

Managing Ethical Conflict on a Human Terrain Team

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HUMAN TERRAIN SYSTEM

The Human Terrain System (HTS) is a US Army project that embeds social science teams, known as Human Terrain Teams (HTTs), with the military overseas. The purpose of the HTS is to provide cultural insight to brigade command staff by interviewing local populations and utilizing social science methodologies to better enable culturally astute decision-making. This allows commanders to consider the possible ramifications of their choices with consideration of local populations' perceptions, needs and interests.

The participation of anthropologists in military projects has been debated in both anthropological and military circles. Some anthropologists would like nothing to do with the military, while others support teaching social science theory and practice to military personnel but only in the US. A third group posits the best way to help local civilians overseas and the US military who operate alongside those civilians is to embed HTTs directly on the front lines where the two groups interact daily. I identify with this third group, and from July 2008 to March 2009, I deployed as a social scientist in Tikrit, Iraq. During this time, my HTT conducted over 650 interviews with local citizens to support various research plans throughout Salah al-Din Province. This paper discusses one of these research projects, as well as how my team resolved an ethical conflict we encountered.

In mid-2008, the US military began planning for an Iraq-wide civilian security force known as the Sons of Iraq (SoI) to tran-

since could increase as individuals would turn to insurgents for employment because of a lack of alternative jobs. Compounding the challenge, the Iraqi government placed a 20% limit on the number of SoI-transited individuals in the Iraqi Security Forces. The rest could remain as SoI at reduced pay or be assisted by the US through vocational training and then transfer to other civilian occupations. In order to assuage SoI concerns, the BCT needed to understand the attitudes, perceptions and opinions of SoI personnel regarding their transition into the Iraqi Security Forces, non-security employment and possible unemployment. The BCT also wanted to know the potential effects on SoI family income as it related to family size.

For operational purposes the BCT divided the provinces into five areas with a battalion in each area. Using a 95% confidence interval, a minimum of 80 individuals per battalion area were surveyed. Given our time constraints, my teammates and I decided on a survey style format that included 52 quick-answer demographic questions and six longer semi-structured interview questions about the SoI transition. Our team conducted interviews in Arabic at several locations, including central salary payment sites (such as a SoI headquarters), a joint Iraqi police/US military compound, SoI checkpoints in the city, and along main roads. Oral consent was obtained by identifying who we were, what we were doing, why we were doing the survey, and how the survey was to be used by the military. We informed participants that we did not want to know their names so they could speak freely. Some SoI

members did not want to participate in the survey, but the majority participated because the survey was strictly anonymous. Although most of the 503 interviews were unproblematic, we faced a specific ethical conundrum as a result of seven respondents' comments that they would collaborate with the insurgency for money if they were to become unemployed. We did not know the respondents' names because of the anonymity of the survey, but I did know where they worked and what they looked like. This led to a conflict when a brigade military intelligence officer asked for the identity of these seven respondents. At this juncture, I was forced to consider if I, an anthropologist working for the military in a non-intelligence gathering, non-lethal capacity, should tell the intelligence officer where the individuals worked and what they looked like. Who was I most ethically bound to protect, my survey participants or the possible victims of an SoI-turned-insurgent? How could I protect the interests of both parties?

If we revealed the interviewees' identities, the most likely outcome would have been that those seven individuals would be questioned and closely monitored as a potential threat that might already have close contact with insurgents. My team discussed this ethical conflict as we reviewed the survey data and prepared our report. We concluded that protecting the participants was of paramount importance since (1) it was necessary to follow-through on our promise to protect anonymity, (2) we wanted to maintain IRB standards of protection, and (3) we did not know the validity of their comments, which were statements of general attitudes about the hypothetical future, not statements of intent to harm. Our response to the inquiry by the intelligence officer was that we could not provide the information he desired due to the confidential-

ity HTT guaranteed each individual. However, we did provide the BCT with substantial insight into the SoI members' perceptions and attitudes. Our BCT commander valued the report outcomes and respected our decision to protect the survey participants, understanding the situation and our role as social scientists.

This case illustrates two significant points for anthropologists. First, teaching social science methods from the safety of home is not sufficient to ensure that instruction is not misused; having a daily presence at the site where research is done provides a far more valuable opportunity to instruct. Second, anthropologists or other social scientists may try to sequester our research results to prevent misuse, but if our work is sanitized, what then is its utility? As an anthropologist, I would rather see our discipline engage the world directly rather than the classroom alone, such that our cultural insight may assist decision-makers in working toward informed, positive outcomes.

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COMMENTARY

sition in early 2009 from being paid by the US military to being managed by the Iraqi government. In Salah al-Din Province, this transition would affect nearly 7,000 individuals. The Brigade Combat Team (BCT) staff was concerned that if the transition of control went poorly, the potential of destabilization in the provin-

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