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Social Science Research and Military Agendas: Safe Distance or Bridging a Troubling Divide?

Craig Calhoun

Recent calls for more public social science have sometimes faltered at the idea that better relations with the military should be part of the project. Better relations with social movements, sure. With NGOs—why not? And certainly with the departments of state, education, or commerce. But is it the job of academic social scientists to inform the military?

Analyzing the disconnect, Michael Mosser focuses on broad stylistic differences between “academics” who understand themselves to be solving puzzles and “military practitioners” who believe they are solving problems.¹ This is an issue, but there is plenty of problem-oriented academic social science.² Here I point to three further issues: First, “military practitioners” include both line commanders and broader strategists and policy-makers—and relations with each have different implications (to foreshadow, Human Terrain Systems is about the former and the Minerva Initiative is about the latter). Second, academic worry is partly about distorted agenda-setting instead of scientific autonomy. And third, there is serious concern about potential complicity in causing harm.

These issues look different to social scientists doing different kinds of research. While any researcher may worry that poor policy choices cause harm, model-building specialists in international relations typically have much less hesitation working with the military than do ethnographers—and this has to do with the research approaches they employ, not just their politics. The IR specialists may simply hope their research and advice lead to better strategy. Fieldworkers and those dependent on context-specific relations with international colleagues are valued for different kinds of knowledge but

face different kinds of challenges. Likewise, the issue of who sets the agenda looks different to area-studies specialists and fieldworkers with fewer other sources of funding. Not least, relations between the military and civilian social scientists cannot be understood without reference to a troubled history.

These are issues of great importance to the Social Science Research Council (SSRC). Not least, as a leading funder of fieldwork-based, context-specific social science research the SSRC wants to see this both supported and recognized for its policy and practical significance. This work is of vital importance for those trying to shape successful—and benign—strategies in a complex world. But it can only thrive if there is appropriate respect for what it takes to do this work well, and for the risks fieldworkers sometimes face. Further, the SSRC seeks to encourage a more public social science.³ This means research that contributes to addressing major public problems and generates knowledge available to a wide range of public conversations and organizations. Such knowledge is an important adjunct to strong public institutions that work for the benefit of all citizens. This suggests that there should be better relationships between civilian social scientists and the Department of Defense (DoD)—and its analogs around the world. But such good relationships depend both on building trust from experience and building an appropriate normative framework to guide cooperation.⁴ I am grateful to *Perspectives in Politics* for expanding a much-needed discussion.

Good Knowledge and Uncertain Consequences

Wanting good knowledge to bring only good results is understandable if implausible. Nuclear weapons research brought the issue into the public eye. Scientists who thought the potential bad uses outweighed the good responded both by personal decisions not to work on weapons systems (and even theoretical projects relevant to weapons systems) and by public decisions to campaign

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against nuclear weapons. But it was clear that potential bad results were made possible precisely by good knowledge: bombs based on bad physics wouldn't explode. Social science seldom produces such immediately devastating technologies, but nonetheless understanding social processes—the behavior of states, the structure of populations, the psychology of small groups—makes possible a variety of actions that researchers may regret or condemn as well as praise. Social scientists like physicists may respond by avoiding knowledge-creation they fear will lead to bad uses or by campaigning against such uses. But this isn't the connection between social scientists and the military that creates controversy. Controversy comes less from the study of abstract social processes than from the study of concrete social contexts.

Training programs for military officers and planning efforts by the DoD are informed by the more or less generalizable results of social science. Officers are taught without much controversy what states are and what kinds of challenges they face. Individual political scientists may or may not want to teach in military programs, but those writing theories of the state are not dismayed when their writings are assigned. Moreover, when academics think the theories guiding the strategic thinking in the government are mistaken they can contest the dominant understandings by deploying the usual tools of theory-production and debate. Many prominent international relations scholars did just this, for example, when neo-conservatives in the Bush administration advocated remaking the Middle East by a combination of military force, nation-building, and public diplomacy.

