I will never forget a Special Forces (SF) company commander relating the story of his deployment to Haiti in 1994 to my class in the SF Qualification Course. His mission: deploy his team to a certain location and “establish peace”. At the time I had thought he was possibly exaggerating, but since then I have seen many other examples of official guidance which assumed that elements of the military could perform miracles. “Change our culture to one that ensures no sexual harassment or assault”, “Establish non-corrupt governance in Afghanistan”, “Support the development of a viable economic infrastructure”, and “Assist South American security forces in stopping the flow of drugs to the U.S.”- are just some examples of the guidance I have seen in official documents. I used to think we did not really believe our official pronouncements, but regardless, the effect is the same: our troops are often asked to do the impossible.

What makes us think that U.S. military personnel, or anyone for that matter, can affect fundamental change on a scale unheard of until relatively recently? I submit that what is required when attempting fundamental change is not a new program, surely not the same old programs, and definitely not a new theory. I propose that it is new thinking that is required. If we are truly going to attempt fundamental change we must approach all that we do in a fundamentally different way.

This paper will describe this different way, something that I will call “Relationalism”[1], a term I have borrowed from COL (ret.) Dr. Christopher Paparone and a speech he gave at an Organizational Research and Systems Analysis (ORSA) Officer Qualification graduation ceremony. Simply put, Relationalism attempts to get us to critically and creatively think about what we are attempting to do. I submit this is absolutely imperative for affecting fundamental change when dealing with humans and that the way in which we normally talk about critical and creative thinking within the military is dead-wrong.

The Contemporary Challenge: Fundamental Change

I once asked in a KC Star newspaper blog, “What temperature do we want it to be?” It seemed to be a reasonable question, since most of the intelligentsia of the country were warning of the dangers of “Global Warming” and urging action to slow temperature growth. Assuming that we really could change the rate at which the Earth warms, I wondered at the hubris that held that there was some sort of “optimal” temperature that we humans should aim for and that we really thought we could get there. After all, I am sure most people might support efforts to clean the air we breathe, but aiming for a certain degree of temperature seemed to be ludicrous. Those who aim for cleaner air, however, seem to be able to sell their
agendas far easier when they suggest that we should slow down the Earth’s warming, or, as I sometimes suspect, actually make it cooler. Why is that?

The “war on drugs” seems to follow a similar logic. Politicians are able to sell the American people on a strategy of fighting supply, when we as a country largely operate on exactly the opposite logic when it comes to our economic system. Why are politicians and security leaders able to get away with language that sounds as far-fetched as changing the world’s temperature? Our leaders promise to combat the flow of drugs into this country targeting users, dealers, transit personnel, manufacturers, and growers. No-one, however talks much about targeting the reasons users use drugs. This simplistic logic points to a fault in our educational system and humans in general: people largely only understand simplistic causality.

The “war on poverty” is another great example. The U.S. has spent too much money for decades attempting to eradicate poverty with the assumption being that poverty is not something that emerges from many other factors. If only someone has food, an education and a job, poverty, it is thought, can be defeated. What if poverty stems from some very complex and multi-faceted causes? What if those causes are different for different people? What if these causes feed off each other and are emergent- in other words, tracing them back to one, or even a few, root causes is impossible? But, just like the simple causality logic that runs our drug policy, our populations’ inability to process complex relationships makes it easier to sell useless programs that do little more than eat up untold resources without much to show save increases in government jobs.

Lastly, there is the example of the U.S. military in Iraq and Afghanistan. The three ubiquitous lines of effort we have chased after in these two countries were “security, development, and governance”. The U.S. military operated, and still operates, under the assumption that we can force security solutions onto several groups of peoples living in one geographic “nation”, that we can create development or even assist them in “developing”, and that we can support “good” governance from on-high. These examples ignore our own history of how our security developed, our economy grew and how our government has evolved. But, because some analysts have claimed these efforts to be the key in defeating insurgencies, our simplistic-causality minds have unquestioningly bought into it and we have developed entire national defense strategies around this concept.

