSNPS Women's Network, liaison with the UNMISS Child Protection Unit, engagement on issues of sexual and gender-based violence, and periodic participation in UNMISS Radio programs alongside local police counterparts and women community leaders in Western Equatoria. The grievance stemmed from a leadership decision made during my official absence on compulsory time off (CTO). Specifically, the team leader, with the endorsement of the DFOPC, appointed another UNPOL officer to serve as Officer-in-Charge (OIC) during his CTO, rather than assigning the role to the complainant, who was the most senior officer present. The officer initially raised the issue verbally during a virtual conference with the UNPOL Chief of Staff, a position that was not supported by several colleagues participating in the meeting. Upon my return from CTO, the officer requested that I overturn the decision endorsed by the DFOPC, a request I considered inconsistent with established professional and command protocols. After consultations with the Chief of the UNPOL Professional Standards Division and a review of the relevant UNPOL SOPs, it was clarified that the SOPs do not prescribe seniority as the sole criterion for acting leadership appointments. Rather, such appointments fall within the discretion of the team leader, based on assessed competence and suitability to manage the team during periods of official absence. Dissatisfied with this explanation, the officer proceeded to submit a formal complaint against both the DFOPC and me. After a thorough review and investigation by senior management, the complaint was dismissed due to the absence of substantiating evidence. This case highlights the complexity of managing multicultural teams in UN peacekeeping operations, especially where leadership decisions intersect with gender-related perceptions and expectations. While adherence to policy and due process ultimately protected leadership legitimacy in this case, it also shows how leadership actions, particularly those involving authority, representation, and visibility, can be interpreted through a gendered lens. Notably, if the officer had not already been entrusted with significant gender mainstreaming responsibilities, the complaint might have been seen as more credible and could have posed greater challenges to team cohesion and leadership effectiveness in the Yambio Field Office.

The dynamics described in this case can be understood through the theoretical lenses. Cultural intelligence emphasizes the leader's ability to interpret and respond appropriately to culturally shaped behaviors, expectations, and communication styles. In this instance, managing the officer's perception of unequal treatment required awareness of how cultural norms regarding gender and authority might influence interpretations of leadership decisions, particularly in a multicultural UNPOL team. Hofstede's cultural dimensions, especially power distance and masculinity, femininity, help explain divergent expectations regarding hierarchy, seniority, and gender roles. The officer's reaction reflected a possible tension between her expectations of formal authority and the operational discretion exercised by leadership, shaped by both organizational culture and individual cultural backgrounds. Social identity theory further illuminates how professional and gender identities intersect. The complainant's identification with her role as a champion of gender mainstreaming and her position within the team influenced her perception of fairness and legitimacy. Collectively, these lenses underscore the complexity of leadership in multicultural peacekeeping contexts, where decisions about authority, competence, and representation are interpreted through multiple, overlapping cultural and social lenses, requiring leaders to exercise culturally informed judgment while upholding UN principles and operational protocols.

Coordination with Host-State Institutions and Other Mission Components

UNPOL leaders must manage teams composed of diverse cultural backgrounds while simultaneously liaising with the SSNPS, military units, and UNMISS civilian sections. Misunderstandings rooted in cultural differences within the team can become amplified during interactions with other mission components or external partners, which may compromise professional credibility, weaken trust, and hinder the efficiency of operations. I vividly recall preparing a joint patrol with the SSNPS, UN Military Observer (UNMO), and Child Protection Unit, including Civil Affairs and Public Information

Officers. On the grounds that the joint patrol was initiated by UNPOL, my officers argued that we should assume a leadership role. UNMO countered the UNPOL position on the grounds of their inherent superiority. Concerned about the language barrier at the security checkpoints, the SSNPS suggested leading the convoy, which is contrary to UNMISS joint patrol operations. The UNMISS Civilian Units, comprised of language assistants, argued that in joint patrol operations, they lead the convoy because their language assistants communicate skillfully at the local security checkpoints with the Security Operation Information (SOI) or security clearance. During the briefing, these differences led to confusion about roles, responsibilities, and the sequence of actions that, if not resolved, would have delayed the patrol cause some operational mistakes, which could undermine trust between the UNPOL team and its partners.

To resolve this challenge, I sought professional counsel from the UNMISS Field Integrated Office Coordination (FIOC), a crucial hub for information analysis, operational coordination, and crisis management within field offices, integrating military, police, and civilian components to support mission leadership and mandate implementation in South Sudan. FIOC team leader acknowledged the merits of the claims from all sides but advised that Civilian Units, comprised of language assistants, have always assumed the lead in such an integrated operation.

