

The Value of Social Science Research in Military Operations

The recent “Mike Furlong” spy ring scandal and resulting DoD investigation into his operations and the use of PSYOP and IO has yet again highlighted the controversy that surrounds the use of social science research to support military operations.

However, unlike the American Anthropology Association’s recent very public criticism of the use of anthropology by the US Army’s Human Terrain System program, this latest scandal is something of a DoD own goal. It would seem that Mr. Furlong and his company convinced General McKiernan, the then ISAF commander, to fund, to the tune of \$22 million no less, a cultural research project intended, at least as far as the General was concerned, to improve the Coalition’s very limited understanding of the Afghan population. In reality, according to the New York Times, as much as \$15 million of this budget was siphoned off to fund operations intended to locate and kill Taliban and AQ operatives, a claim that Mr. Furlong denies.

Of course the opponents of the use of social science research in military operations and, specifically the Human Terrain System, did not view this apparent misuse of DoD funds by Mr. Furlong as simply a case of possible fraud against our Government. Rather they immediately saw their ethical opposition to the military’s use of social science research as vindicated.

According to these naysayers, when working for the military, one simply cannot protect the anonymity of respondents and interviewees, because any socio-cultural insights collected by the military will always end up being used for targeting. Ergo, professions such as anthropology should simply not get involved in operationally focused socio-cultural research projects.

The American Anthropology Association actually goes much further in its opposition to programs like HTS. While disingenuously claiming it is happy to support the DoD, under certain restricted circumstances, in reality the AAA has made it clear that any member who decides to join a social science based program that is used to support military operations, will likely be ostracized by their profession and faces the barely disguised threat of being unable to pursue a career in academia, once the dye has been cast. Several of these dedicated anthropologists who work for the Army and for my own company, Glevum Associates, doing invaluable service for our country in Iraq and Afghanistan, are greatly concerned that the thinly veiled threats of the AAA will blight their careers once they return home.

In light of recent events; the longstanding opposition of some academics and bloggers to the use of social science research in military operations, and frankly the potential for the misuse, by the military and others, of socio-cultural insights for targeting purposes, an informed and balanced debate is clearly needed. A debate that explains why the use of social science research in support of the military is

needed; which explains the ethical and methodological concerns of some academics; and which results in the development of a pragmatic way ahead.

I would like to contribute to that debate today by making a passionate case, not use for the use of socio-cultural research in support of military operations, but rather for the significant expansion of this use. While at the same timing offering a warning to the military not to misuse what I believe to be war-winning capability.

Given the emotions that have sometimes surrounded this debate, I feel that it is important to anchor the debate with the why question. Before one can consider whether the use of the social science in conflict is appropriate or not, we need to begin by deciding why it is actually needed. Specifically we need to answer the question, “Why does the US Military, when engaged in counter insurgency operations need socio cultural understanding in the first place”?

In my view the answer to that question is marked by the graves of hundreds if not thousands of American and allied heroes who have killed unnecessarily, in operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, because for too long we did not know how to fight and win the counter insurgency battle. We did not know or at a minimum accept that at its core the counter insurgency fight is a struggle for influence with our enemies. An ideological and physical struggle for sufficient influence with the local population to persuade them that it is in their best interests to support their Government and reject the arguments, enticements and bullying of the enemy.

This is a battle our enemies have always known is a struggle for the hearts and minds of the Afghan and Iraqi populations. Yet for too long we saw it as a battle of attrition, focused on killing and arresting bad guys not protecting the local population.

Our enemy knew, while we failed to understand, that we are both engaged in a battle for influence that can only be won if one side or the other intimately understands the people whose support, cooperation or at least acquiescence we are both trying to secure. Then uses that understanding to develop an effective campaign based on ideas, inducements and intimidation that persuades a growing percentage of the contested audience to support their cause through a combination of shared ideas, bribery and/or fear

Generals like Petraeus, Chiarelli and Ordinaro in Iraq and McKiernan, McChrystal and Flynn in Afghanistan have come to appreciate; and operational experience in Iraq and Afghanistan has vividly demonstrated; that in order to defeat an insurgent threat, it is critically important to understand intimately the local population. I would add that General Petraeus, who rightly gets much praise, and General Chiarelli, who does not, both understood the population-centric focus of COIN from the outset. Both focused on winning influence with the population when they command the 82 AB and 1st Cavalry divisions in Iraq in 2003. But for too long they were in the minority.

