

Anthropology News

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Anthropology News, the official newspaper of the American Anthropological Association (AAA), is published monthly, except for June, July and August.

The mission of the AAA is to advance anthropology as the science that studies humankind in all its aspects, through archaeological, biological, ethnological and linguistic research; and to foster the use of anthropological knowledge in addressing human problems. *Anthropology News* (AN) advances this mission by providing members with news of association business; discussions of issues of vital importance to the discipline; and information on publications, professional job opportunities, research funding availability, meetings and other items of importance to members. AN promotes the discipline of anthropology and the interests of anthropologists across all subfields.

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DIALOGUE

Reflecting Back on a Year of Debate With the Ad Hoc Commission

Kerry Fosher is a security anthropologist who recently left a position as a research assistant professor at Dartmouth Medical School to become the first command social scientist at the Marine Corps Intelligence Activity in Quantico, VA. She is a member of the AAA Ad Hoc Commission on the Engagement of Anthropology with the US Security & Intelligence Communities. As the commission prepares its final report—expected by the executive board in November—Kerry spoke with Paul Nuti, AAA Director of External, International & Government Relations, about several key themes that have emerged for her while participating in commission deliberations.

Paul Nuti: Stepping back a bit from being on the inside of the commission's discussions, what epistemological conclusion(s) have you reached on the general matter of anthropological engagement in national security and intelligence?

Kerry Fosher: Move Beyond Turtles All the Way Down: I have come to believe that the challenge for the discipline is to move beyond a debate that ultimately dissolves into the kind of "turtles all the way down" exchange. Few would debate that any anthropologist who works with or for an organization engaged in US national security is enabling a flawed system. This is a circumstance that requires constant navigation and vigilance, but is not unique to those engaged with the security sector.

Just scratch the surface of traditional academia. 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

ethics, scholarship and practice. For this same reason, I am not a fan of the label "engaged anthropologist" (although I have yet to find a good alternative). We are all engaged.

The disciplinary discussion needs to move, as the commission's has moved, toward a more nuanced and reflexive examination of what security anthropologists are actually doing and what guidelines they need to help them stay within the [AAA] Code of Ethics.

PN: As the staff liaison to the commission, I have come to understand the commission's work as an exercise in teasing the "gray" out of what has essentially been a black and white conversation. What kinds of nuances and distinctions has the commission framed?

KF: I think some of the most important work of the commission has been to recognize the widely diverse types of engagements with the security sector and the different ethical challenges faced by anthropologists in this topic.

Security anthropologists are teaching in military academies, colleges and universities. They are employed as researchers, administrators, analysts and trainers. Some do private consulting or consult via a contracting firm for policy, planning, research, classified or unclassified analysis, fieldwork, etc. Work may be geared toward understanding US organizations, international organizations, NGOs, the joint environment, allies, perceived adversaries or neutral groups.

Transparency and aspects of secrecy vary among types of engagement as does the freedom to present and publish without constraint. I hope that we are successful in communicating this diversity and its implications to the AAA membership.

PN: A strand of the commission's discussions have centered on the extent to which the AAA Code of Ethics provides clear, applicable guidance for all types of anthropological engagements in national security and intelligence. Can you cite an example where this might be more complex than meets the eye?

KF: The guideline to do no harm to one's research community, seemingly so simple, may be the most complex. Our emphasis on protecting informant communities is still a critical touchstone in our ethical code, but the code—or related guidelines—must be refined to cope with the



ON ANTHROPOLOGY AND US SECURITY/INTELLIGENCE

traditionally study. We may try to mitigate those effects, but the fact that we are insulated from them does not mean they are not there.

This is not to say that we should adopt a hyper-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

Simple distinctions such as the "Study of" vs "Study for" dichotomy do not hold up in the face of the ethnographic exploration of the types of engagement out there; some are clear, others blur the distinctions between "of" and "for" and, more significantly, what counts as a community or informants to whom we have ethical responsibilities.

complex kinds of engagements and collaborations many of us now face. For many of us, our research community is a military or intelligence organization and that is where our primary responsibility lies according to the code. However, area specialists and those who are deployed may

See *A Year of Debate* on page 4

A Year of Debate

Continued from page 3

end up with two communities, local people and US personnel, to whom they feel responsibility, as their job generally necessitates research on both groups.