By contrast, those with the most detailed knowledge of actual social situations—a specialist on Shi'a communities in Iraq, for example—may feel not only that military decision-makers are basing policies on faulty knowledge but also that correcting this knowledge could expose the groups they have studied to harm. Would a better understanding of Shi'a politics and culture be used to subject Shi'ites to outside control or to help them achieve greater autonomy? What of very concrete knowledge about which Shi'ites were sympathetic to US troops and which were hostile? The context-specific researcher faces distinctive challenges (whether or not this research also informs generalizations across contexts).

Just as lumping all sorts of social science research together may reduce clarity, so it is important to distinguish providing knowledge to aid tactical operations from providing knowledge to inform strategy and policy. The Human Terrain System (HTS) program has sought to recruit anthropologists and other social scientists to work alongside combat troops in real-time operations.⁵ The basic notion is that contemporary combat operations, especially counterinsurgency, demand a better ability to understand culture and social organization—not simply of other combatants but of local civilian populations. Military per-

sonnel are taught to pay attention to such factors (and the much-discussed Army and Marine Corps *Counterinsurgency Manual 3-24* incorporated social science knowledge to help in this). But the Human Terrain System program also sought to incorporate social scientists into actual teams deployed in combat zones in Iraq and Afghanistan. By contrast, the Minerva Initiative involves DoD funding for academic research not subject to military command structures or immediate operational objectives. It was designed to secure more knowledge to inform strategic thinking over a longer term (not immediate tactical action).

Regarding Minerva, and military funding of academic research more generally, questions turn on who sets the research agenda and who frames the issues. Minerva would not place social scientists in combat zones; it would not classify research results or restrict publication; it would not ask researchers to provide confidential field notes. It would offer funds for relatively long-term research programs. When objections surfaced to having grants directly administered by the DoD, the National Science Foundation was commissioned to run the competitions for Minerva funding, establishing an arm's-length relationship to the DoD. But this core issue remained: Minerva would establish priorities and topics for research—for example into the impact of religious and cultural change or what electronically available documents would reveal about strategic thinking in China's military. There was arguably tendentious framing in the call for work on "terrorist organizations" that seemed to treat terrorism as a defining attribute of some organizations rather than a tactic used by various organizations, movements, individuals, or networks under certain circumstances. But more basic was the idea that the DoD was setting the agenda.

There was nothing new about linking calls for research funding to national security goals. Generations of area specialists received grants for graduate study under the National Defense Education Act. In launching Minerva, Secretary of Defense Gates evoked the Kennedy administration's post-Sputnik calls for research to meet "the Russian challenge." He quoted Arthur Schlesinger's call for "a return to the acceptance of eggheads and ideas."⁶ What was and is different is the direct role of the DoD in funding and setting priorities for research—rather than supporting a call for other federal agencies, like those in the Department of Education, to increase funding for such research.⁷ The DoD made this move partly because it perceived that other organizations were not funding this research—it would not have paid for new knowledge if its needs were already being met. But if the DoD saw its effort as remedying a deficiency, many in the relevant academic communities saw that same deficiency as giving the DoD undue influence. Because other agencies were not funding fieldwork-based research, scholars would feel a pressure to take DoD money. The result, many feared, would be researchers harnessed to DoD framing and

priorities—and therefore not asking critical questions, not contesting the frames, not opening up new ways of looking at contexts and issues.

Project Minerva called for culturally-oriented, context-specific, often fieldwork-based knowledge. Senior DoD administrators worried that the models on which they relied missed vital dimensions of security challenges posed today. The pursuit of national security thus needed area studies specialists, anthropologists, sociologists, and the kind of comparative politics specialists who learn other languages and immerse themselves in specific sites. The DoD had plenty of experience securing more abstract studies and no shortage of relationships to specialists in formal modeling and game theory. Ironically, the DoD leadership was calling for kinds of knowledge different from what disciplinary hierarchies had recently rewarded most. Its strategic thinkers saw context-specific knowledge as crucial to formulating new strategies in relation to new global conditions.

