HTS Redux: A "Halfie" Calls for an Anthropology of the Military

https://www.e-ir.info/2012/03/01/hts-redux-a-halfie-calls-for-an-anthropology-of-the-military/

DAVID BAYENDOR, MAR 1 2012

Anthropologists … have ignored military elites even more than capitalist elites, despite militarism's evident importance as both a mode of social organization and a site of potent ideological production in America.

– Hugh Gusterson, Studying Up Revisited, 1997

[i] The foreword of *FM 3-24 Manual for Counterinsurgency Operations (COIN)* concludes by stating that "conducting a successful counterinsurgency campaign requires a flexible, adaptive force led by agile, well-informed, *culturally astute leaders*" (Petraeus and Amos 2006, emphasis added). In doing so, General David Petraeus cemented the combination of culture, anthropology and military operations into the public consciousness. In talk shows and exposés, much was made of General Petraeus' background as a warrior-scholar; he is both a graduate of West Point and holds a Ph.D. in international relations, both a soldier and an academic. In that regard, General Petraeus could be described as being a "halfie", an anthropological term used to describe individuals that are caught between two or more cultural boundaries (Abu-Lughod 1991).

I am myself a "halfie": an Army soldier and veteran as well as a graduate student, interested in applying an anthropological perspective on military service members and their experiences. As an anthropologist studying my own experiences, I have to engage yet another anthropological concept, that of reflexivity, the conscious act of seeing oneself as both the disengaged observer and the ethnographic participant or subject. Reflexivity forces one to be aware of the "other" in a very distinct way. We are trained to notice the boundaries of cultural exclusion that various groups create in ways that might be otherwise lost.

The military does this at many levels: appearance, behavior, language, shared experiences, etc. In this regard the military is an often-cited instance of Erving Goffman's (1961) concept of the *total institution:* a place where individual behavior, agency, and expectation are rigidly controlled. The civilian world outside of this total institution maintains this distinction, fetishizing the very idea of military service, granting it tremendous power and projecting expectations, both real and imagined, upon it. There are both positive and negative aspects of this institutional mythos: ideas of courage, service and rites of passage on the one hand, offset with an idealization of warfare, hyper-masculinity and a facile acceptance of military necessity on the other. Catherine Lutz (2009) described this as "the military normal", and Roberto Gonzalez reveals with particular clarity how pervasive this is when he offers historian Richard H. Kohn's description of militarization as "the degree to which a society's institutions, policies, behaviors, thought, and values are devoted to military power and shaped by war" (in Gonzalez 2010:18-21).

The military institution is distinctly closed to the civilian. One cannot simply walk into a military environment and write ethnography. The military exists in this state of exemption from examination because it serves as a mode of enforcement of an overarching political power structure. Powerful groups are notoriously resistant to being studied as Laura Nader (1972) stated in her ground breaking essay "Up The Anthropologist", where she called for anthropologists to engage in studying hegemonic groups in the west, rather than exotic "others" in far away locales. Hugh Gusterson (1997) argues that this form of "repatriated anthropology" is essential in a world state where globalization and the concentration of power are the dominant themes in the twenty-first century. It is this

concentration of power in the military that begs for study.

Yet from where I stand with my halfie perspective there appears to be a distinct reluctance on the part of anthropology to engage with the military institution. The obvious skeleton in the closet is that anthropology was the willing handmaiden of imperial colonialism. Today anthropologists still suffer under the perceived demons of military officers exploiting knowledge of the natives during colonial expansion, and of anthropologists working for the U.S. government during both the World Wars. I am not alone in this belief: the American Anthropological Association (AAA) censured one of it's own founders, Franz Boas, for suggesting that anthropologists should not be serving as informants for the government. It took the AAA eighty-six years to rescind that censure (Forte 2011). As someone new to the discipline it seems that we are deeply troubled by how we engage with institutions of power, and that it seems to be easier to simply adopt a "hands-off" approach.

