INTRODUCTION: SPECIAL ISSUE ON THE ETHICS OF ANTHROPOLOGY IN EMERGENCIES

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Introduction

West Africa's Ebola virus epidemic (December 2013 to January 2016) thrust anthropology into the public eye. It is hard to think of a recent moment when anthropology as a profession has had a higher profile. Anthropologists have been active in the Ebola response, both as policy commentators (Sridhar and Clinton 2014; Abramowitz 2014) and frontline responders (Bedford 2015). On the ground, anthropologists worked alongside other public health professionals to trace patient contacts, manage burial practices and guide both the medical responders on the social dimensions of the outbreak and the general population on the behaviours of the virus and its clinicians (Bedford ibid.).

These events have given anthropology coherence in the popular imagination—a public image. Now, when asked the perennial question, 'Just what is it anthropologists *do*?' we can point to the headline news. Media sensationalism aside, the work of anthropologists in the Ebola epidemic has had a practical, visible impact. More than adding flare to the discipline's public credentials, these events have catalysed discussion on the future of the profession itself (Biruk 2015; Leach 2015; Ravelo 2015).

The Ebola response is just one example of anthropology practised in times of acute crisis. There are many actual and potential roles for anthropology in emergencies. Outside the media spotlight, ethnographers and anthropologists can be found in epidemics, mass displacements and conflict zones (Ravelo 2015; Geissler 2013; Harrigan 2011, 2012; Wood 2006); recent debates have focused on potential future engagements for anthropology (Leach 2015). With a higher profile for the discipline and the number of anthropology graduates on the rise, anthropology's engagement with acute crisis seems set to increase.

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Yet engagement brings consequences; when anthropologists enter emergencies they (and their institutions) encounter new risks. Many of the issues that arise are centrally questions of ethics: the 'who, how, where and why' of research in fraught environments. In this introduction we attempt to outline some of these issues and give a short background on anthropology in situations of acute human crises, which we refer to as 'complex emergencies'.[2] Each subsequent article in this special issue examines some aspect of the nature and ethics of fieldwork in complex emergencies.

The materials presented in this issue are the product of a recent workshop on the subject of anthropology in complex emergencies. Entitled *Fieldwork Ethics in Crisis: Practical Considerations for Ethnographic Research in Complex Emergencies*, the authors convened the workshop in the summer of 2015 with the support of the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography (SAME) and Wolfson College, both of the University of Oxford. The event brought together anthropologists and emergency practitioners to discuss the past, present and future of anthropological engagement in complex emergencies. While the presenters and their topics formed a diverse group, they were united by field experiences, each presenter having grappled with the ethical complexities of crisis in their own fieldwork. This special issue presents, in expanded form, some of the papers from that day.

A brief introduction to anthropology in emergencies

Anthropology has a history of engagement with crisis and emergency; some of the twentieth century's most prominent anthropologists were concerned with understanding how people deal

[2] While the term 'complex emergency' most often refers to armed conflict, here we broaden it to encompass public health emergencies and natural disasters, particularly when they unfold in remote, violent or resource-poor environments. As David Keen notes, the term is imperfect, but better than the alternatives: '"complex emergency" draws attention to complexity and embodies a useful degree of vagueness about the nature of a violent conflict' (Keen 2008: 1). While we use the term partly as convenient shorthand, it also draws attention to the social and anthropogenic nature of crisis. Put simply, 'there is no such thing as a natural disaster' (Smith 2006; Squires 2006); the anthropogenic factors that underlie mass casualty disasters, such as over-crowding, under-nutrition, poorly-resourced health systems, inadequate public infrastructure, and dysfunctional or unresponsive governments, are social and political phenomena (Bankoff 2003: 152-5; Smith 2006; Squires 2006). According to Keen (*op cit.*) these social dysfunctions serve a function: inequity, almost by definition, has beneficiaries. A related perspective argues that all human emergencies are underpinned by structural violence (Farmer 2009: 261). Ultimately, the very designation of a set of phenomena as an 'emergency' is itself a social act and a collective invocation to serve moral and political ends (Calhoun 2004: 376-7). Emergencies are, above all, social.