Researchers understandably worried not only about DoD motives or intentions but also about the extent to which decisions regarding what research to fund would reflect the agendas of policy-makers rather than the judgment of the research community. One might of course suggest that this is the nature of research paid for by those trying to solve specific problems. Moreover, responding to policy agendas is not just a matter of “application”; it can have a positive influence on basic science by leading researchers to ask different questions.⁸ But it is one thing when policy agendas structure only a fraction of the funding for a field, or only loosely. The Minerva funding was a rare instance of new funding for area studies and fieldwork-based social science after at least 20 years of declining support.

This is part of a longer story than can be retold here. It goes back to the alliance among social science, area studies, private philanthropy, and US policy-making in the heyday of modernization theory.⁹ The alliance broke up amid critiques of prevailing development models as well as anxieties over complicity in poorly conducted counterinsurgency programs and the broader disputes of the Vietnam War era (which I think Mosser’s essay underestimates). Area-studies fields entered a period of self-critique that continued in some cases for decades, though they also produced exciting new research. The end of the Cold War encouraged many to think that market-transition, democracy-promotion and similar global agendas should replace regionally focused studies of culture, history, and social organization. In the 1990s, with the old alliance gone, there was a crisis. Some foundations decided they should emphasize direct engagement in practical problem-solving over research (especially academic research). Though area studies suffered, there was for a time a strengthening of support for “human security” research. Issues like environmental conflicts, humanitarian disasters, and the implications of HIV/AIDS and

other infectious diseases all received attention. After the September 11 attacks, funding for security research turned predictably to terrorism, but also returned (perhaps ironically) to hard-security issues like nuclear weapons. Many expected a revitalization of area studies funding, but this didn’t materialize—not even for regions in which the US launched wars.

It was in this context that, under Secretary Gates, the DoD launched its efforts to promote the development of cultural and social knowledge. This was occasioned by the conviction that the nature of the wars the US military is called on to fight is changing, and so too the larger strategic context that will shape future conflicts. This is why DoD leaders are trying to understand the implications of growing Chinese power and more generally a world shaped by multiple major powers, why alongside nation-states they are concerned with global networks and illicit trade and with global migrations and media systems, why they are trying to understand the role of religion in conflicts, why they are interested in the psychology and cultural contexts of suicide bombing, and why they are interested in the dynamics of ethnic conflicts. DoD leaders also seek a better understanding of the operational conditions they will face, the implications of changes in the populations recruited to the military, of changing gender relations in the military, of the training demands new technologies will pose, and indeed of the ways in which support systems work—as life on military bases poses new challenges when both parents may potentially be deployed, or when soldiers return with much higher incidents of post-traumatic stress disorders than were diagnosed previously.

There are good reasons for civilians to want military thinking—including both strategy and analysis of non-combat operations—to be better informed. Poor intellectual preparation can cost lives, prolong conflicts, and contribute to disasters like failure to protect Iraq’s archaeological heritage. But of course there are risks that good knowledge will be used to pursue bad policies more effectively. In general, contesting policy seems better than withholding knowledge, especially in a democracy, but the military pursuit of social science knowledge does present some real problems.

Problems

One problem (or set of problems) derives from the fact that the DoD now seeks input from fields that have been underfunded in recent years. This means that there is more anxiety because the military funding is proportionately larger. The solution is partly support from other sources; fields thrive better with multiple funders because this enhances diversity of perspectives and thus creativity. Perhaps ironically it is harder to generate positive engagement from chronically underfunded fields. It is not an

accident that the DoD leadership showed a special interest in anthropology, area studies, and qualitative sociology and comparative politics—but received a disproportionate number of proposals from international relations theorists, quantitative researchers, and econometricians.

A second problem is the damage done to relations between social scientists and the military during previous conflicts. Relations between American social scientists and the US military and intelligence establishments were much closer before the Vietnam War—and other offshoots of the Cold War—became intensely controversial. They are more distant now than relations between academic and security counterparts in most other countries. And indeed the distance has been institutionalized. While academic engineers routinely work with the Defense Department, most social scientists have little relevant experience, few relationships, and no clear norms or best practices. Moreover, Vietnam-era protests drove ROTC programs off many of the campuses with leading social science research departments. This reduced relationships between civilian and military leaders. It also reinforced class divisions—as did the end of the draft in favor of an all-volunteer military. Elite social scientists typically have little biographical contact with anyone in the military. Today's graduate students and junior faculty generally don't remember the conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s directly, but they have been trained in settings where they are unlikely to forge connections to the military.

