



Anthropology of the Military

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Abstract

The anthropology of militaries in industrial countries is a relatively young discipline, which has seen significant growth since the end of the Cold War and the advent of the “new wars.” The chapter focuses on the anthropological analysis of social and cultural concerns related to (and derived from) the armed forces, war, and the provision for national security. It charts the main clusters of issues anthropologists are engaged with and explains the unique contribution of this discipline through the following themes: militarization, fieldwork, military organization and units, gender, military families, veterans, and medical anthropology.

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This chapter concludes with a discussion of anthropology's contribution to military education.

Keywords

Anthropology · Violence · Cultural competence · Ethnography · Fieldwork · Militarization · Gender

Introduction

Like other social scientists, anthropologists apply the analytical and theoretical approaches of their discipline – namely, ethnographic research methods – to the study of the military. The addition of anthropology to military studies is comparatively recent, beginning since the end of the Cold War. Of course, militaries have long used anthropological research for military purposes (Mohr and et al. 2019), but this chapter focuses on the anthropological analysis of “things military,” those social and cultural concerns related to (and derived from) the armed forces, war, and provisions for “national security.” Thus, we see military-related matters as referring to a much broader set of issues than the issues focused on the “armed forces,” issues that denote the practices and institutional arrangements centered on commanders and troops.

This chapter offers a review of the field with two aims: First to chart out the main clusters of issues with which anthropologists are engaged and, second, to explain the unique contribution of this discipline (Gusterson 2007; Simons 1999; Sørensen and Ben-Ari 2019). While there have been anthropological studies of warriors in more traditional societies and some newer work on armed non-state militias or resistance movements, our focus is on the state-sanctioned militaries of industrial countries. We primarily refer to major works published since the end of the Cold War to illustrate the topics studied in the field rather than a sustained bibliographic review.

We note that it is not easy to draw clear boundaries between anthropologists engaged with military topics and colleagues from related fields who also look at the armed forces through an anthropological lens. Most of the authors we review are social and cultural anthropologists by profession. Others have studied social sciences focusing on anthropological approaches, while others hold a degree in sociology, for example, but have incorporated anthropological ways of thinking into their research over the course of their careers. Finally, we limit ourselves to works in the English language on the assumption that they will be most accessible to a variety of readers.

Why Anthropology?

The unique contribution of anthropology – and here we refer to sociocultural anthropology – is threefold. First, it offers a holistic approach to groups as part of humanity, which means that anthropologists try to place any subject they study – say

unit dynamics, commemoration ceremonies, or gender relations – in its wider social and cultural context. Second, the main method anthropologists use is fieldwork, which is usually undertaken in one extended period but sometimes during a series of short stints. In practice, anthropological fieldwork involves obtaining a rich and multifaceted picture of the groups or issues under study. However, since militaries belong to the security establishment, doing fieldwork – via observations, interviews, or other forms of gathering data – often proves difficult. Third, anthropology involves a comparative approach. Thus, military anthropology does not focus on the one case but, as much as possible, on comparing its differences from and similarities with other cases. Anthropologists do not always undertake sustained comparative studies, of course; each case is analyzed as having its own uniqueness that can only be understood against the background of other cases.

Given the relatively small size of the field of military anthropology, anthropologists have often found themselves in dialogue with and cooperating with qualitative and culture sociologists. Some of the analytical methods used by anthropologists in the study of the armed forces are shared with sociology, and some ethnographies penned by qualitative sociologists are similar to those produced by anthropologists. Further, some research projects discussed here have been carried out by anthropologists as well as sociologists, political scientists, psychologists, historians, and philosophers. Given the limitations of space, we restrict ourselves to anthropological work in this chapter. Similarly, while some military anthropology overlaps with the anthropology of security (Maguire et al. 2014; Samimian-Darash and Stalcup 2017), in this chapter we focus on the armed forces.

Anthropology and the Study of the Armed Forces

Militaries are large-scale, public organizations, and many studies of the military liken to, or differentiate them from, other such entities. Their defining characteristic is the production, management, and use of legitimate state-mandated (if sometimes contested) organized violence (Boene 1990). Hence, almost all anthropological studies of the armed forces deal in one way or another with this defining feature, whether it be the preparation for, use of, or the aftereffects of armed violence. In this regard, the relative paucity of anthropological studies of the armed forces in industrial countries until the end of the Cold War may be surprising. It is remarkable because violence – the physical or symbolic use of damaging physical force against other human beings – has been the object of intense anthropological scrutiny for a long time (Abbink 2000). Yet there have been relatively few ethnographic studies of the armed forces.

