Applying Cultural Knowledge to Design Problems

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Applying Cultural Knowledge to Design Problems: Notes for the U.S. Military about Challenges and Opportunities[1]

A Lecture for U.S. Training and Doctrine Command's "Culture Summit" 2009[2]

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Good morning. My thanks to TRADOC for the opportunity to address this audience.

Before I begin, just as a formality, I have to say that my comments don't necessarily reflect those of either the United Nations or the University of Massachusetts.

That done, I call this lecture Applying Cultural Knowledge to Design Problems: Notes for the U.S. Military on Challenges and Opportunities. Given that we are here at the Culture Summit, there is a natural presumption that the focus of our attention should be on culture. I have, in fact, a great deal of interest in this topic, including both my education and my current professional obligations. But I'm going to divert from the expected here and not foreground a discussion of culture. Unless you are an academic, the study of culture is usually not an end in itself. It is the means to some end. You want this knowledge, not for its own sake, but to get something done. For the sake of this lecture, let's agree that the end we have in mind is design. And what we'd like to know more about is how to turn cultural knowledge into a strategic asset for the benefit of design on security-related matters.

The reason I've chosen to focus on design is that we all face design challenges. At one time or another, at one level of responsibility or another, we all design actions, policies, operations, or campaigns. When speaking of design we are talking about the process of defining problems and crafting viable solutions.

Therefore, for the next thirty minutes, let's be a room of designers. And more than that, let us be a room of designers that already recognize the potential

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[1] The ideas in this presentation were developed in close cooperation with Lisa Rudnick at the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research. Special thanks goes to Nikhil Acharya for this insights and research assistance in the preparation of this lecture.

[2] The designations employed and the presentation of the material in this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area, or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

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value of cultural knowledge to help us get our work done. But I'd also like to share some questions about how to do that. In particular, I'd like to explore and try and answer three fundamental questions.

The three questions are:

1. What kind of cultural knowledge is actually needed for the purpose of design? Said differently, what characterizes *this* kind of knowledge and distinguishes it from *other* kinds of knowledge?

2. Where does such knowledge come from? Put differently, what is the process by which this knowledge is be generated or, once generated, where it stored and how is it accessed?

3. How does one apply this kind of knowledge, when available, to design problems?

What I want to do here today is use these three questions to guide us on a short intellectual and historical journey that will lead through valuable conceptual distinctions, place them in an historical context, and by doing so hopefully help your work as designers to possibly understand the challenges you face more clearly at this particular moment in time.

In answering these questions together, my own goal for this presentation is to outline an *agenda of work* that I believe will help get us from where we are to where we need to be on applying cultural knowledge to design problems on security. And adding to that, I'd like to help move us towards that goal in a way that is cooperative, ethically viable, and analytically responsible.

To answer these three questions we need some historical background. As I'll be explaining, both the opportunities and challenges the military now faces in its ability to answer these questions, and act on the answers to these questions, are profoundly contingent on the history of applied research in the U.S., and it is a history that does not receive nearly enough attention.

I reached this conclusion by looking back on the last sixty or so years of U.S. military funding of social science research in the United States, and then tried to better inform myself about the kinds of questions that seem to be on the minds of many military and foreign policy personnel today. I did that by doing some reading.

I read some history, including Congressional hearings from the mid-1960s on research and national security. I reviewed the intellectual history of both anthropology and communication studies from the 1940s to 2000 — which I believe to be the most appropriate academic disciplines to inform your current challenges — to get an overview of political change and the changing focus of attention in those field. And I looked at what Joy Elizabeth Rohde rightly calls the "boundary zone" between social science and national security and how that relationship has changed, and in many ways degraded, over the last forty years.[3]

I also read some military material. I reviewed the publicly available version of the Human Terrain Team Handbook and talked with some of the HTS staff with whom my own team is in casual conversation. I read the new doctrines on Stability Operations, Training for Full Spectrum Operations and the new Counterinsurgency doctrine with an eye trained

[3] Rohde, Joy Elizabeth (2007) *The Social Scientists' War: Expertise in a Cold War Nation*, unpublished dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.

towards the need for cultural knowledge and the design of programs, operations or campaigns.