Managing multicultural UNPOL teams in UNMISS presents complex challenges related to coordination and clarity of roles, which can be better understood through several theoretical perspectives. Cultural intelligence highlights the importance of leaders recognizing and adjusting to differences in communication styles, language nuances, and culturally influenced expectations. In joint patrol operations, the diverse viewpoints of UNPOL, UNMO, SSNPS, and civilian personnel demonstrate how professional and cultural norms shape decision-making and behavior, requiring leaders to adapt to maintain operational cohesion. Hofstede's cultural dimensions shed light on the values driving these interactions, such as variations in power distance and individualism versus collectivism. For example, UNMO's emphasis on hierarchical authority reflects

high power distance, while UNPOL's efforts to guide the patrol reveal differing assumptions about role legitimacy within mission frameworks. Social identity theory helps explain the inclination of team members to identify with their national or professional contingents, which can create in-group/out-group dynamics and complicate collaboration across components. Confusion regarding convoy leadership and task allocation illustrates how these identities influence perceptions of authority and trust. By consulting FIOC, which brings together military, police, and civilian perspectives, it suggests how leaders applied CQ to navigate cultural and professional differences, drew on Hofstede's insights to address hierarchical expectations, and managed identity-based tensions to restore clarity and ensure mission effectiveness.

Stress, Fatigue, and Environmental Hardships

The challenging environment in UNMISS, characterized by unpredictable security situations, limited infrastructure exacerbated by budgetary constraints, and long separations from family, has the proclivity to heighten cultural tensions and put pressure on personal interactions. Within this setting, leaders must take on the added role of maintaining team morale, promoting well-being, and encouraging positive and effective relationships among team members. This requires a high level of flexibility and cultural intelligence. I remembered a few situations I handled effectively with flexibility. The first relates to one of my officers from Bangladesh, facing domestic pressure from his spouse to come home. Being up throughout the night because of the time difference, talking to his spouse, punctuality on duty became a challenge, affecting his duties, especially for the patrol scheduled for the morning.

I addressed the officer's family-related challenges by combining empathy, cultural awareness, and flexible leadership. After understanding his situation through a private conversation, I adjusted his schedule to allow family communication without compromising critical patrol duties, while encouraging team support to maintain cohesion. This approach enabled him to meet both personal and professional responsibilities, reinforced morale, and strengthened a culturally

sensitive and supportive team environment, key to effective leadership in UNPOL.

Another situation I remembered dealing with was during the Holy Ramadan, observed by some of my UNPOL colleagues. Even though the SOP provides that UNPOL work eight hours daily (0800hrs-1700hrs). Moreover, the SOP did not provide consideration to adjust the schedule. These officers, who were far from home, needed a reasonable time to retire from duties to prepare for breaking fast. Recognizing the significance of Ramadan for the team members observing, which reflects respect for cultural diversity, and without compromising operational effectiveness, I pleaded with their respective team leaders for flexible duty hours for fasting officers, such as enabling them to end their shift slightly earlier to prepare for breaking fast (from 0800hrs- 1500hrs).

In the context of the theoretical framework, effective leadership necessitates cultural intelligence, as demonstrated in the case of a Bangladeshi officer dealing with family pressures while colleagues observed Ramadan. By exhibiting empathy and understanding culturally influenced obligations, as well as adjusting work schedules without disrupting operations, leadership showcased the flexibility and sensitivity needed to balance individual needs with mission requirements.

Hofstede's cultural dimensions provide insight into these decisions: an awareness of collectivist values informed the support for family obligations, while adherence to hierarchical structures and adaptation within SOP constraints helped maintain team harmony during religious observances. Additionally, social identity theory highlights how cultural and national affiliations can create subgroups; proactively addressing personal and cultural needs mitigated the risk of in-group/out-group divisions, fostered inclusivity, and strengthened team cohesion and morale, ultimately enhancing operational effectiveness within the UNPOL context.

Conclusion

Although the author's direct experience as a field office police commander in South Sudan does not capture every challenge of leading multicultural teams in UN Peacekeeping Operations, it provides

meaningful insights and practical lessons that can benefit leaders facing similar situations. The operational environment, with its security uncertainties, limited infrastructure, and long periods away from family, amplified the risk of cultural misunderstandings and interpersonal tensions, highlighting the necessity for adaptive and responsive leadership.

Key lessons from this experience emphasize the importance of cultural awareness, flexibility, and empathy. Effective leaders must understand and respect culturally influenced practices, including family commitments, religious observances, and hierarchical norms, while maintaining operational efficiency. Demonstrating this level of Cultural Intelligence (CQ) involves applying cognitive, motivational, and behavioral approaches to foster trust, cohesion, and team morale in diverse and challenging settings.

The experience also reinforces the value of theoretical frameworks in guiding leadership. Hofstede's cultural dimensions help leaders interpret differences in individualism, collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance, providing insight into team expectations and behaviors. Social identity theory highlights the influence of group affiliations on interaction and cooperation, reminding leaders to consider identity dynamics in team management. Combining these frameworks with practical, context-driven strategies allows leaders to balance mission objectives with the needs, motivation, and well-being of a culturally diverse workforce.

In summary, leading in UN Peacekeeping Operations requires both strategic understanding and human sensitivity. The lessons drawn from this reflection offer guidance for fostering effective team performance, promoting cross-cultural understanding, and achieving mission success in future peacekeeping contexts.

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