

Finding Common Ground: The Ethics of Anthropology and Military Cooperation

by Joel Evans

Ethics are a common, albeit varying, theme found in most societies and organizations. Definitions of good ethics or ethical behavior can differ greatly between groups. This holds true in the United States between the broader discipline of anthropology and the United States military. Both see their profession as ones that serve society and are bound by deeply ingrained ethics to work toward a greater good. While it seems organizations with such similar concepts of service would have common ground with which to build cooperation, this is by and large not the case. Currently, anthropology and the American military have a tenuous relationship at best. However, this has not always been, nor should it continue to be this way. It is my contention that enough shared interests and similar ethical considerations exist that both groups could forge a new relationship that is beneficial to both.

Before delving into the details of this examination, it is important to understand the methodology. This is primarily a comparative analysis of organizational documents and previous studies. The information used highlights each organizations' ethical ideologies, the historical context that help shaped their relationship, and the areas where each could benefit. After this critical examination, the data is synthesized, and approaches discussed that offer a much-improved relationship between anthropology and the military.

Part of this methodology is examining two large organizations that cover diverse functions and ideologies. This study will require making some generalizations. However, such generalizations will not prevent the identification of broad issues and approaches for cooperation. The United States military is extremely large, consisting of five separate services: Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard. Like any organization, each service has its own cultural nuances that give them unique institutional ideologies. To make this examination more manageable, the American Army, which has been the leading service in the last sixteen years of war, will be the focus. Furthermore, the author is a member of the Army and can offer insight into this service based on personal experience. While there are qualities unique to each service, the discussion and potential methods of cooperation are applicable across the Department of Defense.

In a similar manner, anthropology has for basic sub-fields: sociocultural anthropology, linguistic anthropology, biological anthropology, and archaeology. While each sub-field has its own unique ethical issues and nuanced approaches, the discipline is expected to follow the American Anthropological Association's "Ethics Statement."¹ This examination will approach the subject of ethics in general terms while acknowledging that there are a range of perspectives within each organization. Despite these broad generalizations, this type of generalization will highlight some of the key issues and shape ideas on cooperation that can be applied in the variety contexts existing in both.

To begin a meaningful comparison of each group's ethical perspectives, it is important to understand their current ethical climate to establish a baseline of beliefs. As a large bureaucracy, the Army codifies its ideologies in writing which outline everything from uniform wear to the conduct of land warfare. This large body of written material also covers the organization's thoughts on ethics and makes the Army's view on

the topic readily accessible. To begin with, the Army acknowledges the need for having a defined concept of ethics. As it looks to the future, it sees a battlefield that is complex and uncertain. This will lead to ethical dilemmas that will have to be addressed to achieve future success. The concept used by the Army to outline ethics is titled *The Army Ethic*. This framework addresses the expected ethics of the organization and the individual in two areas. The first area is the legal ideologies that stem from documents such as the U.S. Code, treaties, oaths, and the Uniformed Code of Military Justice. The second area is the moral concepts that outline the Army's ethics. These include just war tradition, basic rights, the golden rule, and various creeds. The ethical ideology for the Army can best be summed up in one quote from the Army Ethic, "In war and peace, we recognize the intrinsic dignity and worth of all people, treating them with respect."² While this is a brief description, it highlights that ethics are something the Army has put considerable effort into and a key component is the treatment of people.

While the previous description outlines the basic principles of Army ethics, there are areas that require a deeper examination. The use of violence is perhaps the most pertinent issue to discuss and one the Army takes seriously. There are ethical principles in place that limit the use of force in combat. One example is the requirement to use only the military action necessary to achieve the stated military goals. Another example is proportionality which is intended to limit the impacts of combat in terms of life and property. Proportionality means that only the minimum amount of force required should be used to gain an advantage. The Army also necessitates that combat forces distinguish between combatants and noncombatants.³

On the surface, these may seem somewhat vague, the Army does have method to implement these ethical concepts. It is important to know that character is the defining trait the Army believes encompasses ethics. The Leader Development Strategy is rooted in the Army Ethic and expects all types of Army leaders to develop character, both theirs and others. This translates into decision making during conflict. In combat, leaders are expected to "consider ethics in planning, preparing, executing, and assessing operations."⁴ From this discussion, three things are apparent. First, the degree of organization and thought highlights an organization with a deep concern for ethics. Second, the Leader Development Strategy reveals a methodology that addresses the implementation of ethical practices and shows importance of incorporating ethics into the Army. Finally, the central theme of Army ethics points to a genuine concern for people and the impact of military operations. Understanding the Army's approach to ethics offers an initial understanding of one side of the debate with anthropology.