What I found were two trends, and each of these trends have different histories and different prospects.

The first trend is the ''soldier-focused'' trend. It started creatively with the Army during World War II and has since become a solid, beneficial, and *uncontroversial* component in military training and education. We might call this inter-cultural training and education, and it involves language training, cultural sensitivity, dealing with culture shock and so-called "reverse culture-shock", reintegration issues and other matters that share a focal concern on the *solider* and making the *soldier* better able to cope with cultural challenges. The work began, as Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz explained, with the work of such scholars as Edward Hall and William Foote Whyte who worked closely with the Foreign Service Institute of the State Department following the lead of the Army's first efforts and then feeding experiences back into the military from there.[4] By focusing on the soldier and the soldier's personal "culture" skills, the military as a whole gains as the water rises for everyone.

There is also a second trend that we will call the 'policy trend'. This needs to be distinguished from the first because it's inherently different and also has a more obscure and complex history. We can see this trend today in the doctrinal work I cited and in the HTS Handbook where there is a concerted effort to employ social analysis – not for the benefit of *preparing the soldier* – but to *inform the campaign or operation*. This is a huge difference, and this latter work also has its own history that is not as current as you might think.

This second genre of analysis isn't about better soldiers. It's about better systems for the generation and application of social knowledge about foreign societies in order to improve operational effectiveness in foreign societies.

Here's a quote that will probably be unsurprising to you. The person, testifying before Congress at hearings on *Behavioral Sciences and the National Security* said that:

"The Defense Department has … recognized that part of its research and development efforts to support counterinsurgency operations must be directed towards the people … and the DoD has called on types of scientists — anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, political scientists, economists — whose professional orientation to human behavior would enable them to make useful contributions in this area…"[5]

What *may* surprise you is that this quote is not from the post-9/11 Pentagon but is from Seymour Deitchman, special assistant for counterinsurgency to the Office of the Director of Defense Research and Engineering at the hearings held in 1966.

And would it surprise you to know that only a couple of years earlier, in 1963, that the Office of Naval Research funded a 250 page report called *Social Science Research and National Security*, to which scholars like Thomas Schelling, Lucien Pye and Wilbur Schramm among others argued for the *value* of social research into counterinsurgency operations to support containment policies against the Soviets? In fact, between 1956 and 1969, the Office of Naval Research and the U.S. Army were working intimately with the Special

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[4] Leeds-Hurwitz, Wendy (1990) *Notes in the History of Intercultural Communication: The Foreign Service Institute and the Mandate for Intercultural Training,* Vol. 76, Quarterly Journal of Speech

[5] Statement of Seymour J. Deitchman (July 14, 1965), Behavioral Sciences and the National Security, Hearings Before the Subcommittee on International Organizations and Movements of the Committee on Foreign Affairs House of Representatives, Eighty-Ninth Congress, First Session

Operations Research Office based at American University as Joy Elizabeth Rohde has documented carefully in her dissertation "The Social Scientists' War". [6]

So both trends – the soldier-focused and the policy-focused -- have a rich history and have been with us for quite some time. The post-9/11 period has not, in fact, created anything radically new on either front aside from renewing interest and ratcheting up attention and resources.

But aside from both trends preceding the current wars, they otherwise share little in common. While inter-cultural training got stronger, better, and more broadly applied in a non-confrontational environment with academics, the application of what used to be called "non-material research" to the design of policy and foreign operations has had an incredibly shaky history that we would ill advised to ignore lest we repeat the errors.

And this brings me to what's riding on this crucial moment in time and the importance of getting the answers right to the three questions mentioned earlier, namely, what information do I need, where do I get it, and how do I apply it and put it to use. Because right now I think you face two challenges. The first is that you've hit a methodological roadblock. You know that cultural issues matter but you're not certain how to make the move to generating and applying relevant cultural knowledge to design problems.