There are two interrelated reasons for the dearth of such studies. Anthropological studies of violence tend to focus on the victims' perspectives, often ignoring the perpetrators. Hence, ethnographers tend to study the underdog and the marginal, leaving the study of elites and the mainstream (including the military) to others, even though the study of elites provides insight into topics such as power, hierarchy, leadership, authority, and the construction of sociocultural identities. Thus, with rare

exceptions, anthropologists have for a long time usually ceded the study of the armed forces to sociologists, political scientists, and psychologists. It should be mentioned that military-related subfields in sociology and political science do not constitute very large fields either, leaving research gaps in these disciplines as well.

In choosing to research the military and militarization, anthropologists enter a politically charged area. Whereas many topics anthropology deals with are subject to a host of preconceptions, the military is arguably one of the most loaded, and is seen by many (if not most) anthropologists as morally tainted and therefore not worthy of anthropological research. But if we are to understand violence, it seems crucial to study both victims and perpetrators since violence is interactional (Tomforde 2017, p. 153 f.). The majority of American anthropologists, situated at the very heart of global academe, have viewed the US military in terms of the Vietnam War and, since 9/11, through the lens of the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. Consequently, armed forces have often been regarded as somehow not “worthy” of anthropological research, and anthropologists linked to the military have sometimes been seen as “polluted” (Ben-Ari 2011; Rubinstein 2012). Indeed, because of the pervasive belief in the discipline that war is pathological and because of a professional value orientation that opposes armed aggression, key cultural questions about conflict and the armed forces have gone unanswered.

This situation started to change at the end of the Cold War and the major transformations this period brought about. New kinds of studies began to emerge: Bickford’s (2011) ethnography of the effects of Germany’s reunification on the lives and identities of former East German officers, Ben-Ari’s (1998) analysis of an Israeli infantry battalion, Moelker and Schut’s “kinetic ethnography” of Dutch veteran bikers, Sztankai’s action anthropological study of the Hungarian Defence Forces (2014), and Tomforde’s (2009) research on changing German military cultures in peace operations. Especially with the new kind of warfare, combining older and newer forms, and variously termed “asymmetrical wars,” “hybrid wars,” “post-modern wars,” or simply the “New Wars,” anthropological studies of the armed forces developed rapidly.

While the Global South experienced the lion’s share of these wars, the new wars have also occurred on the doorstep of Europe and tore the Balkans apart. Violence that had previously been limited to “out there” has come “home,” as the areas traditionally studied by anthropologists became connected to anthropologists’ own home countries in new ways. Troops were deployed abroad in multinational formations, for example, and civilian urban spaces were transformed into battlespaces involving militaries and other security forces (Fosher 2009; Gustavsen and Haaland 2019).

Yet despite more anthropologists researching militaries globally, the tones (theoretical and political) tend to be set by scholars in US-based institutions. These scholars continue to influence what is considered appropriate or legitimate anthropological lines of inquiry, indeed to shape disciplinary norms about what is worthy of study (Ben-Ari 2016). In this sense, American military anthropology has been a font of stimulating dialogue but at times also a limiting force with its heavy concern (sometimes fixation) with the way our discipline has been “subtly moulded by the

priorities of national security state and the exigencies of other people's wars," a view that has been projected by default onto the global community of military anthropologists (Gusterson 2007, p. 156). Thus, it is important to understand that US-based scholars focus almost exclusively on the USA and its presence abroad, and they often generalize from that society's experience to the whole world (McFate 2019).

It is against this background that one must understand how often-acrimonious discussions in the USA have centered on the help anthropologists have given their armed forces in zones of conflict (Gusterson 2007). These debates arose after anthropologists (among other social scientists) were actively recruited into military frameworks deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq (Gusterson 2007; Gonzalez 2004; Kelly and Jauregui 2010; Lucas 2009; McFate and Laurence 2015). One outcome of these controversies was the negative labelling of any anthropologists working for the military, even in educational institutions (Fosher 2011; McNamara and Rubinstein 2011; Price 2011). With these controversies in mind, this chapter explicitly goes beyond the American case.

