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Social Scientists and the Human Terrain System (HTS) Project

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Description

Since 2005, the U.S. Army has deployed teams of social scientists to areas of conflict to develop social and cultural knowledge about local populations as an aid to military decision-making. The American Anthropological Association (AAA) sees ethical problems with using social science methodologies, particularly ethnography, to further military goals and believes that the HTS program specifically violates the AAA's Code of Ethics.

Body

- *How could social scientists use their professional skills in front-line military units? Should they? Why or why not?*
 - *If many members of a major anthropology professional society strongly object to these activities, how can the organization respond?*
 - *How could both the work of social scientists in the military and anthropologists' objections be in the public's interests?*
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The HTS

Since 2005, the U.S. Army has developed and implemented the Human Terrain System (HTS) Project as part of the U.S. counterinsurgency strategy in the Middle East. HTS deploys teams of social scientists to areas of conflict to develop social and cultural understanding of local populations as an aid to military decision-making. Human Terrain Teams typically consist of five to nine social scientists. They use ethnographic methods to collect data on local customs, kinship structures, economics, and politics. Teams provide the data and analyses to both their direct military commanders in the field and analysis teams in the U.S., who advise high-level military decision makers. [\[1\]](#)

Should Ethnographers Serve in or Protest Against HTS?

When interviewed, many military personnel who have been on the ground with HTS personnel valued the social scientists' work. [\[2\]](#) Many participants in the HTS program are recent college graduates, both undergraduate and graduate students. They have been credited with reducing civilian and military casualties and deaths as well as making the U.S. military more effective. However, by 2008, the scientific community, and American society more generally, was split on the value of HTS. The resulting discussions included:

- Editorials and articles in *Nature*, as well as in the *New York Times*, the *Economist*, and *U.S. News and World Report*, that offered positive reviews of the program. [\[3\]](#)
- A negative reaction that was initially largely centered in the anthropology community. Scholars debated the military program at meetings of the American Anthropological Association and the Network of Concerned Anthropologists. [\[4\]](#)
- No significant debate in other social science professional organizations, such as the American Political Science Association or the American Psychological Association.

Skepticism from the American Anthropological Association (AAA)

In October 2007, the Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association issued a statement of formal opposition to HTS, declaring it an unacceptable use of anthropological expertise. [5] In 2009, the AAA went even further and strengthened the language in its Code of Ethics against research conducted in secret. The AAA saw ethical problems with using social science methodologies to further military goals and believed that HTS specifically violated the AAA's Code of Ethics for the following reasons:

- Anthropologists working as military contractors may not always be able to identify themselves as anthropologists and to disclose truthfully what they are doing.
- HTS anthropologists may have obligations to the military that conflict with the "do no harm" obligation stipulated in the AAA Code of Ethics.
- HTS anthropologists wear a military uniforms and travel with military personnel, making it difficult for them to obtain voluntary informed consent.
- HTS does not have administrative processes to assure participant safety or data security, which makes it possible that harm might come to research participants.
- "Military" anthropologists, by association, may jeopardize other anthropological fieldworkers, who could be mistaken as U.S. spies.

Optimism in Nature

In July 2008, *Nature* gave HTS a cautiously positive review. [6] The editors declared that, in an era of increased security, social scientists would enter into new arrangements with the military and national security communities. The editors were guardedly optimistic that, by studying cultures from the inside, social scientists on the front lines could:

- Educate the military about other cultures and societies
- Reduce the number of attacks on U.S. military and personnel

Program failures

Only two years later, in 2010, new information and news reports of HTS team member fatalities led to a significant decline in scholarly support of HTS in the Middle East. While AAA criticism of the program continued, *Nature's* editors, in a complete turnaround, declared HTS a failure and called for its end. Among the problems cited in *Nature* were:

- Inadequate training of Human Terrain Team members
- Inadequate screening of applicants
- A high attrition rate of HTS personnel
- Placing social scientists in deadly risk [\[7\]](#)

In 2010, the HTS director abruptly left and a university-affiliated institute, which had provided training, pulled out of HTS upon completion of its contract. The government agencies involved offered no public explanation for either decision. [\[8\]](#) The HTS remains a controversial undertaking. While there is little criticism of the anthropologists who support U.S. troops by providing cultural sensitivity training before deployments, studying the needs of soldiers with posttraumatic stress disorder, and consulting with national security agencies, as of 2013, the AAA maintains that the HTS program does not meet its ethical standards. In a 2012 statement, spokespersons for the AAA stated:

"Sending social scientists to study local populations in the company of armed troops amid active hostilities will not produce scientifically reliable information. Just as important are the long-term consequences of this approach. Embedding anthropologists with combat brigades undermines their independence and duty not to harm populations—requirements that are the linchpins of anthropological ethics." [\[9\]](#)

Scientists' Social Responsibilities and HTS: Questions to Consider

- Does applying social scientific knowledge and skills as an HTS member serve a public good? Is the work good for humanity?
- Does applying social scientific knowledge and skills, as an HTS member, create risks? What kind? For whom?

- How does one assess the ethical merits of activities, such as HTS teams, that have both pros and cons?
- What role(s) should journals, such as *Nature*, and professional societies, such as the American Anthropological Association (AAA), play in decisions to deploy social scientists with American military units?
- What kinds of experiences, positive and negative, might a recent social science PhD have if she chose to serve on an HTS team?

References & Additional Resources

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Notes

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