I believe that if you don't solve this, you might grow frustrated and change course. I think this would be disappointing because of the benefits it could offer – not so much to warfighting, where I think the gains will actually be nominal – but to higher-level pursuits of statecraft including cooperative engagement, new forms of security solutions, post-conflict stabilization, and a host of other matters of relevance across the spectrum of future operations that will be your problems to engage.

And second, you've reached a moment in time when the conceptual challenges are being met with new political challenges. The academic community, you must understand, is highly suspicious and often hostile to cooperation with the military on social research in, and for engagement with foreign societies. And the history of social research applied to military matters in the U.S. is now well documented and informative. It reads like high drama and optimism that descends into tragedy and then repeats itself.

It goes something like this:

At first there is a moment of creativity and excitement about social science research by the military shared by scholars. Rohde quotes Psychologist William Lybrand back in 1962 as saying that his aims, in working with the military were, "constructive — to create internal conditions and encourage political, economic and social systems which remove hunger, disease, poverty, oppression and other sources of discontent."[7] But eventually, when wars fail to deliver their promises to the American people, there is political and ethical turmoil with the academic community leading to the shutting down of programs. Again drawing from Rodhe, problems of ethics, scholarly openness, operational demands by the military and problems of patronage and politics all conspire to widening the gulf between the academic and policy communities. That happened last time in the late 1960s and early 1970s. And since then, there has been a quiet period. But now, since 9/11, there is a new stirring of interest. But the same landmines remain in the field.

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[6] Rohde, Joy Elizabeth (2007) *The Social Scientists' War: Expertise in a Cold War Nation*, unpublished dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.

[7] As quoted in Rohde, Joy Elizabeth (2007) *The Social Scientists' War: Expertise in a Cold War Nation*, unpublished dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.

So now, the drama starts again. You have experienced a new round of creativity about the value of social analysis as seen in the new counterinsurgency doctrine, the Human Terrain system, these conferences and other indicators, and you've started to allocate resources. But now we are entering the state of political conflict with the academics and wider populations due to coverage in the popular press while still being unclear on how to generate truly useful cultural knowledge and apply them to design problems.

So here's the message: If you fail to solve the methodological impasse you now face while simultaneously getting hit by the most strident rebuffs since 1970 — when cultural research was used to understand counterinsurgency operations in Thailand — I'm afraid you will turn your backs on this vital area of work as you'll find it operationally insufficient to justify the political backlash it creates and has already started creating.[8] You need to solve these method issues, and you need to solve the politics on the home front. It would be helpful to engage this deliberately and soon.

Get this wrong and the military concludes that cultural research is a dead end and it pulls its support which the funders conclude only leads to political headaches at home and aggravates the war effort. But in doing so, it sinks one of the greatest possible research agendas for positive social change and cooperative engagement that we may ever know before we even get a chance to get it right.

Get this right, and American foreign relations are improved, NATO benefits from better doctrine, and importantly, communities around the world benefit from more nuanced, more sophisticated conflict prevention, crisis management and peacebuilding activities when America is engaged. And that strikes me as a ring worth reaching for.

Question number one. What kind of knowledge is needed?

The study of culture is something specific. It was first popularized by Ruth Benedict in her famous 1934 book "Patterns of Culture".[9] Since then the term has been debated, but it carries with it a shared understanding that a key feature of the world being investigated is a relationship between behavior – or actions – and the meanings of those actions to those engaged in it. Taken collectively, these constitute systems of practices and meanings. Once we understand one such system, we can undertake cross-cultural analysis by comparing systems of practices and meanings. The point of anthropology, to paraphrase Clifford Geertz, is to come to an *understanding of understandings not our own*.[10] The purpose of research was to "reduce the puzzlement."

But cultures are vast and complex systems of meanings and are, as Adda Bozeman used to say, all of a piece.[11] You can't study it all. So instead, we have to come to the study of a culture in a purposeful manner trying to learn something of value. What that is, depends on the question being asked and the purpose of the inquiry. In our case, as designers, we are trying to learn something of value *to something we are trying to do*. It is the "trying to get it done well" that motivates our inquiry. And the task we are trying to achieve directs us to the aspects of culture that we'll need to study.