Key Themes of Research

In her review of the development of warfare at the turn of the century, Simons (1999) suggested that two subjects were still unexplored, the processes of militarization and the military establishments of the industrial democracies. This gap has not only been continuously filled since that time but supplemented greatly by other topics of research. In what follows, we chart out six key themes that comprise the field of the anthropology of the military. We have used two criteria for this choice: first, these themes are by far the most numerous in terms of scholarly interests and publications; and second, taken together they offer a comprehensive introduction to the variety of subjects that anthropologists study.

Militarization and Militarism

A central concern for military anthropologists is processes of militarization through which institutions of civilian society are configured in the preparation for and the conduct of war. Militarization is simultaneously a discursive process involving a shift in societal beliefs and values in ways necessary to legitimate the use of force, the organization of large standing armies, and the higher taxes or tribute used to pay for them (Lutz 2002, p. 723). In addition, mobilization of civilian institutions for war is linked to the creation of hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality. It is expressed in both public spaces and popular culture. Anthropology is methodologically well suited to capture the manifestations of militarization due to anthropologists' unique empirical methods, which go beyond and add to the institutional approaches of other disciplines.

Accordingly, anthropologists have focused on three main areas in the study of militarization and militarism. The first is its everydayness: the taken-for-granted

nature of militarized ways of thinking and how societies and groups are organized. Such studies illuminate the ways in which “things military” (e.g., institutions, people, values, symbols, or objects) are entangled with “things civilian” (e.g., people, social life, or popular culture; Sørensen and Ben-Ari 2019). Some of phenomena studied in this manner include popular cultural products in Japan (Ben-Ari 2019), material products, such as toys and movies in the USA (Lutz 2001, 2002), and the role of the Turkish armed forces in the country’s education system (Altınay 2004). As these studies suggest, anthropology seeks not only to address the classic issues of how societies affect the military, but to go beyond a focus on states and militaries, law, and politics. A second, closely related area of study has been public ceremonies and performances. Investigations by Ben-Ari and Frühstück (2003) and by Sørensen and Pedersen (2012) illuminate how civilians are exposed to the military as audiences at public events that demonstrate military capacities or in ceremonial celebrations of the warrior-hero.

The third area of the study of militarization that has received quite a bit of attention focuses on dissent and resistance, both to militarization in general and to the placement of military bases close to local communities (Fitz-Henry 2015; Inoue 2007; Lutz 2009; McCaffrey 2002; Schober 2016; Vine 2019). Agyekum (2019) challenges such analyses by arguing for “positive militarization,” where the armed forces use their resources and efficacious competences to support societies during crises by dispensing and managing relief. Whether the military’s role in operations other than war is best perceived as an example of increasing “securitization” of non-military areas (Fosher 2009) or is a “civilizing” (or better “civilianizing”) of the military, as Agyekum contends, can only be answered empirically. Sørensen and Ben-Ari (2019) delve deeper into the many forms of military-civilian entanglements and try to better comprehend processes of militarization of the civilian domains as well as the civilization of the military. In any case, it is important to consider how militaries’ benign activities are tied to their potential for violence and wide processes of militarization.

Fieldwork

For anthropologists, who are used to studying various marginal others, the study of the armed forces – a central societal institution – raises a number of issues. The first is gaining access to the armed forces, given the secrecy surrounding national security. While some anthropologists have gained full access to military organizations (Ben-Ari 1998; Simons 1997; Tomforde 2016), others find that security concerns have limited them to short-term fieldwork or to interviews or post-deployment data (Pedersen 2019). The second issue is related to the risks, dangers, and implications of conducting fieldwork under fire (Ben-Ari 1998; Nordstrom and Robben 1996). Ethnographic work with military units in times of armed conflict is not unlike studies undertaken in countries marked by violence and disorder. The third concern surrounds the danger of researchers being seduced by high-ranking informants in the military. These elites may see talking to researchers as part of wider

attempts to create positive views of the armed forces and of themselves (Castro 2013; Robben 1996). The fourth issue concerns inevitable questions about the political and ethical positioning of researchers studying the armed forces (Weber 2016). The main challenges here, as Mohr and his associates (2019) argue, is finding the right critical distance – a mix of critique and empathy – from the studied subjects. Finally, the fifth topic deals with peace operations and all the stakeholders involved, including the military. Some anthropologists call for an ethnographic peace research (EPR) agenda to achieve a much-needed empirical turn within interdisciplinary peace research and more participatory approaches to peace on all levels.