What these Generals knew from day one and what most other Generals have learnt since is that we must fight for the hearts and minds of the Iraqi and Afghan populations because within these contested populations, the terrorist or insurgent network hides, recruits, trains, prepares and attacks. Even when the enemy is composed primarily of so-called “foreign fighters”, this adversary must still find sanctuary, funds, recruits, resources and intelligence from the local population. They can remain hidden from us, for extended periods, simply by hiding in plain sight; well known to elements of the local population, who are unwilling or unable to challenge their presence. These groups both exploit and are heavily influenced by dynamic cultural and social factors that can increase population support for their cause and the effectiveness of their operations or conversely lead to their degradation and eventual defeat.

This enemy is acutely aware that they are fighting for the support of the population, some call it “hearts and minds”, and that their operations are critically impacted by changes in social dynamics, which they seek to shape to their own advantage often through a combination of ideas, inducements and intimidation. All too often in such operations, we have limited visibility of their activities because of our inability to understand the human terrain or systematically engage “alien” cultures and societies.

Our enemies have some significant advantages in this struggle for influence. They typically share a similar cultural and ethnic background with the population in

which they hide and operate. This does not guarantee that they will not fall foul of cultural social norms, as AQ eventually did in Iraq, by trying to usurp the tribal authority of Sunni leaders and crudely trying to exploit Sunni cultural norms. However cultural, religious and ethical similarities are still a significant advantage, especially for the Afghan Taliban.

At a minimum these similarities provide the insurgent with message authority for some audiences. They can also, instinctively and by design, tap into shared narratives and a common faith, albeit one that they have significantly distorted. They also understand, often share and can easily manipulate preexisting grievances, enmities and hatreds and use these emotions to maintain a community support base. Most importantly, they can exploit ethnic and tribal loyalties, traditional and religious leadership, and formal and informal legal systems to exert and maintain their control or those who fear and resent outside intrusions and the impact of modernity.

These groups can also deploy a compelling argument that appeals to key segments of the population. For example, both the Islamist and nationalist extremist groups we have battled in cities of Iraq and the mountains and valleys of Afghanistan, argue that support for them will lead to the redress of community grievances, restoration of honor and respect, protection of traditions, community and faith, revenge for real and perceived injustice and casualties, purification of Islam and/or the return of Muslim or ethnic power and prosperity. Compelling arguments to the

disenfranchised, angry, huddled masses. Arguments used by all politicians to get elected. Which is why their promises to improve our quality of life, repeal unpopular legislation, maintain our traditions and protect our communities can so often persuade us to vote for change at elections.

These insurgent groups also expertly use both traditional communications means and modern multimedia, combined with deadly attacks; Johanas Most called these attacks “terrorism of the deed”; in order to extend their influence, export their ideology, publicize their actions, undermine enemy morale and reduce confidence in a Government, thereby enhancing their image, reputation and credibility.

Perhaps most importantly of all, they expertly exploit intimidation tactics and violence to bolster or supplement their arguments and inducements. In Ireland, it included summary execution, tar and feathering, and kneecapping; in Afghanistan it is night letters, mutilation and beheadings. Similar tactics designed to achieve the same effect – to cow even a supportive population into accepting them and rejecting their Government and us.

If we are to challenge these terrorist and insurgent networks, defeat this insidious threat, and enhance the influence and effectiveness of the Governments and communities we support, our soldiers and diplomats must intimately understand the Human Terrain they operate in and contest with this enemy. Without this vital socio-cultural knowledge our diplomats will struggle to establish and extend good

governance. The international community will fail to implement development programs that actually address community needs and wants, thereby securing us and the supported government credibility and time. And our military will be starved of the intelligence it needs to protect the population from the insurgents while avoiding the use of excessive force and collateral damage.