What do all of these examples have in common? They rely on the idea that we can affect fundamental change in human population groups if we just hit the “sweet spot” of what everyone needs according to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. In other words, life is simply a search for the right algorithm. Enough reading and analysis of history, enough practical application, and enough number-crunching will reveal the secret formula to any problem. There is no need for different perspectives: there is one paradigm with which to view the world and that paradigm is pretty much the American or Western paradigm. This paradigm sees the world as something objective that follows simple causality logic and ration. When confronted with paradox it blames the observer as opposed to blaming the system the observer exists in. As more and more Western entities attempt to solve problems that entail fundamental change in human population groups, it makes complete sense that we have had to invent new terms. These new terms assist us in overcoming our frustrations as we have inevitably realized we are not making progress with our old terms. The U.S. Special Operations’ term “the Human Domain” is one good example.

**SOF and the “Human Domain”**

There has been a lot of talk recently about adding a seventh warfighting function and much of it has been linked to the concept of “the human domain”. Essentially this concept recognizes that human population groups are complex adaptive entities and prone to behavior that the U.S. military has not quite gotten the grasp of. Many have oversimplified the concept to mean that in the past the U.S. military has
done a terrible job of thinking about how people will act and react to our actions, but this is disingenuous. The real reason I think this concept has gotten a lot of play is that even though we HAVE thought about people, we still do not seem to be having the effects we want. In other words, we think we know where our focus should be, but we still seem to struggle to get good results.

This concept has gotten even more attention in the realm of Special Operations. The Special Operations community has linked this idea to a push to claim greater exposure within conventional forces’ plans. If conventional forces incorporate Special Operations in all of its concepts, the thinking goes, then not only will their plans be more effective, but their effect on populations will be much more successful. The logic is that Special Operations Forces (SOF) know “people” and if the conventional forces want people to act in a certain way, then they need to incorporate Special Operations more as a general rule.

What is really going on here is that the military is starting to attempt to grapple with the reality that fundamental change within human population groups is massively difficult. It has presented us with issues such that we have to invent new concepts and even words. We want to change our doctrine, add warfighting functions, and template new approaches for all operations. This is the natural actions of a bureaucracy that sees the need to change, but recognizes that real change is most likely impossible. Of course, some may not see a need for real change, but, regardless, change is something everyone seems to accept as inevitable. The only debate is what kind of change.

Unfortunately, SOF, just like the rest of the military, is stuck in, for lack of a better term, a simple-causality world. This world is characterized by, for starters, linear causality thinking. That is, things are thought to be caused by one or a few things in a very obvious manner. Further, these causes are thought to be easily traceable from their effects and, when acted upon, have direct impacts upon those effects. Once actions are taken, observers are thought to be able to measure reactions and learn, influencing future actions and eventually becoming more successful in similar operations.

This simple causality is further supported by the idea that the world is full of “natural facts”. Thus, there is one objective reality- even when dealing with humans- and this objective reality consists of natural facts that are indisputable and, once discovered, are incontrovertible. This makes objective analysis, observation, learning, and improvement possible and is characterized by the discovery of such things as “principles” and other categories of knowledge that allow one to “understand” certain instances of human group behavior. The way the military makes sense of these natural facts and their accompanying simple causality is by engaging in categorical thinking (breaking phenomena into categories in order to better understand them). Once the military “understands” a phenomenon, it uses rational decision making processes to best influence those engaged in the phenomenon and then uses mostly quantitative data measurement to gauge progress.

This line of thinking, of course, fits not only the American and military educational systems, but also our intuition and experience; therefore it is very difficult to imagine anything different. But, there are signs that the key to effectively institute fundamental change within human population groups rests more in how one approaches and thinks about each unique situation as opposed to any one paradigmatic approach. This idea is not a new paradigm, but one that rejects paradigms all-together, instead it encourages a multi-paradigmatic approach. In a word, this approach is called “Relationalism”, and it is characterized by an appreciation of complexity theory, an understanding of the difference between physical and social facts and provides one with alternatives to categorical thinking. The purpose of Relationalism is to get us to think about why we think the way we do (in other words, to be critical thinkers) and to get us to think of new ways to approach reality (or, be creative).