with social upheaval, particularly the massive and widespread social change wrought by the colonial encounter (Malinowski 1926; Turner 1972 [1957]; Douglas 2002 [1966]). Until relatively recently, however, field-level ethnographic accounts of mass emergencies have been rare. Mid-century, Firth (1959) and Spillius (1957a; 1957b) wrote with scientific clarity on famine in Tikopia, while Turnbull (1972) managed a somewhat less lucid account of displacement and disaster in 1960s Uganda. These encounters were largely accidental; the anthropologists arrived, coincidentally or unawares, as a potential catastrophe unfolded in their fieldwork communities. This happenstance form of study would change in subsequent decades. Following the pioneering work of anthropologists like Barbara Harrell-Bond (1986), Alex de Waal (2005 [1989]), Liisa Malkki (1995; 1996) and Sharon Hutchinson (1996), more ethnographers actively began to seek out and engage with issues of war, disaster and forced displacement as core research topics. There is now a significant body of work on the anthropology of violence and complex emergencies (among many others, see volumes by Nordstrom [1997; 2004]; Englund [2002]; Hammond [2004]; Richards [2005]; Ellis [2007]).

These new engagements brought with them new ethical dilemmas, or more precisely, a renewed focus on old ones. In complex emergencies the divide between subject and observer can be extreme, thus making the methodological questions stark. Just how is one to be a participant observer of disaster? Is it ethical to conduct ethnographic research during war or famine? Can one be a neutral observer while others suffer and die? And if one takes the opposite tack—to actively intervene, more participant than observer—what happens to one's ethical and epistemological stance? (de Waal 2005 [1989]: 2-4; O'Neill 2001:225-9). These questions have no conclusive answer; their elements and considerations are slightly different for every study. One can read about how anthropologists negotiated these questions in the past (Spillius 1957a: 3-27; 1957b: 113-24; O'Neill ibid.; James, this issue), while the ethics review process can prepare the anthropologist for the dilemmas they will face (Ford et al. 2009; Lowton, this issue), but ultimately the trickiest conundrums are often negotiated on the wing (Felix da Costa, this issue).

Thus, despite excitement over anthropology's constructive role in the Ebola response, the discipline's participation in complex emergencies is not without controversy. By way of comparison, consider another public moment for anthropologists: the outcry and debate—at its

fiercest about five years ago—surrounding military anthropology, particularly the US military's implementation of the Human Terrain System in Afghanistan and Iraq, whereby anthropologists are embedded within military units in pursuit of counter-insurgency objectives. For many anthropologists this practice is an inexcusable compromise. Critics argue that, not only does the practice implicate anthropology in extreme forms of physical violence and support an essentialist political rhetoric, but also, through its association with counter-insurgency and intelligence-gathering, it endangers individual fieldworkers and poisons the discipline for the long term. The counter-argument states, simply, that a bit of anthropological knowledge can go a long way—a moderating influence that might enable anthropologists to mitigate the most egregious collateral casualties (for more on the debate, see Forte 2010; Bristol and Jones 2007; González 2007: 14-15; Lucas 2009: 5-9; Price and Sahlins 2013; also see Kunnath 2013 on the ethics of anthropologists 'taking sides' in armed conflict).

It is informative to compare the furore over military anthropology with the present enthusiasm for the discipline's role in the Ebola response. At a quick glance, the comparison between the armed forces and public health might appear disingenuous. There are clear differences in motives: one studies and practises systematic lethal violence, while the other fosters life. Yet there are key historical and organizational similarities in methods and practice. The role of the military in the institutionalization of medicine and public health is well established (Foucault 2012 [1963]: 69, 80-2; Collier and Lakoff, 2008: 7-8, 13-15). Public health campaigns follow a military logic in their vocabulary, organization, planning and execution. This is particularly true in outbreak situations, where the aim is to delineate and eradicate a pathogenic threat. Since population health is a major factor in geopolitical stability, the military has been a prime mover in many public health campaigns, including the current Ebola response (Martin 2012: 24-5; Lakoff et al. 2015). For good reason, therefore, military analogies are perhaps the dominant metaphors of medicine (Sontag 1990: 97-9) and—at a time when enemy ideologies are a cancer and surgical strikes target terror cells—military campaigns make use of the language of healing medicine.

