

Cultural Knowledge for the Military and the Limits of Anthropological Ethics

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For at least the last year and a half, the most prominent debate in the discipline of anthropology has been about what, if any, working relationship it should have with the military, security, and intelligence communities. At times this has been an acrimonious debate. At the business meeting of the annual gathering of the American Anthropological Association here in DC two weeks ago, anthropologists working with the military were labeled “war criminals.” The Network of Concerned Anthropologists, a group including prominent practitioners, has circulated a pledge against anthropologists contributing to counterinsurgency efforts in Iraq – described as a “war of occupation.” The Network is understandably concerned about the implications of what anthropology would become if subject to the priorities of the military, as an institution of violence.

Prior to the annual meeting of the AAA, with a strongly worded statement, the Association’s Executive Board voted to formally condemn the U. S. military’s Human Terrain System project, which has received substantial media attention in recent months. The HTS project places anthropologists, as contractors with the military, in settings of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, for the purpose of collecting cultural and social data for use by the military. Anthropologists, and other social scientists, are embedded as part of five-person teams, with the goal of helping field commanders with their decision-making, and when at all possible, to avoid “kinetic” situations. The EB found that “in the context of a

war that is widely recognized as a denial of human rights and based on faulty intelligence and undemocratic principles,” the deployment by the military of anthropologists in HTS-type arrangements would violate the discipline’s Code of Ethics.

Eighteen months ago, the EB authorized creation of a new Ad Hoc Commission on Anthropology’s Engagement with the Security and Intelligence Communities, an eight-person group which included myself, and which last month completed a detailed Report on what kinds of engagement anthropologists might ethically pursue with these sectors. The Commission’s Report is meant to inform further disciplinary discussion and decision-making about these matters in the immediate future – matters sure to remain heated and perhaps even to create lasting disciplinary fissures. As the Report makes apparent, much of the story has to do with mapping the changing fault lines between “academic” and “applied” anthropological work in the field.

Of course the discipline of anthropology is not the only social science currently debating these issues. Our disciplinary arguments are part of a wider discussion about the changing circumstances of scientific practice in the post-9-11 era, where what we might call the “security paradigm” is notably influencing how science is to be done, including: the role of changing sources of funding, the definition of priorities in topics and subjects of research, and the identity of new collaborators and circumstances of data collection, as these are informed by the institutions, priorities, and policies of a new kind of security state. This is a debate about a new *longue durée* – a necessary public debate to have at present. But it also takes distinctive forms across different scientific communities.

Current passionate debates in the APA reflect, in large part, recognition among psychologists about the ways signature disciplinary skills historically (and at present) are resourced in military and intelligence work – for interrogation. Among the psychologists, the relationship of interrogation to torture is at the center of their disciplinary arguments. Anthropologists are engaged in a very different discussion, however, where the signature disciplinary concept of culture and method of participant-observation ethnography are at the center of our own controversy. If “culture” has become a new DoD buzzword, and if anthropologists are actively sought for their cultural expertise, what is being asked from anthropology? How is the application of cultural expertise to military ends problematic? That anthropology is debating these rather than other questions highlights that the human rights implications of these debates for the different sciences are intimately connected to unique disciplinary histories, identities, modes of inquiry or practice. For anthropology’s relationship to the military, then, we might have to consider the human right to culture – usually weakly defended and poorly understood – as this must inform considerations of the role of anthropologists as “fieldworkers” in the collection of cultural intelligence in contexts of war (as with the HTS controversy). I’ll have more to say about this.

My comments are going to focus on the relationship of anthropology to military intelligence, an activity for which anthropological expertise is deemed desirable. First, I want briefly to note some of the relevant recommendations of the Ad Hoc Commission’s recent Report. After a year and a half of research and discussion, the Commission opted not to condemn engagement with the military a priori. Instead, it suggested that there are

multiple forms of engagement, many of which meet ethical standards for anthropological conduct, and which should not be condemned. Briefly, these include: cultural education, policy work, organizational study, and diverse analyst-type activities. More problematic, however, is the case of professional anthropologists engaged in assisting the military with its operational goals, including on the battlefield. A second recommendation emphasized that ethical considerations must be situational. Rather than thinking of ethics as a set of overarching categorical imperatives, in the context of anthropologists working with or for the military, we are better off thinking through ethical implications in more direct relation to one's specific job description, particular activities, working relationships, institutional environments, and desired outcomes. Ethics, the Report suggests, are not self-evident but fundamentally bound up with everyday kinds of scientific practice – which do not come pre-packaged.

Given why we are gathered here today, it is interesting to note that the debates in anthropology have not, by and large, been framed as human rights debates but rather as ethics debates. This is, I think, because they are fundamentally arguments about how the professional identity of anthropologists should be defined. I suggest, however, that if we look more closely at what the ethical debates are for anthropologists, it becomes apparent that these are concerns about the relationship between appropriate scientific conduct and the maintenance of human dignity. Human rights, in short, lie at the heart of the matter.

A third recommendation of the Ad Hoc Commission's Report suggests the AAA should revisit its own Code of Ethics to consider reintroducing language from the original

1971 CoE, created in the Vietnam War era and specifically focused on the circumstances of the research relationship between ethnographic fieldworker and subject. This language was modified in 1998 to accommodate the proprietary circumstances of research that are commonplace for many applied fieldworkers. Building upon the prohibition to “do no harm,” they address problems of secrecy or transparency in research and the concept of informed and voluntary consent. Anthropological ethics in research are concerned with insuring the safety, privacy, and dignity of the people with whom we work. Such a focus accords with such standards as the Declaration of Helsinki, first adopted in 1964, which insures respect for the individual in research, the right to self determination and the right to make informed decisions regarding participation in research, where the welfare of the subject of research must always take precedence over any other interests.