The military (and the government it putatively serves) wields tremendous influence in their ability to choose with whom they engage and how. The so-called Human Terrain System has become the poster child of this very problem. How does one maintain ethical standards of scientific research when the data may be subject to censorship at best and may be used to identify targets for "kinetic" operations at worst? The AAA and others have already spoken out against this kind of engagement (AAA CEAUSSIC 2009). While I am not in entire agreement with that decision, I will not debate it here. Suffice it to say that there are good points on both sides of the argument, with what I consider a more realistic application lying somewhere in the middle (see Lucas 2008; The Network of Concerned Anthropologists 2009). However, it seems to me that the unintended consequence is that the military has been deemed "off-limits" to legitimate anthropological research, and that the act of engaging with the military in anthropological inquiry is somehow essentially corrupting. Curiously, reports from those social scientists working on Human Terrain Teams illustrate one of the hidden dangers of the military institution: it is very seductive. These erstwhile researchers seemed to be more excited by their playing the role of soldier, of fitting into the institution, than fulfilling the role of the academic. Communications to colleagues and friends are rich with examples of falling into the guile of power that comes from entering into a relationship with a powerful institution(Gonzalez 2008; see Udris, et al. 2010). Conversely, those same reports from the field indicate that the social scientists themselves experience considerable frustration at being unable to integrate into missions, left on the base with little to do, or being assigned to units where the commanders are unsure of how to implement a Human Terrain Team (AAA CEAUSSIC 2009). While this is often used as evidence of a failure on the part of the HTS program, to anyone who has been deployed there is an obvious truth here: war is very disorganized. Almost every single example I have read of HTS scientists describing dull routine, non-work, or confusion about mission parameters is representative of the typical day-to-day experience of the deployed soldier. There is a lost opportunity to study what deployment is like for the military outside of the tidy, hyper-organized ideal that the military would have the civilian world believe. I am continually surprised that none of these social scientists has described their deployment experiences and their interactions with soldiers (perhaps they are forbidden to do as a condition of their HTS contract, a matter for another day). Surely this is a unique chance to study what a military deployment really looks like, from a privileged embedded vantage?

Lucas (2009) crystalized this by describing three types of military anthropology: 1) anthropology of the military, 2) anthropology for military operations, and 3) anthropology for military training. While type 2, illustrated by HTS (but present in other forms), has received the greatest attention, it is the other two forms that have legitimate value and are seemingly overlooked by the academic community and, perhaps, even the military itself.

In regards to type 1, the military is a culturally rich and complex environment, with areas of distinct academic interest that are entirely relevant to anthropological inquiry: Foucault's concepts of *governmentality*, Bourdieu's *habitus*, studies of hierarchy and ritual, are but a few examples. Anthropologists have begun to recently study (and study well, I believe) how society has become militarized, how militarism is the new normal. The value that anthropology brings is one that challenges these assertions of normal, and these constructed notions of what it means to be military, lest we become guilty of supporting a militarization that threatens to undermine democratic function. Demographers, political scientists, and historians have all addressed the military in their respective academic traditions. Yet these largely quantitative, statistically driven efforts often fall short of capturing the real fabric of the institution. They simply lack the qualitative insight and theoretical depth that anthropology can bring.

Anthropologists are quick to defend their position as subject matter experts when it comes to issues of culture, and will opine that culture is so complex that it cannot be easily captured. Yet outside of undergraduate studies there is very little exposure to anthropological theory that a lay-person can use to provide insight to cultural, political and social problems. Hugh Gusterson, in the pithily titled *Counter-Counter Insurgency Manual* (2009) suggests that a military reviewer in charge of training material would reject out of hand some of the core works of anthropology. I doubt this is true. The military makes available some of the core texts of anthropology as part of its online education system. My questions are: who is choosing these texts, and in what context are they being taught? Anthropologists should (re-)claim ownership of this work, and make efforts to ensure that what it holds is properly taught, understood and applied by those who engage it. By disengaging from anthropology for military training, anthropologists are guilty of withholding expertise that can address a singular problem with military conflicts today, what the military calls *cross-cultural competency*.

A prima facie example of the need for cross cultural competency is currently occurring in Afghanistan, where the accidental burning of Qur'ans has ignited another round of violence and distrust, undermining an already tenuous relationship between the US military and the Afghan people. While many anthropologists might state that it is misguided to create a laminated two-sided "culture" card that can be issued to deploying soldiers, and that an hour long course on cross-cultural competence is essentially worthless, I would argue strongly that this is misguided academic hubris. Having been deployed, I can speak from experience in saying that *any* cultural information would have been useful. Further, as a graduate teaching assistant I can attest that the military is addressing this in a quite subtle way: individual soldiers and Marines are being sent to college by their commands to take courses in anthropology and ethnographic theory. While this is not an institutional policy, obviously individuals with authority over training have embraced the advice given in the foreword of FM 3-24. If we insist on using our military as a tool of diplomacy then it is essential that cultural training be a core part of the military skill set, and I see no reason why anthropologists should not be openly involved in this training.

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[i] This essay was adapted from a paper presented on the panel "Deployment Stressed: Legacies of the War on Terror in Home Front Communities," at the meeting of the American Anthropological Association (AAA), Montreal, Canada, 17 November 2011. The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the United States Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.