ANTHROPOLOGY and GLOBAL COUNTERINSURGENCY

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17

Yes, Both, Absolutely

A Personal and Professional Commentary on Anthropological Engagement with Military and Intelligence Organizations[1]

:: KERRY FOSHER ::

A Choice?

At the 2008 meetings of the Society for Applied Anthropology (SfAA), I spoke in a panel on anthropology and government. The panel was largely focused on work with the military, a topic not well understood in the anthropological community. Of the panelists who worked directly with the military, each represented a significantly different type of engagement. One speaker, Brian Selmeski, described his work in reorienting professional military education for an entire military service, the U.S. Air Force. Montgomery McFate discussed her work with the Human Terrain System, a U.S. Army pilot project to deploy people with social science backgrounds as parts of teams providing sociocultural analysis to military commanders. I spoke about my work with the Marine Corps Intelligence Activity, where I help figure out an appropriate approach to culture and am building an analyst development program to teach social science concepts to people involved with military intelligence. Each of us had worked out our alignment with the American Anthropological Association's (AAA) *Code of Ethics* (1998) in our own way. However, a common theme among us was a desire to work for change from the inside.

During the question and answer period, a young woman asked

us all which was more important, working for change from the inside or maintaining critical distance to work for change from the outside. I thought about the range of topics and methods that our discipline has been able to encompass. I thought about the diversity of engagements we embrace, from textual analysis that can take place in a university office, to traditional field research, to action anthropology, advocacy, policy advising, and applied work. I thought about the tradition of rigorous debate about and monitoring of ethics that allows this breadth of work. In such a tradition, there is no reason to choose, and, in fact, there may be an imperative to refrain from making a choice that excludes entire areas of practice from the disciplinary discourse. I replied to her question with what I truly believe to be the best answer for the discipline: "Yes, both, absolutely."

There are two types of choices hinted at in this exchange. One is an individual choice about personal ethics and an assessment of where one's activities and relationships fall in a professional code of ethics. The other is a choice for the entire discipline. Which kinds of activities and engagements will we allow under the big tent our discipline has formed and which are simply too problematic?

This commentary describes my own choices and what I believe to be the key issues in navigating the ethical challenges I face. I also mention what I feel are the potential benefits to the discipline of having some anthropologists directly engaged, despite the problematic nature of the work. I do not propose my choices as a model for anyone else in the discipline. I simply use them to illustrate what I feel are some of the core questions that face any anthropologist addressing this topic, regardless of the degree to which they decide to engage with people working in military or intelligence organizations.[2]

Context: A Bit of Ethnography

Relatively little is available in the anthropological literature that describes the types of engagements that anthropologists have with people and organizations related to U.S. national security.[3] Consequently, it is necessary to provide a brief discussion of types of work, categories of employment, and domains of practice as a framework for the comments that follow. I do not pretend that these descriptions are based on rigorous research. They are merely observations, as much research remains to be done in the ethnography of the security sector in the United States.

Anthropologists employed by military and intelligence organizations work in many different capacities. Some teach in academies, colleges, and universities. Some work as researchers, administrators, analysts, and trainers. Some

do planning, research, classified or unclassified analysis, fieldwork, and so on. Most work in offices and classrooms in the United States. Some work in offices overseas. A few are deployed with operating forces. Some spend their time traveling around to different bases and facilities delivering training or policy advice. Work may be geared toward understanding U.S. organizations, international organizations, nongovernmental organizations, the joint environment, allies, perceived adversaries, or perceived neutral groups. It may involve providing information on specific groups or, as is the case with my own, it may have more to do with trying to ground policy, education, and planning in solid social science concepts and methods.

These anthropologists often are employed as civil servants. Their positions are similar to others in the federal bureaucracy, although a number of organizations are trying to create positions that are tailored to the kinds of freedom of schedule and publication that anthropologists prefer. One consequence of the recent increased interest in anthropologists is that many anthropologists now do private consulting or work with a contracting company. Such private sector jobs can be created and dismantled more easily than civil service positions. They also offer considerably more freedom in terms of working conditions and pay. Of course, they also come with less job security and, for those who are deployed into conflicts, a certain amount of ambiguity about which laws apply. It is difficult to assess the numbers of anthropologists who are employed in these categories. Of course, some of that depends on whom one "counts" as an anthropologist based on a variety of criteria such as the type of work being done, level of education, professional membership, publication, and so on. It also depends on who wants to be counted. I know a number of anthropology Ph.D.s working for the government who have adopted a different professional identity and now consider themselves to be a different sort of professional, an analyst, a manager, an advisor, whose work is informed by their anthropological background.

It also is useful to think about the domains of practice. Although each overlaps or is entangled with the others, they help me think about one dimension in this discussion. It is important to remember that in almost all of these domains, one's audience is likely to include both uniformed and civilians members of these communities.