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8 Wakin, Eric (1992) *Anthropology Goes to War: Professional Ethics & Counterinsurgency in Thailand*, Monograph No. 7, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Wisconsin

9 Benedict, Ruth (1934) *Patterns of Culture*, Sentry Edition

10 Geertz, Clifford (1983) *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*, Basic Books

11 Key citations for Adda Bozeman include *The Future of Law in a Multicultural World* (1971); *Conflict in Africa* (1976); *Strategic Intelligence and Statecraft* (1992).

I'll take some examples from the project I manage at the UN called the Security Needs Assessment Protocol.[12] As we move towards the application of our approach, we may be trying to assist with the safe return of child soldiers to their villages by understanding the best means of integration based on social practices and norms. We may be trying to prioritize the clearance procedure of a minefield in order to maximize the return of economic life of a community by understanding how a community uses the land. We may be trying to design a weapons collection program that attends to locally relevant inducements in order to encourage meaningful – rather then useless – engagement. We may be trying to create training programs for the security sector by understanding the tensions in civil-military relations so that community security can be improved in ways that are meaningful and helpful to community members. In all these cases, the design of the program could be approved through the application of cultural knowledge.

Let's illustrate this by examining a real American case to get our heads around all this theory for a second. Let's cast our minds back to the largest post-World War II relief effort ever launched by the United States which has gone largely unremembered. It took place between about April and July, 1991 just after the ceasefire at Aswan in Iraq. Saddam Hussein had been using helicopter gunships and ground forces to slaughter the Kurds, Shiites, Marsh Arabs and others following a semi-spontaneous uprising in both the north and south of the country. Over two million people fled into the Zagros mountains of Iraq and Iran and also into southern Turkey, which annoyed our NATO ally. President Bush – under pressure from the British – launched Operation Provide Comfort. It was, I think, a remarkable success. But it was also a form of engagement for which the military — in this case, mostly special forces — had no doctrine. They were winging it. And for the most part, they did a pretty good job. But, as a matter of course, there were mistakes.

Some mistakes were technical. Rather than using sling-load helicopters to drop off food and clothing, someone thought it would be a good idea to throw palettes of frozen chickens from the back of C-130 airplanes. This led to the unfortunate result of squashing the refugees. Lesson learned, becomes a best practice, enters into guidelines, new doctrine, and lo and behold, the Army ceased squashing refugees with flying frozen chickens. A moment of pride for the U.S. Army.[13]

Some mistakes were cultural and did not involve flying frozen chickens – or FFCs. What happened here was an issue over the organization of tents.

When the military was setting up refugee camps they were organized in diamond formations. This seemed perfectly reasonable to the Americans because it maximized the use of space and tents, created privacy, sanitation, ease of movement and all the rest. As soon as the tents were pitched, the Kurds started moving the tents into seemingly disorganized clusters. The result was not only a mess but a new form of tension between the military and refugees that could have turned ugly.

While this event in itself was not terribly important, I think it is emblematic of the kinds of confrontations the military has every day with foreign peoples. Something that seems entirely reasonable from one point of view and action is in fact rejected wholesale from another.

What really was the problem, though? Why were the Kurds doing this. Lack of information? Just not understanding what was in their in their own self interest? Was the problem

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[12] Miller, Derek B. and Lisa Rudnick (2008) *The Security Needs Assessment Protocol: Improving Operational Effectiveness through Community Security*, United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, Geneva, Switzerland.

[13] Rudd, Gordon W. (1993) *Operation Provide Comfort: Humanitarian Intervention in Northern Iraq, 1991*, Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University.

"communication" and a need to have better relations with the Kurds that could be solved by language classes, or better inter-cultural communication practices? Or was something else going on that none of that could have solved?

The answer is, something else was going on.

I mentioned before that you've hit something of a methodological roadblock. The roadblock is right about here. It is at the juncture between intentionality and outcome – between action and interpretation. The trouble involves how we make sense of what we observe. How we ascribe meaning to actions. How we make sense of how they make sense of what's happening. This is the nature of the puzzlement that Clifford Geertz spoke of.