Built into the anthropological ethics guiding appropriate conduct for ethnographic fieldworkers toward research subjects is an account of human rights. This account has to do with the self-determination of the subjects of scientific research. For anthropologists, this position also builds upon the implications of the human right to culture, as laid out in the key covenants composing the International Bill of Rights, as these form part of how we pursue our self-determination. This set of concerns itself poses a challenge for human rights advocates, who have been slow to take up so-called Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and for whom these rights, themselves, are often understood to be controversial.

Time does not allow for the fullest development of this account here. But, briefly, Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states the right to “participate in

the cultural life of the community.” This right receives further support in the subsequent covenants on civil and political rights and ESC rights in 1966. If the right to culture has been largely ignored in the practice of human rights for many reasons, it is nevertheless basic to the concept of human dignity. How this is the case requires that we understand this right against the background of other recognized human rights, including: the right of self determination, freedom of expression, freedom from fear, a person’s right to security, and to not be subject to coercion. When these rights are all applied to the right to culture, the human rights implications of how the military is currently seeking to apply cultural knowledge to operational tasks in the theater of war, and the role given to anthropology in achieving these goals, comes into sharper and problematic focus.

In 1999 the AAA adopted its “Declaration on Anthropology and Human Rights,” authored by its own Committee for Human Rights. This declaration states, “The capacity for culture is tantamount to the capacity for humanity.” It also states that “violence limits the humanity of individuals and collectives” in the pursuit of “the full realization of their humanity.” But it further suggests that the definition of human rights has to be expanded to include more explicit reference to their collective implications so far as culture is concerned. This, I suggest, is a task that we are now slowly beginning to undertake.

A recent primer produced by the nearby International Human Rights Internship Program, called *The Banyan Tree Paradox: Culture and Human Rights Activism*, notes that “many activists often fail to see culture and rights issues in situations they address.” The UNDP’s 2004 *Human Development Report*, however, sought to address this through

reformulating how best to think about cultural rights. The UNDP proposed a new term, “cultural liberty,” which develops the implications of the right to culture as including an element of choice – allowing people the freedom to choose their identities as central to the capability of people to live as they would like. As part of our individual experience, our cultural identity is also a matrix through which we determine what our choices are. Understood in this way, cultural liberty, as a collective fact, is also very much part of the individual right of self-determination, freedom of expression, right of personal security, and freedom from coercion.

As I’ve emphasized, our Ad Hoc Commission did not rule out anthropological engagement with the military per se. In part, this position reflects the realization that the military is not a monolithic entity about which we can simply generalize. At the same time it also recognizes that the military is increasingly being tasked with operations other than war, in contexts of humanitarian relief, development work, nation-building, as well as peace keeping missions. The application of cultural knowledge by anthropologists in collaboration with the military can reasonably and ethically lead to less conflict and to better policy, as the military’s own mandates and missions evolve.

If many forms of engagement are at least theoretically possible, we should return to the example of the Human Terrain System insofar as it suggests a limit to the possible. Tasking anthropologists with operational responsibilities, HTS is problematic for at least the following reasons: 1. As members of HTS teams, it is impossible for ethnographers to distinguish themselves from their military counterparts (especially if wearing fatigues and

carrying a weapon), 2. Field data is collected in an environment where research subjects are not easily distinguishable from targeted communities, 3. Work in front line positions makes it hard to distinguish the “field” from the “battlefield,” 4. The researcher’s close association with military goals in the field (which include coercion and violence) makes it almost impossible to evaluate voluntary informed consent by research subjects. There are, in short, obvious human rights implications when cultural knowledge is applied at the “point of the spear,” so to speak.

HTS is problematic, both for anthropology and for human rights, in short, because it potentially directly contributes to the curtailing of peoples’ potential range of choices in the capacity for culture. A key human rights concept is that of “without discrimination,” with regard to race, color, sex, language, religion, birth, politics, social origin or status. In cases where anthropologists directly contribute to infusing cultural knowledge toward the improvement of the military’s operational capacity, as an institution of violence – even if used unintentionally in the targeting of specific cultural communities – the military has in effect acquired the lethal capacity to culturally discriminate. This is further problematic in a post-Cold War era of asymmetric warfare where clear definitions of combatants have given way to a variety of strategic engagements with civilian populations. When cultural intelligence gathering is used to inform the decision-making of military commanders in conflict zones, it is in effect a potential means of coercion that compromises conditions of cultural liberty – the personal security, freedom of expression, from fear and right of self-determination necessary for the exercising of the freedom of cultural choice.

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1. Report of the Ad Hoc Commission on Engagement of Anthropology in US Security and Intelligence Communities:

URL: http://www.aaanet.org/PM_112807.htm

2. AAA’s Executive Board’s Statement on the Military’s Human Terrain System:

URL: http://www.aaanet.org/blog/PR_110707.htm

3. Chronicle of Higher Education article on the recent AAA meetings and debates on Anthropology and the Military:

URL: <http://chronicle.com/news/article/3512/panel-releases-report-on-anthropologists-work-with-the-military>

4. Pledge of the Network of Concerned Anthropologists:

URL: <http://concerned.anthropologists.googlepages.com/home>

5. Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association (revised 1998):

URL: <http://www.aaanet.org/committees/ethics/ethcode.htm>

6. AAA’s Committee for Human Rights’ Declaration on Anthropology and Human Rights (approved by the membership in 1999):

URL: <http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/humanrts.htm>