Education: work on long-term educational approaches, teaching; often in the academies, colleges, and universities of professional military and intelligence education.

Training: work on strategies for training, delivering training; often as part of predeployment preparations or professional development.

Policy: advising on or developing policy, sometimes at the national level, sometimes within specific organizations.

Direct support to operations: usually deployment in an advisory or analytic capacity, sometimes involves field research.

Intelligence: involves aspects of all other domains but is focused on providing information, both classified and unclassified, that supports decision making by elected officials, other policy makers, or military commanders.

Research and development: basic and applied research conducted through the national laboratories and research institutes, military and intelligence universities, or with Federally Funded Research and Development Centers[4]; although traditionally these organizations tended to look at hard science and engineering topics, they increasingly are trying to address culture-related topics.

These domains are emically derived. Whereas anthropologists may be interested in degrees of secrecy and transparency, relationships leading to a potential for bias, the possibility of harm to research communities, and so on, as Sahlins reminds us, "These people have not organized their existence in answer to what has been troubling us lately" (Sahlins 1999). Instead, these domains follow the distinctions important in the military and intelligence communities and help point toward the sorts of institutional contexts in which anthropologists work, although perhaps not the boundaries of the work they actually do within those contexts.

Increasingly, anthropologists are taking on shaping roles, advising their organization or larger parts of military and intelligence institutions on what they should be doing with regard to culture. As seems to be so often the case, anthropologists are troubling these domains, cross-cutting, talking to one another, and generally perturbing the waters. My own work touches on many of these domains. My primary employment is in intelligence. I spend a good part of every day dealing with educational and training issues as we try to figure out how social science can be included in the professional development of members of the intelligence community. I also deal with training and education issues at higher levels of policy, trying to help ensure that standards are developed based on social science and education theory rather than what is convenient and familiar. I work with people who want to model culture or some aspect of human behavior, trying to point out the problems with technological "solutions" to anything related to human life. I work with the organization's leadership to develop an approach to incorporating more social science that is based on sound scholarship and is sustainable over time, as the culture money

streams begin to dry up. I also provide limited guidance on how we can best provide direct support to operations, particularly questions of when it is appropriate to send somebody into a conflict zone to provide analytic support related to culture and when it is not. I provide no region or group-specific analysis. Almost everything I do is focused on generic concepts and methods. The common themes through all of my projects are that I provide advice on how to make better use of social science concepts in intelligence and how to encourage intelligence analysts to use different approaches in their work.

Questions

Point of Departure

How did I get into the position described in the paragraph above? As the audience member at the SfAA meetings pointed out, there is one individual question that marks a point of departure for all future questions for any academic. Should I stay in a traditional academic role, thereby preserving my autonomy and credibility as a source of objective assessment and critique? Alternatively, should I try consulting for or working within one of these organizations to see what I might be able to learn and accomplish from that vantage point? There are trade-offs in each case. When directly engaged, you risk absorbing the assumptions and biases of the organization(s) for which you work. In some cases, you may be risking causing harm to your research community or enabling harm caused by others. You almost assuredly are enabling flawed institutions. However, there also are risks if you choose the more traditional path. It is very challenging to try to learn about security-related organizations from the outside. Unless you are particularly careful and fortunate in your contacts, you end up having to craft your critique with the sorts of sources and information that are available to an investigative journalist rather than the ethnographic data upon which our discipline normally bases analysis and critique.

This also is a choice about the frame(s) in which I make my ethical decisions. At the macrolevel, the decision-making frame of the discipline focuses on the structural constraints produced by powerful institutions and discourses. This frame cannot be ignored, and I accept many of the critiques that emerge from it. However, I do not accept that this is the only frame in which to make choices. There also must be analysis and decision making at the level of human practice. Structures do not emerge, continue, and change as a result of a Kroeberian superorganic force. However powerful they may be, they rise

and fall as aggregates of human agency. As illustrated in the following sections, some of my choices have been made in acceptance of constraining structures but with greater emphasis on human agency and the lives currently being lived within those structures.

Each of the questions below factors into this first choice. However, if the choice is made to engage in an enduring relationship with a military or intelligence organization, especially one where compensation is involved, the questions must be revisited on a near daily basis. Most anthropologists working for military and intelligence organizations are faced with choices about which projects to accept, which lines of advice to advocate, and how to draw lines. All of these decisions must begin with whether or not something is within the code of ethics of the appropriate professional organization, usually the AAA or the SfAA(Society for Applied Anthropology 1983; American Anthropological Society 1998).

To What Degree Am I Enabling a Flawed System?