This question of how to conduct interpretive, cultural research into local systems of premises, practices and meanings, to paraphrase Donal Carbaugh — and then render that interpretation into design solutions — is the nexus of the methodological challenge.[14] It is what Lisa Rudnick, myself, our team and our Advisory Group has been working on for over four years and it is what my project the Security Needs Assessment Protocol at the UN is all about.

To bottom line it for you, it doesn't matter why you think they might be setting up the tents in a certain way. It matters why they think they're setting up the tents in a certain way. And the reason that matters is because it constitutes the logic of their activities. It is not the "what" but the "why". Getting at that cultural logic by structuring the research to allow a grounded interpretive move to be made is the purpose and promise of applied cultural research. And it is what you need to feed into your designs. Because once you have this, you have a basis for making claims about the wisdom of a selected course of action as considered against what it may mean to the community you are working with.

What if the Kurds were setting up the tents in seemingly messy clusters because they were organizing them by extended family relations in order to provide different forms of protection for both individuals and for their families vis-à-vis others during the crisis? What if this affected social standing and future relations beyond immediate survival? Unfortunately, we can only speculate on this because no one has ever really done the research to know for sure. But if we can get to that system of meanings behind the actions, once the pattern becomes explicable, we are in a new position to engage it wisely. If the analysis is wrong, everything that follows will be mobilized behind the wrong interpretation. Get it right, and new opportunities for cooperative engage become possible. That juncture determines the course of the river, the success of an operation, the outcome of a campaign or even a war.

The second question is, Where does such knowledge come from?

Given that my answer to the first question was rather dense, I'm going to be straightforward in answering this one. So here's the answer: If the information you need is interpretive cultural knowledge for the benefit of design then the information you need is unavailable. I believe it is unavailable because it has never been created. It has not been created for three reasons.

First, because during the hay-day of social research into policy matters during the late 1950s and 1960s, the intellectual movement in America was firmly moving away from interpretive, qualitative research into social meaning, and towards quantitative models of

[14] Carbaugh, D., Gibson, T, & Milburn, T.A. (1997). A view of communication and culture: Scenes in an ethnic cultural center and private college. in B. Kovacic (Ed.), *Emerging theories of human communication* (pp. 1-24). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

analysis, or else matters of information processing.[15] This was as true in cognitive science as it was in economics, as it was in political science, and even in peace research. This is a sweeping generalization but in so far as one paragraph can do it justice, it's within reason.

The second reason is that by the time our intellectual history in the academy began to rekindle its interest in the study of meaning and systems of meanings in the 1970s, no one wanted to work with the military or on policy-related questions associated with security. The late Professor Ron Scollon and I wrote a piece on cultural research and ethics comparing lessons learned from the U.S. military and the American Anthropological Association after the Nuremberg trials in 1945 and 1946.[16] You'll remember that the Nazi soldiers and doctors on trial defended their actions as merely 'following orders' or by claiming that the consent of human subjects to medical experimentation was not legally required. As a consequence, here in the United States, the 1951 Unified Code of Military Justice was profoundly explicit about matters of 'lawfulness' whereas the American Scientific Committee began developing a commitment towards openness and scientific research, and consent as a foundational matter in all studies of people.

The upshot of all that was the creation of what Rodhe calls an ethical "boundary zone" in which competing concepts of "research ethics" came into tense coexistence between the military and social scientists. This worked OK in the 1950s as I mentioned, but by the time of the cultural revolution in the late 1960s that boundary zone started to collapse, the academic community retrenched, and the lessons from Nuremberg about "informed consent" and other key concepts moved students and scholars away from cooperation with the military.

The consequence of all this was that in 70s, 80s and 90s, new ideas that were emerging in social research on constructivism, rhetoric, grounded theory, discursive psychology, cultural psychology, communication, ethnography of communication and a host of other useful approaches that were all — to one extent to another — interested in systems of meaning, and comparative systems of meaning, were by then utterly uninterested in working on policy matters. Security matters had grown so ethically convoluted since Vietnam that no one in academia was going to risk their careers getting involved.