Military Organization and Dynamics

The study of the military as an organization is a rapidly growing area that focuses on socialization into military life and the culture of specific units (Katz 1990; Moore 2004), training centered on violence (Samimian-Darash 2013), and multinational peacekeeping exercises. Anthropologists have also penned full-fledge ethnographies of units (Ben-Ari 1998; Danielsen 2015; Irwin 2002; Simons 1997; Winslow 1997) and military bases (Hawkins 2001). Yet other analyses have focused on military cultures, such as those of the U.S. Marines (Holmes-Eber 2014) and the U.S. National Guard (Vest 2013), the British military (Kirke 2009), the Dutch forces (Sion 2004), and the German military in peace operations (Tomforde 2009). An important addition, especially given the methodological difficulties mentioned above, are studies of the actual experience of armed conflict (Bar and Ben-Ari 2005; Ben-Ari et al. 2010; Guber 2016; Pedersen 2019; Tomforde 2016) and of military occupation (Ben-Ari 1989; Ben-Ari 1998; Grassiani 2013). Such studies have focused on the particular character of the armed forces as specialists in armed violence to explore the kinds of folk and professional models internalized by soldiers, the learning of institutional rules and embodied practices of soldiering, and the experiences of using violence on or withstanding violence from others.

With the deployment of forces around the world during the past three decades, the study of multinational military formations has also developed significantly. The body of work in this field includes Rubinstein's (2003) exploration of the differing orientations to force and to peacekeeping that characterizes different militaries, the way different armed forces come to cooperate (Elron et al. 1999), and the place of women in peacekeeping (Sion 2009). From a different direction, some anthropologists have charted out global military connections, such as Gill's (2004) study of the training of other countries' troops in American military schools, Grassiani's (2019) exploration of retired Israeli military officers establishing security firms in Kenya, and Uesugi's (2019) analysis of the struggle of former Gurkha soldiers to obtain British citizenship.

Gender and Sexual Orientation

The study of gender has seen an explosive growth in the social sciences generally. Research is devoted to the gendered nature of militaries (Altinay 2004; Duncanson 2013; Kilshaw 2009). Indeed, given the historical connection between manhood and war, it is not surprising that the military is an excellent site through which to explore masculinities. Examples of such studies include warrior-masculine identities (Winslow 1999), the masculine roles of female soldiers (Sasson-Levy 2003), peacekeeping and masculinity (Sion 2005), contested masculinities among Dutch soldiers after Srebrenica, and masculinities and the influence of the media and narratives of war (Cockburn and Zarkov 2002). Other anthropological studies deal with the multiple roles and challenges women face in the military and topics such as feminist militarism, positions of power of female soldiers in Israel's military (Hauser 2011), the influence of female soldiers in the transformation of the Argentine army (Bàdaro 2015), and the intersections of gender and power among women veterans (Cheney et al. 2013). A small number of anthropological studies has tackled issues related to homosexuality (Kaplan and Ben-Ari 2000) and trans-soldiers (Yi and Gitzen 2018).

Most of the studies on female soldiers and gender relations in the military discuss issues such as gender discrimination and the opportunities for agency available to women in the armed forces. When not restricted by masculine norms, women tend to be more open to values from different dimensions of their identities than their male peers. The agency of female soldiers does not usually resist or challenge institutional norms and structures associated with military masculinity. Instead, this agency is found in the different forms of individuality that female soldiers bring into the military through their everyday practices, ideas, conceptions, and behavioral patterns. In this way, they instigate (largely unintentionally) long-term organizational change within the military and help to redefine interactions between the armed forces and society at large.

Families, Communities, and Veterans

An area well studied by anthropologists are the relations between the military and communities and families. One set of issues that has received special attention is ethnographic studies of the communities in and around army bases in the USA or abroad (Hawkins 2001; Lutz 2001; MacLeish 2013; Tanaka 2019). These studies explore the formal and informal ties among the services offered by the military, local commercial and economic relations, or, as stated above, resistances to these ties. A more recent addition are investigations of the relations between soldiers and their families or between the military as an institution and the families of soldiers (Heiselberg 2017; Sørensen 2015; Tomforde 2014). Here the focus has been on family support mechanisms and the armed forces' ways to mobilize families to help soldiers fulfill their roles.