Like the Army, anthropology as a discipline has its own ethical guidelines. Anthropology in the United States is a diverse discipline. As mentioned before, the field encompasses four general subfields which highlights very different theoretical approaches and field methodologies. In addition, anthropologists in the United States works in both academic and applied fields. Taken together, this is a great deal of professional diversity. While it seems difficult to develop a set of ethics to govern such diverging interests, a common framework does exist. The American Anthropological Association (AAA) has a document on ethics that offers a starting point. While the document is intended to apply only to members of the association, it can be used to inform non-members on ethical expectations. Furthermore, AAA is often referred to in debates regarding the ethics of cooperation between the military and anthropology.⁵ An examination of the AAA will provide a framework for understanding Anthropology's approach to ethics.

Like the Army, Anthropology recognized the need for broad ethical guidelines due to the nature of their work given that, as the AAA points out, the discipline is a "social enterprise." There are several more specific reasons that these guidelines are codified. One of the most important is that anthropological research is interactive, meaning that others are always involved. Research may directly involve people, non-humans, other academics, or employers. This differs from disciplines such as history, for example, whose research is primarily on written documents and may involve little to no research involving others. The different groups involved in anthropological research come with their own relationship dynamics which must be understood

and dealt with by the researcher. A second reason that expands on AAA's contextual reasoning is the range of research carried out by anthropologists who look at all facets of human life and are expected to use the knowledge gained to better humanity. This variation in research focuses across the discipline creates a range of ethical situations.⁶ While it is important to understand why they exist, it is equally important to understand how they are intended to be used.

With the range of situations mentioned above, all contexts cannot be articulated in one document. However, the Ethical Statement is intended to be a starting point and quick reference for ethical anthropological research. The organization lays out several core principles that form the basis of their ethical framework. Each is discussed in a way that can be used by any of the subfields to address unique circumstances. There are three ethical principles that need discussing as they are issues raised when the military and anthropology work together.⁷ The first principle is to not harm those involved in one's research. This is relatively straightforward and reminds the anthropologist to consider the impact of their work. This includes not only the direct impacts but second and third order effects as well. A second principle deals with the availability of an anthropologist's research. Researchers should make their work accessible as soon as possible and should deeply consider the ethical implications of not doing so. The final principle to discuss is consent. Anthropologists are expected to openly discuss the scope of their work and gain the permission of those being studied.⁸ While these are not all the ethical principles outlined by AAA, but they are the ones most critical to understanding the ethical tension between the military and anthropology.

It is this framework that anthropologists use as their ethical guide. Understanding the discipline's perception of what and why ethics must be considered is critical. For a more complete picture, the way in which ethics are incorporated in research must be understood. It is important to note that ethics are not a concept only considered at a certain point in the research process. Ethical considerations should be a constant aspect of research and weighed throughout the research process. This includes "making decisions prior to beginning projects, when in the field, and when communicating findings and preserving records." The implementation of this is difficult to assess, however. It is on the individual anthropologist to follow and use the ethical framework outlined by AAA. Furthermore, AAA does not enforce these standards and are "intended to foster discussion, guide anthropologists in making responsible decisions, and educate."⁹ This discussion outlines the guiding ethical ideology for the work conducted by anthropologists. Like the Army, this is an organization with a deep concern for ethics and ensuring that their work adheres, as much as possible, to a set of ethical principles.

The previous discussion outlined the ethical approaches of each organization and, as noted by Clawson, both organizations share a common interest in maintaining "ethical practices."¹⁰ From the preceding discussion, it is possible to see similarities and differences between the two groups. One similarity is the ethics of both organizations are people focused. Each is interested in limiting the negative impact of their work. Second, each group works in a broad set of contexts that requires each to have a general set of principles to serve as a tailorable reference in specific situations. Another similarity, is both rely on individuals to interpret and carry out ethical decision making. In anthropology, it is the individual researcher and in the Army, it is the leader. A central difference is the concern with causing harm to others. For the anthropologist, causing harm is unacceptable and should be avoided at all costs. Given the Army's role in national defense, it cannot prevent causing harm. However, it is a key ethical consideration to limit wars' impact. Another difference is the issue of availability of research. Anthropology expects that its research be made readily available and has concerns if this is not possible. However, the military may not be able to fulfill this requirement. A final difference is the ability to enforce ethical violations. The Army has a much greater ability to enforce its ethical requirements than anthropology. The first step in any effort at cooperation is a clear understanding of commonalities and differences. While there are likely more similarities and differences worthy of discussion, this list provides an initial starting point and will shape the following discussion.