What We Need to be Effective in Attempting Fundamental Change in the “Human Domain”
The chart above attempts to depict the concept that as one moves away from more linear-types of activities (think of an artillery shell lobbed at a known point) and more towards complex phenomena (UW- Unconventional Warfare, for example), the more one requires different tools than the ones normally associated with the Army training and educational systems. Thus, a focus on “natural facts”, linear phenomena, and categorical thinking results in the twin tools of rational decision making planning processes and quantitative assessments tending to dominate our approach to all operations. Instead, I submit that in order to deal more effectively within the “Human Domain”, one must appreciate “social facts”, complexity theory, and different approaches to thinking- all in order to assist in the development of situationally unique planning models and qualitative assessments frameworks. These tools, in addition to the ones we are normally exposed to, will help in rounding out a unique approach to unique phenomena.

U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) must be more effective in influencing human population groups to do certain things that will further U.S. interests. To do so, however, they cannot rely on the public and military educational systems that have grounded them in, if one has to label certain “domains”: the more “physical” domains- as opposed to the “human domain.” To critically think we have to understand why it is that we plan using rational decision making processes, why we view the world as one made up of natural facts, why we rely more and more on quantitative measurements, why we like to break our world
up into categories in order to best make sense of it, and why we are prone to draw linear logical conclusions even in the face of paradox and contradiction. In other words, we have to understand first how we view the world before we can start thinking critically. We must do this, of course, not so much to destroy our paradigm (we must, after all, continue to talk to the rest of our community-and to do that we have to continue to speak using their language, metaphors, and concepts), but in order to be able to identify its weaknesses.

The second reason to be able to think critically about how we view the world is in order to be creative in our solutions. Without being critical thinkers and knowing why we do what we do, it is impossible to come up with new ways of doing things. Being creative is absolutely essential in dealing with influencing humans. Humans are so-called complex adaptive entities- constantly seeking to, as Ian Morris puts it (and I’m paraphrasing here): “get more stuff (we’re greedy), in less risky ways (we’re risk-averse), with less effort (we’re lazy).”[9] This means that if one takes a general approach to influencing humans, then humans, being what they are, will quite naturally be immune to that approach in a very natural and even unconscious way. But creativeness does not mean being creative within one paradigm. That is only surface creativity. Real and effective creativity requires critical thinking- and, as I noted above, critical thinking requires a fundamental critique of one’s paradigm and an understanding of its weaknesses.

Our paradigm within the Western World is decidedly scientific and determinist. This is not to say this paradigm has not had, nor continues to have, a purpose. After all, many advantages we enjoy over other cultures and other time periods directly come from our reliance on scientific principles and a sense that the world is moving towards a group of certain conditions (for instance: more democracy, more free trade, more freedoms, etc.). But, we should not assume that this paradigm assists us in making sense of all things in all times and in all places- and especially amongst all groups of peoples. Thus, attempting to measure human behavior as one would a planet’s orbit, fit those measurements into certain categories in order to make sense, rationally choose a course of action with which to theoretically logically apply to said group of humans, make linear causality relationship conjectures and note “natural” facts about these humans-lends itself to deceptive conclusions. Although we must know how to do all of that just to simply communicate with some of our own folks, if not as one possibly useful paradigm, we must develop the exact opposite of each one of those things as well in order to be more effective.