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, where does that fall in terms of the “do no harm” guidelines? The 9-year-old girl in Kabul and the 19-year-old Marine do not have the luxury of waiting for us to sort out our national debate on foreign policy. I believe the discipline has room for many different kinds of action. As long as we keep talking to each other, we have a sort of contentious bucket brigade of data, ideas and critique. That likely is the healthiest approach to any sort of applied work or advocacy.

PN: *Secrecy has been a source of considerable debate in the context of the commission's deliberations, and more generally within the membership. What are some of the dimensions of secrecy you have explored as a security anthropologist?*

KF: 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 “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 code of ethics and, preferably, discussed with colleagues.

PN: *A persistent concern among anthropologists is that anthropological knowledge will be used to harm. In light of the revolution in information dissemination, however, how viable is the proposition that the discipline could ever fully control anthropological knowledge or its use?*

KF: As above, there is room in the discipline for a variety of positions in terms of how much an anthropologist is willing to help the security sector access or interpret anthropological knowledge. My positions on the two main concerns are as follows.

There is fear 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. Engagement offers at least some possibility of interpreting, offering other, non-vio-

lent courses of action, but only if we are willing to accept that we will not always prevail. You have to be willing to keep at it.

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

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from other disciplines, and lay readers of all kinds. That should not stop us from trying, nor should it send us into the previously mentioned hyper-relativistic stupor. Again, robust disciplinary discussion and consultation with colleagues is the only thing that can help individuals sort out the dangers and opportunities inherent in sharing knowledge.

PN: *What sorts of things motivated you to become a security anthropologist?*

KF: This is the first time somebody in the discipline has asked me this question. One of the most startling things about the discipline's churn on this issue has been how many people assume that security anthro-

pologists are conservative, are supporters of the Iraq war, are in favor of torture, are naive about the violence inherent in military and intelligence work, on and on. These are assumptions we would never tolerate about any other group. We would insist on ethnographic evidence. That such broad (and largely inaccurate) characterizations can persist in the face of formal challenges in print and at meetings is something that should give us pause.

I initially became interested in security in the way I might have become interested in any other human activity, family life, foodways, and so on. I was conducting my fieldwork on homeland security on Sept 11. I felt the normal anthropological urge to help my informants and ended up blurring the lines between participant observation and applied work. Over the subsequent years, I became interested in how I could shape policy and practice through engagement. Some people are good at protest action. Others teach or run for office. It turns out that I am good at internal organizational shaping.

I did not support many of our post-9/11 political and military actions, but communications from former informants made me realize the immediate consequences of lack of anthropological knowledge at all levels. The requests for help became more frequent and the consequences of inaction more apparent. I took a temporary position to work on cross-cultural competence for military personnel with the Air Force and then accepted the permanent position with the Marine Corps.

I feel comfortable engaging at this level only because I am part of one of the bucket brigades mentioned above. We rely on our differences to help make our decisions strong. ■

Notes on an Ethnographic Scandal

Seymour Hersh, Abu Ghraib and *The Arab Mind*

LAURA A McNAMARA
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At the AAA business meeting in San José in December 2006, a rare quorum voted to adopt twin resolutions condemning a) the war in Iraq and b) the “use of anthropological knowl-

edge as an element of physical and psychological torture.” Both of these resolutions were adopted by the membership who voted in the spring 2007 election.

Were Sources Corroborated?

There were two different motivations behind the torture resolution: ongoing debates in the American

Psychological Association concerning the level of involvement of psychologists in interrogation, coercive and otherwise, and “early evidence of using culture as a weapon,” an allegation made by Robert Gonzales in a January 29, 2007, *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, one largely derived from a Seymour Hersh article published in the *New Yorker* on May 24, 2004.

In case you've been living on another planet, one of Hersh's informants described anthropologist Raphael Patai's ethnography, *The Arab Mind*, as the “bible of the neocons on Arab behavior.” Do a Google search and you will quickly appreciate how thoroughly the idea that Patai's book underpinned ethnographically-informed sexual humiliation at Abu Ghraib has permeated popular and academic culture. Interestingly, Hersh never formally connects Patai to Abu Ghraib, though he implies that