For the military, successful counter insurgency is quite simply predicated on an intimate understanding the local population. One only has to consider some of the key elements of successful COIN to immediately see why the effectively and timely use social science research and analysis is so vital.

How can one have a population-centric strategy, such as the one General McChrystal advocates for Afghanistan, if one does not understand and know how to engage that population. Determine who they are, who the key influencers are, how they view their Government, the enemy, each other and us, and what they need and want.

History has taught us that successfully COIN strategy requires its exponents to secure legitimacy with the local population for both the intervention force and the supported Government. How can one secure legitimacy, if one cannot determine what and who the population believes to be legitimate and why? Experience in places as diverse as Vietnam, and some might argue Afghanistan, demonstrates what happens when the United States attempts to bolster support for a Government and actions deemed illegitimate by a growing and key segment of the population.

In the COIN fight one must provide security to the population so that good governance can spread, reconstruction can begin and so that the people can go about their daily lives in safety. Without socio-cultural knowledge how can one secure the population using the right type and amount of force in a way that encourages the community to support us, and their Government, rather than fear us. Emotions this enemy exploits so successfully, so as to drive a wedge between contested populations and ourselves. The Afghans for example see security far differently than many in ISAF and as a result a disconnect exists that our enemy exploits. While we explore the possibility of developing tribal militias because we see the Afghan Army as inadequate, they overwhelmingly see security as a combination of themselves, at the village level, and the ANA and ANP, and they do not want the emergence of new war lords, a disconnect that has only now become apparent from social science research.

Good COIN strategy also necessitates the development of, and effective support for, indigenous security forces to include both the Army and Police. Socio cultural knowledge is crucial in such an endeavor, if one is to raise or expand a security force that can be effective and trusted by the local population. One could argue that a failure to understand Afghan society and the challenges one faces in building a competent and honest Afghan police force is a primary reason why the Afghan Police are so ineffective and corrupt, despite the international community spending billions of dollars on their training.

Perhaps most importantly, a successful COIN strategy must be based on the minimum use of force. Yet without effective engagement with, and support from the local population, one can become increasingly isolated from the population, depriving the military of the critical information that allows to conduct precisely targeted operations. Lacking such intelligence, a military is usually forced into the type of mass random cordon and search operations and that are so despised by the Irish, Iraqis and Afghans alike. And collateral damage becomes increasingly likely, which is a primary reason why support for an insurgency increases, in communities as diverse as the catholic Irish – think Bloody Sunday, and the Pashtun.

On a more human level without socio cultural knowledge and understanding many more Americans and local civilians will die. More jammers and better armor, and blunt physical force, which has killed so many innocent civilians, no matter how hard we have tried to avoid collateral damage, is not the best way to protect our troops or the local population. Rather it is intelligence willing provided by an increasingly supportive population. Better still winning the battle for influence with our enemies, ultimately leads to the supported population and Government physically confronting the insurgent or terrorist themselves, which almost always leads to the defeat or at least reasonably peaceful reconciliation with this enemy.

Indeed even securing the peace requires a deep understanding of both the population and our enemy. Moshe Dihan, the Israeli leader once said that if you

want peace you must talk to your enemies not your friends. Such dialogue and subsequent negotiations can only take place if one understands ones enemy and if one is aware of, and takes full account of, how such talks will be perceived by the population, key influencers and involved third parties.

It should be obvious therefore that our diplomats and soldiers must have access to timely and accurate multidisciplinary social science and market research to enable them to know how and where to defeat the insurgent or terrorist adversary. They must also have this socio-cultural understanding in order to work with, rather than against the population, addressing each community's concerns, grievances, needs and wants, while respecting their traditions and beliefs and helping to build trust and confidence in the supported Government.

The military cannot do this for themselves. Notwithstanding Major General Flynn's recent withering and justified critique of the US Intelligence community and its undue focus on finding and killing the bad guys, even the US intelligence community is not the ideal source of much of the socio-cultural data and the insights we need. To be fair, they could collect some of this type of data and do effective analysis but the very fact that this work is done by an intelligence agency then precludes its wide dissemination at the unclassified level.