Few would debate that any anthropologist who works with or for an organization engaged in U.S. national security is enabling a flawed system. While this does require vigilance, it is not unique to those engaged with the security sector. I have a hard time imagining any large institution that is not flawed. For example, anyone teaching in a traditional academic environment enables the replication of flawed and unjust systems that affect not only their students but also the communities in which anthropologists traditionally study. People who teach in those environments may work very hard in the classroom to counter those effects, but that does not erase them.

This is not to say that we should adopt a completely relativistic stance with regard to the security sector, only that its status as a flawed institution cannot serve as the sole basis for a robust disciplinary debate on ethics, scholarship, and practice. The choice to be part of or work with any large institution is always going to involve a balancing act as we judge how much good can be done from within as opposed to taking an outside stance. My decisions have tended to come down on the side of working within organizations, but those are choices I make for myself, not the discipline as a whole.

What Harm May I Cause?

The guideline to do no harm to one's research community, seemingly so simple, has been the most difficult guideline for me to navigate. I believe this part of the AAA *Code of Ethics* (1998) is critical to the discussions and internal

decision-making process of any anthropologist considering any sort of work. While much of disciplinary attention has gone to the consequences of action, some of us also feel compelled to look at the consequences of inaction, especially in terms of individual lives. If I do nothing about a situation where I can help mitigate harm or give people more options, where does that fall in terms of the "do no harm" guidelines? The nine-year-old girl in Kabul and the nineteen-year-old Marine do not have the luxury of waiting for us to sort out our national debate on foreign policy. I believe their lives matter. In terms of my overall employment, I have decided that I have a personal ethical obligation to engage under these circumstances.

On another level, there is understandable fear in the discipline that anthropological information and techniques, whether willingly supplied or in the form of published materials, will be used to harm the communities in which anthropologists have traditionally studied. This is undoubtedly true, as it would be if they could only access what we had published. I believe that engagement offers at least some possibility of interpreting, offering other, nonviolent courses of action, and so on, but only if we are willing to accept that we will not always "win" in terms of how information is used. You have to be willing to persist over the long haul.

Anthropologists also worry, based on past experience, that security institutions will take anthropology cafeteria style, rather than understanding the need for the full package. Again, this is undoubtedly true, as it is with our students, readers from other disciplines, and lay readers of all kinds. As with information use, this concern is almost certain to become truth if none of us is in the room when the choices are made.

One of the ways I navigate these concerns involves institutional and organizational shaping. Sometimes this simply means educating my organization, the Department of Defense, or the intelligence community about the concerns of social scientists and suggesting ways that problems can be reframed and solved in an ethical manner. Sometimes it means trying to create institutional mechanisms to provide support for ethical decision making. One example of this sort of work is my efforts, now gaining traction, to establish an Institutional Review Board for the organizations at Quantico that do social science research. In terms of day-to-day activities, I sometimes decide to engage or assist security organizations and sometimes refuse based on what courses of action I feel will cause the least harm or do the most good. For example, thus far I have declined to provide assistance with region-specific information. Instead, I work on providing general cultural concepts and shaping overall approaches at the organizational level. That may change over time as I continually assess my situation and actions.

Is the Work Secret?

Types and degrees of secrecy vary among kinds of engagement. All aspects should be explored by anthropologists considering a new project or job: (1) concealing sponsorship, research activities, or results from the community under study; (2) kiva secrets—concealing some aspects of a community to maintain access for research purposes or so that you can, as Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban (2008) has termed it, "do some good" by working within it (this is problematized when the community to which access is being preserved is an employer or client and is a tertiary topic of study for the anthropologist); (3) not publishing or presenting the results of research in anthropological venues (or at all); (4) secrecy to protect informant confidentiality.

With the exception of the first type of secrecy, there are legitimate reasons for all of the others in various types of engagements (inside or outside of the security sector)—what matters is that those reasons and the consequences are carefully thought out with reference to the AAA *Code of Ethics* (1998) and, preferably, discussed with colleagues.

I work in an intelligence organization. Because of classification laws and organizational policies, if I write about the specifics of what I do or the operation of my employer, I am obliged to have that material reviewed. Thus far, I have decided I do not want to submit to that kind of review and have decided to draw a line between the details of my workday and the things about which I write for the discipline. This means a significant sacrifice in terms of my curriculum vitae, as it will severely limit what I can publish. However, I default to the ethical obligation described above. The obligation I feel to the lives and experiences of people currently in conflict trumps any concerns I might have about professional advancement.

This decision raises issues of whether or not what I do is actually anthropology if I cannot discuss it with colleagues and subject my work to peer review. This is a real concern. However, it also is a concern for anyone doing applied work or advocacy in which they withhold certain information. I am comfortable with the idea that I may be an anthropologist acting as an advisor or an advisor whose work is informed by anthropology rather than an anthropologist doing anthropology. Others may be less comfortable with that distinction. There is a larger disciplinary discussion that needs to happen on this issue, but it must first be disentangled from the exclusive focus on security.

