

Implications of the Uses of Ethnography in DOD Contexts

Robert Albro
American U

October 21, 2010

MORS-SSUCO Social Science Underpinnings of Complex
Operations Mini-symposium

October 19, 2010

Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.

1. REPORT DATE 21 OCT 2010	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2010 to 00-00-2010			
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Implications of the Uses of Ethnography in DOD Contexts		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER			
		5b. GRANT NUMBER			
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER			
6. AUTHOR(S)		5d. PROJECT NUMBER			
		5e. TASK NUMBER			
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER			
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) American University, 4400 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Washington, DC, 20016		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER			
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)			
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)			
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES Social Science Underpinnings of Complex Operations 18-21 October 2010; George Mason University, Arlington Campus. U.S. Government or Federal Rights License					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 18	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

Anthropology and Military, Security, Intelligence: An Ongoing Dialogue

- Human Terrain System
- Minerva Initiative
- Counterinsurgency Manual
- Cultural Intelligence and HUMINT
- Culture and Language Training and Education
- The COCOMS and future of "human terrain analysis"
- HSCB Modeling and Simulation
- Heritage and Cultural Resources Management

A Dynamic Scenario: MOOTW, Complex Operations, etc.

- Development
- Diplomacy
- Humanitarian operations
- Stability operations
- Nation-building (???)
- HUMINT and Counterinsurgency
- Peacekeeping
- NGO collaboration
- Other peacetime missions
- Diverse trans-boundary problems: e. g. climate change

How Does Anthropology Fit?

- Often it doesn't
- As such, necessity of ongoing dialogue with anthropology, and social sciences, about: goals, ethics, practice
- No unitary "anthropology" to be leveraged in the same ways across diverse priorities
- Different implications associated with each activity: Might, might not, be feasible

Anthropologists Working in/for the Military?

- Organizational Study
- Culture Training and Education
- Forensic research
- Archaeology and heritage conservation
- Evolving roles/training for "analysts"
- Policy/Program development
- Operations: Most problematic?
- Ethnography, if desirable, not equally applicable and often impossible

So What is Ethnography?

- Diverse qualitative research projects
- Geertz: Extended acquaintances with extremely small matters
- Participant-observation: Deep hanging out?
- Community, neighborhood, scene, organization, network? Retreat from holism
- Multi-sited ethnography increasingly routine
- Largely collaborative with counterparts "in the field": Critical to understand this
- No consensus definition: A black box facilitating the construction of grounded cultural interpretations

Ethnography and Data

- Center for Ethnography (UC Irvine): “There is no single definition of ethnography or uniform practice of ethnographic method, nor should there be.”
- Marilyn Strathern: a “deliberate attempt to generate more data than the researcher is aware of at the time of collection,” particularly suited to the study of unpredictable outcomes.
- As a form of knowledge production, ethnography not a tool for forecasting and prediction
- Ethnographic data typically not readily available for easy incorporation into standard database management systems despite effort (e. g. HRAF)

Data and Ethnographic Field Notes

- Tensions between ethnography and empiricism
- Qualitative data not a like set of "stuff" to pile up somewhere for future analysis about X
- Participant-observation field work begets "field notes"
- Field notes can take myriad forms: head notes, scratch notes, field diaries, daily logs, diverse systematic archives
- Field notes are fundamentally co-constructed
- Field notes are essentially written "inscriptions"
- Hermeneutic approach: Multiply-authored narratives

Ethnography, Meaning, Data

- Sources of knowledge production?
- The "dialogic ground" of meaning-making
- Contrast between co-construction, information extraction or data mining (unilateral vs. reciprocal)
- Counting vs. conversation
- Eclectic: participant-observation, surveys, snowball sampling, questionnaires, archival sources, event analysis, structured interviews, informal interviews, institutional analysis, network analysis, etc
- Serendipity
- Reframing project: Where you finish is not typically where you started

Sources of Ethnographic Rigor

- Multiple sources of data: emergent
- Validation if not necessarily statistical validation
- Long-term: months and years
- Not about "objective" detachment but relative autonomy of participant-observation
- Ethnographic encounter: collaborative enterprise with counterparts w/negotiated outcomes
- Standpoint and situational responsiveness
- Comparative but goal is not generalization "for all possible N"
- Context-generative thick description

Flynn Report: Ethnography and "Fixing Intel"

- HUMINT as grassroots field research
- From mapping enemy "insurgent networks" to focus upon "the people"
- Bringing collectors and analysts closer together
- Emphasis upon open-source and not clandestine
- Collaboration with NGO and Afghan counterparts
- Anthropological-type problems: local economies, powerbrokers, social cooperation
- Generating standard descriptive narratives: comprehensive assessments of local districts
- Practicable? The predicaments of assessment

High-risk, Conflict, or Combat Ethnography

- Rapid Ethnographic Assessment techniques
- Like use of impact assessments for international development work
- Feeding the beast? Surveys, questionnaires, focus groups, key informant interviews, etc
- Typically in step with strategic or targeted goals
- Ethnographically thin population overviews using relatively easily collectible data points
- Significant limits upon: time, relative autonomy, agenda-setting, collaboration, responsiveness
- Comparable to established uses of ethnographic techniques in International Development (e. g. PRA)

Defining Culture: The Kitchen Sink

- Raymond Williams: One of the 2 or 3 most complicated words in the English language
- Mid-century stocktaking: 164 distinct definitions!
- Anthropology's contemporary retreat from the culture concept as a unitary concept
- Unitary definition still nonexistent

Sources of Cultural Data?

- Holistic approach: Culture as a "total way of life" of a people?
- Culture as: Shared "webs of meaning" (beliefs, norms, values, customs, behaviors) that define membership in a discrete community?
- Or cultures as: dynamic, contested, unevenly distributed, historically contingent, multiply interpreted
- Ethnography where: "Cultures are continuously produced, reproduced, and revised in dialogues"

Starting from Doctrine: Cultural Terrain

- Culture: "A feature of the terrain that has been constructed by man. Included are such items as roads, buildings, canals; boundary lines; and, in a broad sense, all names and legends on a map" (JP 1-02, p.119).
- Terrain Analysis: "The collection, analysis, evaluation, and interpretation of geographic information on the natural and manmade features of the terrain, combined with other relevant factors, to predict the effect of the terrain on military operations" (JP 1-02, p. 471).

Cultural Terrain: "Good to Think With"?

- A practical solution for user community building on existing doctrine
- Because "terrain" is "familiar to all military personnel; therefore, cultural terrain is a term that can be used to ease the incorporation of cultural awareness into training, planning, and operations."
- Cartographic: directs attention to culture as feature of the landscape and spatial arrangement to be surveyed
- Something one learns to read, to successfully navigate, like terrestrial space
- But the problem of the "hermeneutic circle"

Best Avoidance Practices for Cultural Data and Analysis

- Assertions about “unified culture frameworks” rarely stand up to scrutiny
- Keys to the kingdom – “shia-sunni sectarianism,” “the tribe,” etc. – typically not adequate
- Assessment: limits of checklists and protocols
- Attentiveness to peoples’ plural affiliations

Ethnography, Culture, Ongoing Challenges

- Solution to collector/analyst distinction
- Databases, data management systems: compartmentalization of data collection and information problematic
- Unlikely doctrine a good starting point
- How does this help me? Problem of narrow utility of "culture-as-asset"
- Keeping totalizing narratives at arm's length: "clash of civilizations" thesis
- PowerPoint typically not up to the task!