The third reason the knowledge was never created was you. By 1975 and the end of the Vietnam War, the military's attention was shifting away, again, from counterinsurgency and towards major conventional warfare. You got interested new ideas about the Revolution in Military Affairs, learning lessons from the Yom Kippur War in 1973, trying to deal with the state that the Army was in the late 70s — which I've been told was very difficult— and eventually turning attention to the Air Land Battle and other such matters in the 1980s. By the early 1990s, the Army was envisioning Force XXI, policymakers worked on the Bottom Up Review, the Pentagon was planning for two Major Regional Conflicts, none of which was focused on "culture." The Marines wanted the Osprey to work properly, the Navy was building the Seawolf, and the Army was plugging everything into everything else.

After the failure in the 1960s and 1970s to deal with social research and matters of insurgencies, these later challenges provided the opportunity to return to familiar and more successful territory for the military and defense planners alike.

Bottom line is this. The academics didn't want to produce this knowledge and you weren't interested in learning about it. It was the perfect storm of apathy and it had perilous

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[15] Bruner, Jerome (1990) *Acts of Meaning*, Harvard University Press.

[16] Miller, Derek B. and Ron Scollon (2007) *Cooperative Ethics: A New Model for Applied Cultural Research on Peace and Security*, Background Paper, UNIDIR, first presented at a conference on 'Researching Violence and Conflict' at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, July 2008.

consequences to American Foreign Policy among other matters. So while scholars continued to produce ethnographies, they were not centrally concerned – in fact often they were ethically opposed – to matters of design and application at virtually every level of security analysis.

The intellectual neglect of applied cultural research on security issues resulted in a lack of creative attention and resources. As a nation, we didn't create data, analysis, archives, libraries, training courses, university courses, expert scholars, think tanks, research agendas or the new concepts and tools necessary to advance American foreign policy and improve its security operations.

So where does that leave us today? On my whiteboard at the office we have a Latin inscription across the top — because we're nerds. It reads: *Aut Viam Inveniam, Aut Faciam*. It means, I will either find a way, or I will make one.

I don't believe you are going to find a way ahead on the research front by going it alone. You don't have the in-house expertise and capacity to generate and apply the kind of interpretive cultural knowledge that is crucial to you. After all, why would you? It simply hasn't been a priority and you haven't built up those systems. The Human Terrain System is an interesting idea, and holds various kinds of promise, but this is not its current strength from what I can see, and there remain highly complex conceptual problems to tackle. And regretfully the Army is thus far not succeeding in closing the gap with the academy. If anything, that gap is getting larger as evidenced by the new resolutions of the AAA, as recently as February this year.[17]

That means you are going to have to *make* a way forward. You are going to need a resource strategy. That involves going and getting the resources you need. And those resources exist in the academy because they are, more than anything else, conceptual and grounded in deep education, not technical systems or training solutions. But, as mentioned, even in the academy they are in short supply because of the lack of attention to applied design concerns on security. What this means is that you are going to have to make some kind of peace with the American Anthropological Association at some level and the academic community more broadly.

Now that we have examined what kind of cultural knowledge is needed for the purpose of design and where this knowledge comes from, let's move to the final question: [does anyone remember the final question?]

Question number three: How does one apply cultural knowledge, when available, to design problems?

The basic question of application is, "what should we do given what we know?" Applying the data to the task is what I'm referring to as the applied move.

As designers, at some point, we'll have an idea of what to do. The way we test the idea in our minds is to ask, "if I do this, what will the likely outcome be?" If I take this road, will it get me there faster? If I use this tool, will it achieve my task? We think of a possible course of action, then we start to imagine the outcomes of taking it. Assuming we're dealing with people rather than objects, the way we imagine the outcomes is by picturing how other people will react to what we're thinking of doing.