The current relationship between anthropology and the military can be described as extremely polarized and tense. The historical relationship between the two have ran the gamut from mutual support to full animosity. Two quotes show the degree to which the sides have separated. When discussing the military, Marshall Sahlins, in his discussion of the Army's counterinsurgency manual, said, "... *the applied anthropology of the U.S. military may be described as something as follows: a planetary strategy of research and destroy, involving the deployment of armed and largely culturally-illiterate American forces from among the thousand or so garrisons now distributed on foreign soil, sometimes complemented by second rate mercenary academics, all charged with an investigation of the cultures of the local peoples sufficient to determine if and how they can be subjugated or, failing that, taken out.*"¹¹ In a similar comment Montgomery McFate said "*DoD yearns for cultural knowledge, but anthropologists en masse, bound by their own ethical code and sunk in a mire of postmodernism, are unlikely to contribute much of value to reshaping national security policy or practice.*"¹² The comments by both authors are indicative of two groups that are clearly distrusting of and frustrated with one another. As will be seen, there are areas where cooperation can not only develop but be beneficial to both parties. Before a discussion of future cooperation can take place, however, the context and the history that shaped the current relationships must be discussed.

Anthropology and the military have had a long relationship with one another. During World War II, anthropologists actively participated in the war effort. However, there were debates in AAA as to the ethics of their involvement. The shift away from military cooperation changed during the Vietnam War. Anthropologists at the time wrestled with the disciplines role in supporting colonialism as wars like Vietnam began to seem to them more like colonial wars than wars against a legitimate threat. The debate continued through the 1980's and 1990's.¹³ This is the general context of the polarized state of the relationship today.

There are some key aspects of institutional culture that highlight this separation. On one hand, the Army has a clearly defined mission within the larger context of national security and, in the author's experience, approaches this mission pragmatically, looking for the best solutions to its problems. Anthropology, on the other hand, is reconciling a past that was involved in colonial pursuits.¹⁴ Relationships between individuals and organizations are built through an understanding of each's issues and concerns. In this case, both groups can benefit from understanding each other's point of view and finding areas where both have something to offer the other.

It may seem that both organizations have wildly different perspectives and there is no real reason to pursue cooperation. This is not the case, however. From a broad perspective, warfare and conflict are important parts of humanity and will continue to be. In fact, it is likely that warfare will increase. It is importance to both the military and anthropology to understand conflict and war as much as possible and there are specific areas where one organization could benefit from the other.

Arguably, the military is the most important institution in the United States national security system. It has been actively involved in war since 2001 and it appears that the chances of additional conflict are on the rise. Add to this the organization's involvement in disaster relief and other operational requirements, the tempo shows no sign of abating. Using the Army as a microcosm of the military reveals areas where anthropology could contribute to the military while maintaining their ethical standards. The first area deals with the projected future of warfare. The Army has identified four key threats that must be considered in the future: competing powers like Russia, regional powers such as North Korea, transnational terrorist organizations, and transnational criminal organizations.¹⁵ This points to the range of areas, groups, and types of warfare that may be on the horizon. While there are many components of these different areas that would be clearly outside of anthropological ethics, the range is so broad that there are areas where anthropologist could support. This include preventing conflict, more effect techniques to train personnel, and methodologies to support post-conflict reconstructions.

Another area of engagement is resilience, which the Army defines as “the ability to cope with adversity and losses.” Resiliency has two temporal elements that the Army must address. It must prepare soldiers to deal with the stresses and trauma of war prior to fighting. A second area is treating soldiers after conflict to aid in healing and reintegration. The Army favors more of hard scientific and medical approaches to addressing resilience in both temporal arenas. A recent article about Australia argued for the benefits of government supported use of indigenous practices in healing trauma. In this case the knowledge supports the same indigenous community.¹⁶ However, there may be ethical ways to incorporate this knowledge into effective techniques to support those wrestling with the trauma of war. The ethical implications of this will be discussed more later.