To understand fully, the complexities of a foreign society and culture, one must first conduct comprehensive, systematic, timely, methodological sound and ethically

appropriate multidisciplinary social science research and analysis in order to truly understand a population. This means getting into the field and doing primary research, exploiting all available open sources and not relying on occasional visits and highly anecdotal evidence collected from a few dozen interviews, usually conducted through an interpreter. This is because if one makes sweeping generalizations about a country and its people, based on superficial or extrapolated learning, it can have deadly consequences at the tactical level and undermine national objectives at the strategic level.

Critical socio-cultural factors that must be fully understood include but are not limited to ethnicity, tribal and community structures, social status, education, gender, affluence, age, politics, sources of power and authority, belief systems, personal preferences, affiliations, inter and intra-community relationships, macro and micro economics, industry, infrastructure and business, and of course justice, security and the insurgency. We must understand the history of the society that we have engaged because for many they are defined by their history. This analysis must focus not just on the history books but also the myths and half-truths that define almost everyone's understanding of past events. We absolutely need to understand each community's religious faith, its tenets and practices. Not simply to avoid giving offence but also to understand how our ideologically motivated enemies exploit and distort this faith to gain recruits and justify their actions.

We need to understand the frictions and factions that exist in most societies to include our own. Issues of faith, politics, resources and property can have a profound impact on intra and inter community relations and our efforts to engage different often-competing factions. Without knowing the lay of the land it is all too easy to appease one community or leader only to alienate another. Worse still one can all too easily become a protagonist in a long-standing feud or blamed for the shortcomings and failures of another. For example not understanding the extent to which Afghans distrust their Government, while at the same time actively supporting it, suggests to an increasingly number of Afghans that we actually support and even encourage the endemic Government corruption that blights their daily lives and is a god send to the Taliban propagandists.

Just as important is our ability, or currently inability, to fully understand psychological factors such as human emotions and personality types, and how these can be altered by events, information, inducements and threats.

Armed, as the US Army's COIN manual identifies, with an intimate understanding of cultural, society, power and interests our soldiers and diplomats can implement effective programs and operations that protect themselves and the population and drive a wedge between the population and the insurgents. Without this essential socio cultural understanding our soldiers and diplomats stand exposed and isolated and almost certainly bound to fail.

To actually deny then, this key Human Terrain understanding to our military and diplomats on ideological grounds is in my view akin to denying our troops the body armor they wear or the rifles they carry. Taking such a position will kill more soldiers and it will put the lives of the supported population at huge risk, not to mention likely handing victory to their and our enemies. No amount of hand wringing by the likes of the AAA can hide the fact that opposition to the use of social science research analysis in support of military operations is ethically, morally, and professionally wrong.

Equally it is ludicrous to suggest that one can only use such research if the respondent is made fully aware of the sponsors of the research. This is not a study of the mating habits of a Borneo tribe, conducted in a benign situation where the worse that can happen to the researcher is a bout of dysentery. This research is conducted in places where to get caught can mean certain and painful death.

We need to systematically interview statistically reliable samples of the contest population and we need to conduct countless depth interviews and focus groups. We need to objectively observe behaviors and activities in all contest communities. We need to engage indigenous experts from all segments of society and not have to rely on experts sitting in the United States whose connections and insights are limited at best. And we must do this in the midst of a bloody conflict against a ruthless enemy who will think nothing of beheading an Afghan simply for having the number of a Government official on his cell phone. Such research also has to be

done in logistically inhospitable and isolated places where researchers must travel by car bus and on foot to reach remote and dangerous areas.

It would therefore be insane for researchers themselves to be informed of the sponsor of such research let alone the persons they are interviewing. One simply cannot tell either party that he or she is conducting or participating in a survey for the US military or Government. As well as putting both the researcher and interviewees lives at risk, such acknowledgment also injects bias as the respondent, when caught in the middle of a war, is often inclined to say whatever they think the sponsor or the insurgent wants them to say.