Issues of classification and other restrictions on information sharing, such as the "for official use only" and "sensitive but unclassified" designations, present a continual challenge. Although it has not happened yet, it is likely

that I will someday encounter restricted information that I believe the discipline or the public should know. I will follow the laws to which I am subject, but such an incident would be a trigger for me to revisit substantively my willingness to engage.

Daily Decision Making

There is no question that working within the security sector, especially working within an intelligence organization, has a high potential for ethical missteps. In the absence of disciplinary guidance, every anthropologist must design his or her own process for ensuring that his or her work falls within the AAA or SfAA codes and within their own guidelines for appropriate and ethical behavior. My process is convoluted but always includes the following aspects or mechanisms:

Preserve the Ability to Leave

This means some difficult choices about lifestyle and finances, but I believe it is essential for anyone working in the security sector, except those involved in professional military education, where the setting is similar to a university. This means that I must preserve the ability to get other kinds of jobs and must always have enough of a financial cushion to walk away if I am asked or expected to do things I consider unethical. For somebody paying off student loans, this is not easy. For somebody trying to raise a family, it might be impossible, something that should be given due consideration before accepting a position.

Be Systematically Vigilant

I believe it is not enough to make ethical choices once and then become passive. I make small choices constantly because my work changes frequently, but I do not believe that is enough either. On a weekly basis, I take time to revisit my larger choices. Should I be engaged in this way? In this situation? Are there better ways for me to be constructively engaged given my specific skills and knowledge? Is the slope getting too slippery even if what I am doing right now seems acceptable? On a monthly basis, I revisit these topics with one or more colleagues in my network. This attention may seem melodramatic, but I see it as the equivalent of flossing. It is a preventative measure, one that is necessary for those of us who are working within organizations that wield a great deal of power.

Maintain an Intellectual Bucket Brigade

Every anthropologist interested in security should maintain a network of colleagues up and down the spectrum of engagement, a sort of intellectual bucket brigade. This helps ensure that data, analysis, and critique from different perspectives circulate. There are benefits to this sort of communication for everyone in the network. For those in traditional academia, the material from those working within the security sector may not be readily available through documentary or ethnographic research. For those, like myself, who are working within military or intelligence organizations, the outside perspective is critical. I rely on those in my bucket brigade to provide hand holds on a potentially slippery slope, to help me realize when I start to lose sight of the impact of my setting on the choices I have available and on my decision-making process. On a more practical level, this network provides me with a group of people I can call when I am considering a new course of action. I use the differences among my colleagues to help make my decisions strong.

It is in this last mechanism that I believe we see the greatest potential benefit for the discipline as a whole.[5] Given that all these institutions are linked in some way to the capacity for collective violence, understanding how they are created, maintained, and transformed by the people within them should be an important topic in anthropology. As mentioned earlier, it is very difficult to get rich data from security-related organizations from the outside. It is possible to do interviews, policy analysis, and some degree of text analysis on documents that are released to the public. However, these need not be the only sources. It is quite possible for those of us who are working within military and intelligence organizations to act as something like informants, passing along data, perspectives, and research ideas that we do not have time or inclination to pursue on our own. We also can give insights into the lively arena of internal critique in these organizations. Of course, our ability to do this is constrained by all the legal and organizational factors described above. Like people in any community in which an anthropologist conducts fieldwork, we will be biased, tangled in our own narratives and those of the organizations in which we work. However, we may be able to help span a gap in knowledge that has proven very difficult for the discipline to cross.

For now, this system of questions, positionality, vigilance, and consultation seems to work for me. It is time-consuming and sometimes intellectually challenging and almost certainly not the most elegant solution. I am hopeful that the AAA and SfAA will emerge from current debates with a mandate not simply to revise codes of ethics but also to provide guidelines and sup-

port for anthropologists working in the many contexts, not just military and intelligence organizations, where ethical decision making has to be a rigorous, ongoing process.

: : NOTES : :

The views expressed in this commentary are the author s alone and do not represent Marine Corps Intelligence Activity or any other U.S. government agency.

1. This commentary is derived in part from conversations previously published in an interview. See Nuti and Fosher (2007).

2. This commentary does not address the larger historical and political contexts in which anthropological work with the military is currently taking place. Those contexts and their implications are addressed by other contributors far more eloquently than I could manage here. I also do not address to any great degree whether or not the work I do is or is not anthropology or the issue of "do no harm," as I am exploring these topics in other publications.

3. See AAA Commission on the Engagement of Anthropology with the US Security and Intelligence Communities (2007), McNamara (2007b), and Selmeski (2007).

4. Such as RAND, MITRE, Center for Naval Analysis, and the Lincoln Labs.

5. There also are possibilities in terms of the use of applied government work to drive development of middle-range theory. However, these are still at the speculative stage.