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[17] Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association, originally approved in June 1998, revised in February 2009. Available online at <www.aaanet.org/issues/policy-advocacy/upload/Ethics-Code-Proposed-Revisions-092208.pdf>, accessed 18 March 2009.

What I think we're actually doing is even more specific. We're using our creativity to table a couple of options, and then we start looking — not for the best one — but rather for the least bad option. The way we do this is through a process that the philosopher of science Karl Popper called falsification. We try and find out what's wrong with our idea and hoping the answer is "nothing," or at least, "not too much."

So, in our minds, we start to throw problems and obstacles at our designs to see how they hold up to scrutiny. The one that holds up best is the one we go with.

The process of falsification is very important, and this is when the value of cultural knowledge in the design process is demonstrated.

When we try and falsify an idea, we attack it with available knowledge to see how it stands up. The more knowledge we have to employ in the attack, the more aggressive our attacks can be on that theory, and therefore the more robust the theory needs to be to withstand the attack.

I had a professor once who said, "the less you know about something, the easier it is to develop a theory about it." Exactly. If you don't know anything, every theory seems pretty good. And this is why. Because you can't attack the theory with knowledge.

So, what knowledge should I be using to determine whether a theory is a good one? Inevitably the answer involves using knowledge we have, and using understandings that are accessible to us. But what this implies is that we are using our cultural lens only, and not theirs also.

For anyone who has worked in intelligence matters, you know this problem. You hear things, you see things, you start to look for patterns, but you worry that you're engaged in that fearful process called mirror imagining. That is, you're taking things that look familiar and slotting them into familiar categories rather than seeing whole new patterns with novel explanations. What intelligence analysts often do is try to find new patterns. What cultural research does, and is theoretically committed to, is trying to find the actual, endogenous systems of premises, practices and meanings that animate social life as understood by the communities of actors that concern us.[18]

When trying to falsify ideas, the more knowledge we have the better. But what's key is to be able to employ knowledge from both sides of the social interaction. That is to say, rather indelicately, our side, and their side. Each constitutes a different cultural system of knowledge, each with its own attendant logic and folk theories about the world. This is just as true when trying to set up tents with people from another culture as it is when discussing human rights, democracy, justice, peace, war, or a host of other complex notions that have to be turned into actions.

The central notion in the falsification process, therefore, is taking both our own knowledge and the cultural knowledge of the society we are aiming to engage and asking why our designs will *not* work there. If our data is good, if our interpretations are solid, if we are clear about our design theory, if we have checked our design theory with the people we are hoping to influence, and everyone is nodding when the dust settles, then we have ourselves one fine looking design solution.

[18] The notion of culture as "animating" social life is drawn from the work of Donal Carbaugh.

Wrapping up

Let's review and wrap up to arrive at a five point agenda of work.

After giving you some context and history I advanced through three questions. Each has its own set of challenges and opportunities.

First I asked, what kind of cultural knowledge is actually needed for the purpose of design? I said that the information you want is interpretive cultural research into local systems of premises, practices and meanings. You don't need soldier-focused training, you need design-focused research and education. And because you cannot study all of a culture, you want to build situated theory around whatever you're trying to do. The basic question is, "How do I get this done here?" I explained that there is a methodological roadblock now being faced in how to generate this kind of knowledge but there are also tools being developed in the academy and in our project at the UN that are centrally concerned with these matters. The second question was, where does such knowledge come from? I explained why, historically, the kind of knowledge you need simply isn't out there. It's absence – in our curricula, in our libraries, in our databases, in our designs – is a product of America's history of not seriously addressing the profound divisions between the academic and policy worlds – especially on security matters – that have haunted us since Nuremberg and the lessons we all collectively took away from the Holocaust on matters of both scientific ethics and military lawfulness. There were both were good lessons but, never reconciled, they have since matured into competitive agendas and now threaten to become entrenched positions. To mobilize the available resources, and to start to build new ones in a cooperative manner with the finest minds in these fields, the military needs to reach out to the academy and constructively address this ethical challenges. Because the new resources you need reside with them, but this agenda belongs to you.