The best solution to this ethical dilemma is simple. Withhold the identity of the sponsor and purpose of the research for the greater good of the local population and U.S. Forces. Such an approach is ethical because it protects the researcher and interviewee and it is far more likely to elicit reasonably honest and objective responses, which can then be used to protect the population using minimum force. This pragmatic approach is well understood by some, including the American Association of Public Opinion Researchers, which is considering revising its ethical code to protect interviewers and it looks like the new code will be accepted by the membership.

A key element of this revised code reads as follows:

“Participation in surveys is voluntary, except for the decennial census and a few other government surveys as specified by law. We shall provide all persons selected for inclusion with a description of the survey sufficient to permit them to make an informed and free decision about their participation. ***We shall disclose the survey’s sponsorship and purpose, unless this disclosure could substantially bias responses or endanger interviewers.***

It is this type of pragmatic approach that I can only hope that members of the AAA and other social scientists will adopt. Afghans, ordinary Americans and our military, which strives to protect both, do not live in academic ivory towers. They live in a very real world fraught with danger. In order to defeat the insurgent and terrorist threat, our military and diplomats and the foreign Governments they support, must have access to the full range of social science researcher and analysis. To deny them this is to deny them the means to protect themselves and the peoples they engage and support.

Now that said, this endorsement of the use of social science research in military operations is not a blank check for the military. They cannot abuse and thereby discredit these techniques by using social science research for targeting purposes or even to direct development operations, if by doing so they compromise the safety of either researchers or respondents. This is simply too vital an asset to be used for such short term and fleeting gain.

Sadly efforts to develop the necessary level of understanding and conduct of effective social network analysis have for the most part, been fragmented, and undermined by multiple obstacles human and bureaucratic. In addition to outright opposition to the use of social science research and analysis in support of military operations other problems proliferate.

Currently too much store is still placed in single research methodology solutions such as polling, when all sources of research should be used to develop a comprehensive visualization of the population. Typically military commands see polling as a panacea that will answer all of their human terrain questions. They tend to develop unwieldy and culturally inappropriate instruments with 60 or more questions and multiple variables and as a result must wait many weeks and even months to get answer that could be provide more quickly, reliably and cheaply via other means. When national assessments have been based on single intelligence sources we have made very poor decisions or missed critical and sometimes obvious clues. Similarly relying on a single source for cultural research, polling, where one has already predetermined the questions and selected the answers, perhaps wrongly, is also a recipe for similar and sometimes catastrophic mistakes.

Now that it has been realized that social cultural or human factors are critical to successful counter insurgency operations, we have seen the emergence of multiple uncoordinated programs, all trying to answer the same questions, employing

hundreds of analysts, academics and contractors all lacking the same thing – data – on the ground, honest to goodness, “real world” data.

Too much of this essential work, and the limited amount of research being undertaken to support it, is being outsourced to those who have little or no expertise or experience in conducting methodologically and ethically balanced social science research and analysis. This is a mistake. One would never select the technically acceptable lowest bid plumber, with no credentials or relevant past performance. Why then would we select organizations and companies to do vital socio-cultural research who have track record, no in-country capabilities and all too often no ethics.

Which brings us back to the so-called “Furlong” affair. It should have been obvious that this company was not qualified to do the type of social science research that would have provided ISAF with the type of cultural and societal insights they desired. We simply cannot afford to continue to repeat such mistakes.

Our diplomats and soldiers need comprehensive, timely and reliable multidisciplinary research undertaken by experienced organizations with a proven track record, a methodologically sound approach, and appropriate ethical standards. The knowledge these entities can provide is of incalculable value in the COIN fight and will save the lives of Americans, Afghans Iraqis alike, while helping to defeat our mutual adversaries.

Some segments of our academic community should come out of their ivory towers and help their colleagues in the field to provide our military with the best answers they can while protecting the methodological integrity and even more importantly the lives of researchers and respondents.

Thank you ladies and gentleman that concludes my presentation, I will now take questions.