In other words, we must learn about social facts, complexity, multi-paradigmatic thinking, unique planning models, and qualitative concepts. We must appreciate social facts: those facts that mean something within a certain context and especially those that certain groups have attached a certain meaning to. We require familiarity with complexity theory: the idea that many phenomena- especially those that deal with humans- are: impossible to do root causal analysis on, contain emergent properties and lead to exponential second and third order-related effects. We must develop different ways of thinking besides “categorical” thinking that, while having a time and place, prejudice us in certain ways that often reflect more about ourselves than whatever it is we are studying. We need to develop and learn different planning techniques and models instead of relying on rational decision making processes and we must tweak them based on the unique situation we find ourselves in as opposed to a “one-size fits all” approach. Lastly, we have to be more comfortable with qualitative assessments and the value of “narrative” (think story-telling) over data.[10]

**Summary and Objections to this Concept**

Today SOF are being asked to do more than ever before and with increasingly vague and hubristic-sounding missions and concepts. At the same time we are realizing there are issues with our approaches, and yet we are simply inventing new words, new concepts, and sometimes new paradigms to deal with the confusion, contradiction, and outright paradox we find when we deal with “the human domain”. [11]
Instead of demanding our personnel be critical and creative thinkers within our current paradigm, let us demand they be critical of our paradigm in order to truly be creative and invent new paradigms. This truly critical and creative thinking will allow us to be more effective in dealing with fundamental change within human population groups. But, we must school ourselves in something that goes against most of what we have learned in our educational up-bringing: both prior to joining the military and once in the military. That something is “Relationalism”, or, as Dr. Paparone characterizes it: knowledge of complexity, an appreciation of social facts and an understanding that there are different types of thinking other than categorical thinking.

We can no longer rely on a “whole of government” approach, clear and concise guidance, linearly-nested mission statements that are able to tie tactical tasks to policy objectives, an effective and responsive command structure, rational actors- both within our own country and the countries we are attempting fundamental change in- and groups of humans who will play by our warfare paradigms (if we ever could). Instead we must accept this reality, which is at the same time both confusing and exciting. It promises to force us out of our comfort zones and out of paradigms built for mass-educating factory workers out of farmhands. The demands of today’s world: fundamental change within human population groups, or, as we in the military are calling it, “the human domain”, requires different thinking, not different paradigms, words, or concepts. In order to critically and creatively think, we have to know ourselves and our ways of thinking first. And to be effective in the human domain, we must think critically and creatively.

Of course, this would change everything. Critically approaching our ways of thinking and inventing new ways would naturally lead to changes in doctrine, planning, training, educating, executing, structuring, equipping, recruiting and more. Some may counter that we do not need to be critical of how we currently think- only within how we currently think. Of course that is not critical thinking, but we must ask ourselves how we intend to be creative if we refuse to break out from the ruling paradigm. Some may counter that we already critically and creatively think. The counter to this, of course, is to ask them how they think we currently think. If they cannot describe the current paradigm, then obviously they are not critical. Some may counter that the current paradigm is working quite well. This is a very difficult challenge to overcome, as denial of a problem is one of the most useful tools to combat change and the types of problems we are talking about are not easily “proven” to have been successful or not (you can see hints of these types of problems by the fact that the quantitative data seem to prove whatever one wants them to prove). Suffice it to say that if the current paradigm is working well, then I do not see why there is so much debate over Afghanistan and Iraq. But, having said all that, never underestimate the power of the bureaucracy to resist change; and here I am not recommending a small change, but a very large change: changes in thinking are always more frightening than any other kind of change.

There is, of course, one other alternative, and that is to usher in a new paradigm. Although this is tempting, normally new paradigms are just new concepts introduced within the old paradigm. Although I would characterize “the human domain” as a new word within the same concepts and paradigm we currently have, some may attempt to sell it or even characterize it as a new concept or even a new paradigm. I would recommend we resist that as much as possible. We are asking our forces to do very different things than anyone- much less militaries- have been asked to do before: fundamental human population group change. This requires a different tool- and that tool is different thinking.

**Conclusion**

SOF and others dealing in fundamental human population group change must approach things in a different manner with different types of thinking than they would when engaged in other types of actions. To risk sounding simplistic: the types of tools and thinking required for a surgical strike at the tactical level should not be the same tools and thinking used at the strategic level nor actions at any level when
attempting to change how groups of humans organize and act. Instead, when we are talking fundamental human population group change, or, “Special Warfare”, in comparison to “Surgical Strike” operations, our service members must understand the current paradigm our nation and institution operates within and must be encouraged to come up with different paradigms. This will quite naturally get us into the realm of philosophy and social theory, not things with which we are normally comfortable with. But, in the same manner, we have not been expected until relatively recently to be able to affect the kinds of changes we are being asked to affect.