A final area where anthropology could support the military is in understanding and addressing a range of social issues. The Army recruits from different regions and backgrounds within the United States. As such it is a cross-section of American society and faces many of the same issues as the nation. For example, gender has been a key issue. The Army recently opened branches to women which were previously only open to men. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) members’ ability to serve in the military has also been discussed. It has also been addressing sexual assault. Gender issues are an area that anthropology studies and would have a great deal to offer the Army. Gender, however, is only an example. There are many other areas where anthropological input would be helpful to the military community.

The discussion so far has focused on the advantages for the Army. However, there is a benefit to anthropology also. The first area is related to access. Anthropology is interested in violence and conflict. This can range from causes of violence to the subsequent impacts. The Army, as one of the key institutions for carrying out state sanctioned violence on behalf of the United States, would be enlightening from an anthropological perspective. There are a range of topics that could be studied such as interactions with allies, social dynamics within ethnically diverse units, and linguistic anthropological studies of language within the Army. These are only examples of potential study areas. However, the military has become increasingly separated from American society and this includes institutions such as education.¹⁷ Increased engagement with the Army would offer unique perspectives on violence, conflict, and war.

A second opportunity for anthropology is studying an institution that is one of the more important in the United States. Rubinstein points out that “Military, intelligence, and security institutions and the people who participate in them are prominent parts of our society” and argues that it is a missed opportunity to understand and influence change within it. This is even more important given the perception of the military by the American public. A recent Gallup article reveals that Americans have the highest confidence in the military as compared to other institutions. This is a chance to examine American society that, as Gonzalez et al. points out, is militarized. Lutz highlights the influence veterans have on issues related to national defense. There are also veterans working extensively in areas outside of national defense and likely influence other facets of American life.¹⁸ In my own career, several colleagues have left the military to become involved in education, members of the clergy, and business. There are many areas ripe for anthropological research associated with the military that does not involve conflict and will raise few ethical concerns. This interconnectedness between American society and the military holds another area that fits within one of anthropology’s key tenants—advocacy.

In their ethics statement, AAA believes that anthropology has a duty to use its work “to solve human problems” and, with an understanding of the context, “link their research to the promotion of well-being, social critique or advocacy.” In fact, there is an anthropologist that believes in an activist approach to research to the point of siding with a specific group. He provides a way to better understand situations involving conflict.¹⁹ When working for or studying the American military, there is no shortage of groups that could benefit from the perspective and advocacy that anthropology can provide. As mentioned earlier, the same marginalized groups that exist in broader American society serve in the military and face similar

issues. In addition, veterans' health is a major issue. There are a host of areas, from the internal structures of the VA to reintegration preparation, which provide interesting areas of research and allow anthropologists to practice important components of the ethical code. While these areas of interaction and study are critical, there are many others where cooperation between the two organizations would be of benefit.

The previous discussion outlined some areas where each organization has something unique to offer the other. For anthropology, it is access to a key American institution and for the Army it is the benefit of a new perspective on some of the social issues it faces as a large and diverse organization with a specific purpose. The following discussion adds detail to the earlier framework. It offers some specific areas and potential solutions where cooperation would have a valuable impact and be less contentious than cooperation that involves warfare directly. These areas can prove to be stepping stones to start a dialogue and develop a better understanding of each other's concerns which form the basis of a trusting relationship. Only through this process, can the military and anthropology tackle some of the more complex and charged issues. While it will require patience and thoughtful discourse from each group, it is a worthwhile effort.

Warfare and conflict create some of the worst situations in human existence. This, in turn, breeds populations that bear the impact, both physical and mental, of trauma. For the United States, these populations are both internal and external. The internal population is the military population itself which comprises both those serving and veterans who have completed their service. The American military is quite large and spread across the active duty and reserves. The number of veterans is even larger and spans a broader range of experiences, generally from World War II through the present wars.²⁰ An area that anthropology could offer insight is resiliency and addressing the impacts of service. There is a need for understanding resiliency outside of scientific and medical methods. This is easy to see in the growth of military and veterans support groups that focus on public service or non-traditional trauma healing that focus on outdoor activities. A recent article highlights the trauma experienced by a group of Australian indigenous people. The idea is to use their own beliefs and rituals to heal the trauma of the past. Furthermore, they are petitioning the Australian government to offer this through governmental health programs. Another example stems from a work of fiction. The Native American author Leslie Marmon Silko's book *Ceremony* discusses a returning Native American World War II veteran dealing with the trauma of war. Part of the discussion, centers on the use of ceremony after returning from war. While this is fiction, it highlights the value of indigenous knowledge and support outside of western medicine.²¹ This type of indigenous expertise is a subject studied by anthropology. Perhaps, the discipline could work with the military and indigenous groups to develop programs that support the service members on issues involving post-traumatic stress disorder. With anthropologists acting as intermediaries, the programs could be ethically sound and avoid issues such as cultural appropriation. Further research by anthropologists would be insightful in building resiliency prior to combat as well. Beside supporting internal populations, there are external populations to consider.