The way the US military drew social scientists into some earlier conflicts is also part of the history taught to students in some disciplines and area studies fields. Counterinsurgency programs in Central and South America and Southeast Asia are prime examples. If there are to be better working relationships today, this problematic history needs to be confronted directly, not ignored or dismissed. There is no such thing as starting fresh. And of course it is worth noting that as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan become less popular, or when the military leadership appears to tolerate instances of abuse of trust on the part of military personnel, this undermines potential support for a rapprochement between civilian researchers and the military.

Of course there may be other problems; perhaps the greatest arise when research is close to actual military operations, rather than insulated to some degree.

Possibilities

A new normative framework is needed to guide relationships between civilian academics and the military. The implicit normative framework in place fifty years ago was violated by Project Camelot and similar operations and is discredited as well as outmoded. The arguments underway will not be very fruitful so long as they are simply for or against cooperation with the military or taking funding

from the military. It is important, rather, to work out a good and open understanding of how such cooperation might work, what risks are entailed, what are the warning signs of problems, and what to do about them. Conversely, there should be an understanding of the opportunities and the conditions on which those opportunities are extended. Suspicions won't vanish overnight. They will be alleviated by the experience of successful collaborative work based on mutual respect, including better understanding of differences of perspective.

Normative issues arise not only in direct relationships between military funders and civilian researchers, but also in relationships among academics. For example, what are the appropriate obligations between advisors and graduate students? How should military funding be considered in tenure reviews? When a large-scale project is organized as a consortium, how should differences among its participants be addressed? What are the implications of Pentagon funding for efforts to build relationships with researchers in other countries?

There are reasons to think better collaborative relationships could be built. There is genuine desire among social scientists, especially younger social scientists, to undertake intellectual work that makes a difference to public affairs. There is more sympathy for soldiers themselves than there was in the Vietnam era. And here it is worth restating that much social science research of military relevance is neither tactical nor operational. Some of it seeks better understanding of broad social, geopolitical, political economic, technological, or other issues that matter to all who care about international affairs—including the military. Some is intended to improve military operations, but not specifically or immediately combat tactics. A battleship is a social organization as well as a marine warship; how it is designed informs social processes in ways of considerable interest. This bears on gender, on social solidarity, and on cultural diversity as well as on readiness to fight. It is an opportunity to integrate design research and social science. The fraught re-entry of veterans into civilian life is also important to both the military and society at large. It is a matter of job opportunities—including an unsurprising mismatch between the places from which recruits are drawn and the places where new jobs are created in greatest numbers; it is a matter of marital and family relationships, community organization, the support of religious groups, the effectiveness of educational opportunities and support services. To draw a line between such concerns and civilian social science in order to preserve a pristine distance from warfare or the possible biases of military funders seems unwise.

Nonetheless, it would be foolish to ignore the genuine risks military funding or partnerships can pose to certain sorts of research—most especially that based on fieldwork. Ironically, precisely the sort of knowledge the military

would most like to have is the kind hardest to produce well under military auspices. And it would be naïve to imagine that Pentagon funding of field researchers wouldn't be noticed and wouldn't cause problems for some—including graduate students at early and vulnerable career stages. To be sure, there are places in the world (like parts of the former Soviet Union) where being thought to be an agent of the military or an intelligence agency would only make a researcher seem more important. And there are many places where it is simply assumed that US researchers have links to the US military or at least US foreign policy. But there are also places—like much of Central and South America—where troubled experiences in the past mean that being identified with the US military would very often be a problem and perhaps a danger for a field-worker today.

In Sum

There are many challenges in the way of better relationships between civilian social scientists and the US military. Some of these come from a charged history in which civilian research—and the trust of those being studied—has been abused. Some come from unfortunate responses to past abuses and to an unpopular, destructive, and in many ways futile war. Some come from a class divide between those in many privileged institutional positions and those joining the military. The issues are accentuated by the role of the United States as a hegemonic global power. It is easier for the Norwegian or Canadian military to forge good relationships with civilian researchers; neither Norwegian nor Canadian academics are as likely to find their international research efforts disrupted by a reputation for working with the military.