The main problem with this, of course, is that it is in opposition to our institution’s culture. We value experience over education, action over contemplation, and actors over philosophers. But, if we are truly interested in emphasizing the “human domain” over the more “physical domains”, then this necessarily implies doing something different than what we do when engaging the “physical domains”. The “human domain” entails complex relationships and non-linear causality. It begs for creative solutions and requires a critical analysis to avoid common logical fallacies. Without addressing this head-on and with a new approach, our rhetorical calls for critical and creative thinking are seen as just that: rhetorical. Our troops are tired of the buzz-words. Let’s give them something more to sink their teeth into.

Disclaimer: These opinions are the author’s own and do not represent the position of USAJFKSWCS, USASOC, US Army, or DoD.

[1] Relationalism: a philosophical concept in contrast to Rationalism. Whereas Rationalism relies on linear and reductive reasoning and scientific precepts, “Relationalism” relies on non-linear, relations-type concepts and views science as providing less of an “end” or “conclusion” as simply just another perspective- especially in reference to humans and human population groups. It more broadly describes a method of approach that takes into account relations between entities, as opposed to individual entities in isolation.

[2] My definition of paradigm is: the collection of principles that any one discipline espouses at any one given time. It defines in broad terms what is important to a discipline and implies how members of the discipline should view the world and engage in knowledge construction and understanding about that world (the discipline’s philosophy, in other words).

[3] At present there are six “warfighting functions”: Movement and Maneuver, Command and Control, Sustainment, Protection, Intelligence, Fires, and, according to doctrine, once these six are combined with a seventh “element”- leadership- they make up a higher-level abstraction called “combat power”. Thus, in order to maximize one’s “combat power”, one must combine the various warfighting functions in creative ways through leadership.

[4] Paparone, Christopher Dr., speech to ORSA Q Course graduates: “Categorical thinking: contrary to the operationalism we have been taught throughout your military career, a well-rounded SOF thinker must be able to shift between categorical thinking- which eases coordination between different groups and individuals, and other types of thinking- due to the potential costs of prioritizing coordination and communication. The U.S. Army builds almost everything around categories. Doctrine, rank and file bureaucratic systems, organizations and training systems, PMESII-PT, METT-TC, DIME, DOTMLPF, and so forth. There is at least one alternative- and that is that we could think along “continua” vice categories. This isn’t to say that we should never “do” categorical thinking- it has its place and time, but
we should be able to do both. Sometimes we need high adaptation and improvisation.”

[5] Most of the concepts for Relationalism with respect to the military as well as footnotes 6-8 recommended readings come from an U.S. Army ORSA Officer Qualification Course graduation speech by COL (ret.) Dr. Christopher Paparone.


[7] Recommended reading on social facts: Thomas S. Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*

[8] Recommended reading on categorical thinking: Karl E. Weick’s *Sensemaking in Organizations*


[10] Our doctrinal obsession is sometimes amusing, as it was when I witnessed a group of doctrine writers argue for an hour over a good example of a “measure of effectiveness” to be used in a certain manual. At the end of the hour the group gave up, as everyone realized that every measure could be argued to be a measure of performance. In other words, the concept was practically useless when addressing complex adaptive entities due to measures of effectiveness concepts being grounded in linear causality conceptualization.

[11] I have to say that I am not a fan of this term, but when I put it into context, I feel better about using it. As I said before, I think this term exists solely because of the confusion we find ourselves in when attempting fundamental change when dealing with human population groups and we naturally had to come up with a new concept to attempt to better describe what we thought we were facing, as opposed to taking a step back and learning what paradigm we were operating in and whether it was the culprit vice too much of a focus on “physical domains”.

### About the Author

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