We then asked the third question, How does one apply this kind of knowledge, when available, to design problems? I said that we use knowledge to both creatively imagine design solutions and then to help us challenge our designs and see whether they hold up to scrutiny. I argued that the value of interpretive cultural knowledge is that it provides entirely new domains of knowledge to consider in judging the quality of our designs— and by more, I mean maybe 50% more — because they are drawn from a world otherwise invisible to us when we don't do the research.

So here's the agenda of work that I propose:

4. Continue with your work on inter-cultural training for military and U.S. government staff, but renew your commitment to that lost trend of social research that focuses on policy, operations and campaigns. To achieve greater operational effectiveness through a deeper knowledge of foreign social systems and how they compare to our own, you need a research agenda. You need to recognize that if the stakes are as high as the counterinsurgency doctrine and other documents say it is, then your commitment to conceptual clarity and your institutional response should be equal to the value it will bring.

5. Make it a commitment to reach out to the academic community, particularly but not exclusively the American Anthropological Association, by listening to them and taking their concerns seriously. You will certainly find people there who are ideologically opposed to the military and will not wish to engage in dialogue. But you will also find experienced, interested and reasonable people both able and willing to enter into that dialogue and to step into that boundary zone of contested space if they feel there is a genuine partner in the discussion. I believe this worthwhile and necessary. Cultural research for the benefit of operational design and policy is a hard, complicated, morally challenging, and ethnically ambiguous area of work. The anxiety they feel in

the academy is therefore real. However, it should be engaged directly, not only for the benefits it will bring but because of the risks in failing to do so. If this isn't done I expect the research agenda will die off just as did the Special Operational Research Office in 1969 and the agenda of work it once aspired to.

6. Open yourselves to the power of cooperative engagement. In fieldwork I've conducted in Yemen, in Haiti, in Sierra Leone, in Ghana, in Nepal and other locations, it is remarkable how much people want to be understood, want to be heard, and are looking for a partner willing to try and understand. So much of what you need to know don't come from learning secrets, but by learning how to hear what is being said directly in front of you, or directly to you. That is the cultural barrier that cultural research can address. It is a matter of profound pragmatism to improve this skill.

7. Take the applied move seriously. Just as you need to have systems in place to generate cultural knowledge, you need to take the design process equally seriously by bringing the research process into closer cooperation with the decision-making processes in innovative ways. If design is dependent on falsification for testing, then the research should not merely precede decision-making, but remain in constant communication with it. I see creative applications like this with HTS and elsewhere, but not making use of the kind of knowledge I'm talking about today. There is an opportunity here for improvement.

8. And finally, let's remember that we – as military staff and academics alike – are all involved here in an historical process that has antecedents that affect our work today, and will have repercussions in the future based on the choices we make. If our agenda is clear, if our cooperation is robust, if our ethical stance is sure footed, if our research solutions are supported and influential, and our designers and decision makers are taught how best to make use of this system, the benefits will be to us all.

Thank you.

UNIDIR RESOURCES

About SNAP

The Security Needs Assessment Protocol (SNAP) is a project of the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) in Geneva, Switzerland. SNAP is developing a programme design service for agencies working to build community security, or else design their own development or humanitarian programmes in contexts of community insecurity.

Recognizing a gap between "best practices" and actual field-level realities, SNAP is structured as a "best process" approach to programme design. The process begins with the assumption that effective programming for local communities starts with local knowledge, and that local knowledge is best applied through an innovative process of service design.

About UNIDIR

The United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR)—an autonomous institute within the United Nations—conducts research on disarmament and security. UNIDIR is based in Geneva, Switzerland, the centre for bilateral and multilateral disarmament and non-proliferation negotiations, and home of the Conference on Disarmament. The Institute explores current issues pertaining to the variety of existing and future armaments, as well as global diplomacy and local tensions and conflicts. Working with researchers, diplomats, government officials, NGOs and other institutions since 1980, UNIDIR acts as a bridge between the research community and governments. UNIDIR's activities are funded by contributions from governments and donor foundations. The Institute's web site can be found at:

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