The turmoil caused by warfare and natural disasters creates disaffected populations that require a range of support. The most obvious are those directly affected by war. As conflict becomes protracted or comes to end, there are a host of issues other than combat and security that must be addressed. One issue is populations displaced by conflict and may be an issue that the military will have the responsibility to address. Advice from anthropologist can highlight effective and culturally sensitive ways to help in such situations. This support to military efforts could make sustainable improvements for the affected population. Once conflict has ceased, there is great deal of rebuilding that will need to be conducted. This may involve the military, at least in the early stages. Anthropological insight into local cultural nuances and power relations could build the ground work for lasting peace and stability. This is an approach discussed by Lederach with peacebuilding efforts in Columbia.²² These are two areas that could provide anthropology with new areas of research and ethically support the work of the military.

There are also areas within the institutional Army that could benefit from engaging with anthropology. These are based on the author's experience as a soldier. The first is the exposure to a range of new ideologies.

Generally, the Army is socially conservative and pragmatic in its thinking and approach to problem-solving. This not to say that the Army is not concerned about social issues. It generally does not always fully understand some of the nuances that come with issues of class, gender, race, and power dynamics. Furthermore, the Army is very practical in its quest for knowledge. The organization's priority is conducting land warfare and most knowledge seeking is geared to completing goals supporting the achievement of that end. The expansion of socially oriented ideology supports the Army in another of its key concepts. The Army charges leaders with the care of its members and specifically charges strategic leaders with ensuring these change takes place.²³ Anthropological perspectives and methodologies would go far in that regard.

The core of anthropological methods and theories is engaging with societies and groups which is something that the Army frequently does as well. This also includes all of the Department of Defense—the other Services as well as civilian policymakers. Externally, the Army engages with the American public and militaries from other nations. This is particularly important with public engagement. As mentioned earlier, the military has become increasingly isolated from the American public. An understanding of basic anthropological methods and theories would go far in the Army for building institutional relationships. These discussions point out some areas where the Army could learn from consistent engagement with anthropology.

What has been outlined in this discussion is an assessment of the relationship between the military and anthropology along with potential areas of cooperation and benefits. This examination reveals there are areas where cooperation would benefit both organizations and fit within each's ethical considerations. A further consideration is ways in which this cooperation the could take place. The first method is grass roots engagement between members of both communities. This could include military personnel taking courses in anthropology or speaking to anthropology students. In a similar manner, anthropologists could speak to local Reserve Officer Training Corps on university campuses. Another more organized approach would be institutional engagements between university anthropology departments and local military organizations. These could be as simple as regular, informal working groups or more formal conference type events centered on specific topics. A final, more formal method would be faculty exchanges between civilian anthropological academic departments and military academic institutions. There are no doubt other ways to foster cooperation, but these are few that represent the beginning of a productive process.

While this study has outlined benefits and opportunities for each organization, there are broader benefits as well. It has been illustrated that the relationship between the two organizations is extremely polarized and largely based on misunderstandings. Increased engagements will reduce misunderstandings and potentially have larger societal impacts. Cooperation between the two organizations also has the potential to reduce the chance of war and the impacts of conflict. One anthropologists questioned this type of work particularly for anthropologists or anthropological informed military leaders working in policy formation.²⁴ Cooperation also helps to bridge the reconnect the military to American society through improved understanding and engagement methodologies. Finally, the processes of educating each other and expand fields of knowledge would help improve American society.

There is no doubt that that there are some deep concerns with the cooperation between the military and anthropology. However, there is some common ground with which to begin the discussion. Furthermore, there are approaches that can start informally and work up to more formal cooperation. This slow process, based on mutual interests and fitting within each organizations ethics, sets the stage for a less polarized discussion on some of the more contentious issues. This type of cooperation benefits each organization and American society overall.

End Notes

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