Many studies of veterans focus on combat-related injuries and suffering. Anthropologists are more interested in the social positioning (both contestable and

changeable) of veterans and their experiences. In this vein, anthropological investigations address the social construction of public images of “the veteran” (Sørensen 2015) and how ex-soldiers are invariably linked to armed violence (as heroes or victims), or to the military as a symbol embodying the national collective.

Medical Anthropology

In the field of medical anthropology, almost all contemporary work is devoted to the aftermath of violent encounters. As Hautzinger and Scandlyn (2014) argue, post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, and depression have been identified as the signature injuries of post-9/11 wars, and medical anthropologists have been exploring this field. Using ethnographic studies, anthropologists have often challenged psychiatric approaches by explaining the social dimensions of these disorders (Finley 2011; Kilshaw 2009; Messinger 2013). While contemporary wars are marked by fewer casualties than past ones, the use of improvised explosive devices means that many veterans need medical interventions and sometimes amputation. For many former soldiers, the body, which is central to the masculine warriorhood, has become the source of emasculation (Wool 2015; Wool and Messinger 2012). Other, less pathological, studies in medical anthropology include research on post-deployment reintegration of US troops and Linford-Steinfeld’s (2003) study of weight gain among US naval personnel.

Teaching Cultural Competence

Anthropologists have been hired to work in the educational institutions of armed forces for many decades now. The work they carry out involves a variety of overlapping roles. The first is simply to teach anthropology (Fujimura 2003). The second is teaching cultural awareness and intercultural competencies. While Gallagher (2017) cautions that being part of such institutions invites various political and ethical problems, today’s militaries need to prepare servicemembers for their multifaceted roles in missions abroad. Resolving today’s conflicts, which are typically based on complex ethnic, religious, economic, and political dynamics, requires more than military strength and technology. Today’s soldiers must also have various so-called soft-skills. In anglophone countries, training in this field is largely in language and “cultural intelligence” suited to interactions in various sociocultural settings. However, the focus on language has proven to be misdirected because areas of military operations change constantly, and language training offers only indirect help in understanding other cultures. In addition, the term “cultural intelligence” is problematic because it suggests that such knowledge belongs to the intelligence field and that it is not everyone’s responsibility to act in culturally appropriate ways in countries in which troops are deployed (Holmes-Eber et al. 2009; Parenteau 2020).

In the European context, cultural awareness and intercultural competencies are soft skills that military leaders at all levels need to succeed in difficult sociocultural

situations. Among the pedagogical challenges associated with developing such competencies are military students lack of openness toward social scientific concepts. Enstad's and Holmes-Eber (2020) analyzed how military cultural competence is developed in the military and the best didactic models for developing culturally reflective skills in military leaders. Research shows that mission experiences such as those from Afghanistan constitute an important impetus for change and for a structured intercultural lesson-learned process (Masson and Moelker 2020; Tomforde 2020).

Conclusion

Since the end of the Cold War, military anthropology has become an active field, engaging scholars from all over the world in researching the armed forces in many countries. Although a smaller subdiscipline than military sociology, military anthropology offers a unique perspective on “things military.” Anthropologists’ main contribution to understanding military organizations and their activities lies in providing rich, holistic, ethnographic data, and in analyzing the links between culture, structure, and action. Moreover, anthropological work illuminates how organization and social dynamics are related to, and embedded within, larger cultural and social structures and dynamics. The topics studied by anthropologists include sociocultural dimensions and dynamics of state organizations, the cultural transformation of armed forces, conditions leading to armed conflicts and peace, the multifaceted nature of violence and its varied impact on human beings, processes of militarization and civilianization, civil-military entanglements, contested gender roles and masculinity, and dimensions of multinational and cross-cultural encounters and settings.

Anthropological research highlights that things military are always interpreted, given meaning, and processed in manifold ways by all people involved, such as servicemembers, adversaries, and other stakeholders. Thus, experiences and interpretations of war, conflict, violence, and stabilization processes are always embedded in broader symbolic contexts and affect military organizations and societies. Looking at the future of the discipline’s engagement with “things military,” we foresee that accompanying a continued interest in the themes we have considered here, further developments based on the broader theoretical advances of anthropology.

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