At the same time, there are many reasons to bemoan the current relationship of suspicion and distance. Perhaps most importantly, a military that operates in seclusion from civilian concerns is antithetical to democracy. Academic social science is not as large or as basic a part of American society as the military—for better or worse—but if social science knowledge does not inform military operations and strategy, or offer fully informed criticism of it, democracy suffers, not just the military. Social scientists who live in a society with a large and active military should not proceed with their work as though it didn't exist. They can honorably proceed in pacifist opposition or in opposition to specific policies—whether strategic (like waging extensive wars in Muslim societies while trying to win Muslim allies) or operational (like discrimination against homosexuals). But they cannot so honorably simply turn the other way.

However, if social scientists are to cooperate with the military, this needs norms and ground rules. There needs to be clarity about the different kinds of engagements, about the implications of different sorts of funding or

access. Rushing into relationships that have produced so many problems in the past without exercising due diligence in the present would be as unwise as refusing them.

As the military is called upon to engage not only in new sorts of wars but in more peacekeeping missions, more humanitarian response missions, and more work with the militaries of other countries, it is all the more important that there be good pathways for it to be informed by the best available knowledge. Having the military become a primary financier of international studies research would be unfortunate—not necessarily because of what the military would do with research-based knowledge but because it would demonstrate the failure of government as a whole (and for that matter private foundations) to provide funding commensurate with today's global context. The production of good knowledge demands multiple funders, diverse agendas, and often debates over how to interpret the results of research. It is important that social scientists be able to make good careers and pursue vital intellectual agendas without becoming a part of a military-academic complex. It is important also that there be a flow of communication between researchers and those responsible for national security and engaged more broadly in trying to achieve transnational security. It is also important to remember that, in the end, such security is more than a matter of state policy, for it affects the life and death of individuals and communities.

Notes

- 1 Mosser 2010 uses a language of puzzles versus problems that does not clarify all the core issues. First, “puzzle-solving” is but one mode of valued academic achievement, though certainly prominent; there are also major rewards for developing an integrative explanatory model, for spotting a significant but hitherto unnoted empirical pattern, or for disproving (or at least successfully challenging) a prominent theory. Second, academic suspicions of “problem-oriented” research come mainly from the notion that the problem was specified by an outside actor not chosen by academic researchers, and from the notion that problem-oriented research will only “apply” existing theory or methods rather than improve them. What is most valued by academic reward structures is originality, particularly originality in explanatory approach (theory or method) than can become influential in the work of others. New empirical findings are valued less lacking such originality in explanation, or at least deployment to challenge prevailing theories (though lots of essentially descriptive empiricist work gets dressed up with rather thin claims to theoretical or methodological innovation). What is not generally valued in the academic reward system, to which Mosser

- rightly wants to call attention, is practical usefulness.
- 2 Political science has of course seen recurrent debates over just what its relationship to state power should be. As Anderson 2003 suggests, though, even at the height of the “behavioral revolution” and the argument that politics should be studied as abstract science, not practical engagement, there was always a sense in which the discipline remained oriented to informing the state.
 - 3 See Calhoun 2010.
 - 4 Because of the troubled history and absent a better normative framework for cooperation, the SSRC currently does not receive funding from the military—even though there are issues on which we think cooperation between civilian social scientists and the military would be appropriate.
 - 5 Mosser does not adequately distinguish informing operations and informing strategic debates. His comments on disputes in the American Anthropological Association focus on HTS. Anthropologists raised concerns largely at the level of individual researchers’ professional ethics. Anthropologists also debated Minerva where the issues were somewhat different. See Gusterson 2008 and the various discussions posted in 2008 and 2009 both by the AAA and by groups like the Open Anthropology Cooperative and SavageMinds.org.
 - 6 See <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1228>.

- 7 Mosser notes the importance of national security rationales for previous government funding programs like the NDEA, but does not acknowledge the point that these were not administered by the Department of Defense.
- 8 See Stokes 1997 classic account of “Pasteur’s Quadrant”.
- 9 See Gilman 2007.

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