There are also clear commonalities in how anthropology is perceived and represented in military and public health circles. What both approaches share is a reification of 'the

anthropological' as a specific category (or terrain) of knowledge, with the anthropologist as a custodian or gatekeeper of knowledge. At times, this can translate into a drive to operationalize anthropology, to put 'the social' on a footing amenable to technocratic intervention and to package and communicate 'culture' in a format that is easily understood by people from very different social, educational and professional backgrounds (Lucas 2009: 5-6).[3] Given anthropology's colonial legacy, many anthropologists will approach these institutional attempts to operationalize anthropology, whether in the name of arms or of health, with suspicion (Asad 1991:314-315); the same structures, networks and technologies that make it possible to project military force around the globe also make it possible to mount a public health campaign to combat Ebola (Martin 2012: 25-6).

This highlights a key dilemma. Most anthropologists want their work to benefit others; they often feel they have something to offer in situations of acute need. Their subject matter or regional expertise may give them special insight into a local crisis dynamic, and they are often ready to offer their services (Abramowitz 2014). But whom are they to serve?

Most anthropologists want their work to benefit the people and communities they live among; they may view themselves as spokespersons and advocates for people who are otherwise under-represented in research and policy (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 411; Marcus 2010: 371). Yet in a public health emergency or other complex crisis, community-based advocacy may prove untenable or ineffectual (Felix da Costa, this issue). Anthropologists may wish to speak—and work—for the weak, but the crisis response mechanisms belong to the powerful (Revet 2013: 48, 50-1; McKay, this issue).[4] The fear of misuse or instrumentalization of research might be

[3] For an example of this tendency in health fields, see Abramowitz et al. 2015. Although the editors, not the authors, likely chose the title's reference to 'social science intelligence,' it illustrates how anthropological knowledge may be conceptualized by and for other professions.

[4] The most influential contemporary anthropological debate on the subject characterizes complex emergency as a 'state of exception' where the power to impose legal and moral interpretations, to re-shape political and economic norms—often with unintended consequences—belongs to those who control the response. Complex emergencies amplify power differentials and vulnerabilities. In a state of emergency, the laws, rules and norms that govern everyday life may be suspended (see Agamben 1998; Redfield 2005: 329-330). Those who were weak before are made weaker, while the old power structures persist and often reassert themselves with force (Fassin 2011: 181-2; Ticktin 2014: 278). In crisis, action itself imparts a moral right of interpretation and imposition. This, naturally, means powerful governments and international actors most often dominate the moral, political and physical sphere in the wake of crisis. See Ticktin 2014 for a review of the anthropological literature on states of exception in complex emergencies.

particularly strong for anthropologists, whose work is based upon acceptance, trust and intimacy (Lane, this issue).

Fieldwork ethics in crisis

With these tensions in mind, the authors convened the workshop on *Fieldwork Ethics in Crisis* mentioned earlier. In light of the seemingly growing numbers of anthropologists working in unstable contexts, the aim of the workshop was to bring together aid practitioners and academics to map the current state of practice, outline key dilemmas and draw out recommendations for future action. The workshop asked a single question: how to conduct ethical, rigorous, independent civilian ethnographic research in wartime and disaster?

The workshop's central question split into several sub-questions:

(1) What, if anything, is new or distinctive about ethnographic research in and of emergency interventions and relief work?

(2) What are the experiences of ethnographers in these situations, past and present?

(3) What, if anything, makes the ethics of working in complex emergencies different from the ethics of working in non-conflict zones?

(4) What are considered acceptable degrees of risk, for both research participants and anthropologists? Do anthropologists and participants face more danger now than they did in past?

(5) How do new technologies and institutional configurations change research methods and ethics in complex emergencies?

Workshop participants were given these questions in advance and asked to present on one or more of these themes. Some of the presentations from the day are reprinted here, in a revised and expanded form.

In the opening submission, Wendy James recounts her fifty-year engagement with the peoples and crises of Sudan, South Sudan and Ethiopia. The Blue Nile region (where the borders of these three states meet) forms the backdrop for much of her reflection. James relates some of her struggles with officialdom—demands from bureaucrats and security services for supervision

and input where there was neither understanding nor particular interest in her research—and her subtle manoeuvres that enabled her to work, for the most part, as she wished. One is left with the impression that the more things change, the more they stay the same: James confronted many of the institutional attitudes and hurdles that young ethnographers face today. Yet she worries about a new institutional factor, that current research agendas, particularly those driven by urgent response, miss out on what is perhaps the preeminent strength of an anthropological approach to complex emergency: continuity through time and space.

In a related vein, Diana Felix da Costa offers a personal account of how she navigated ethical dilemmas as a doctoral student among the Murle of South Sudan. She relates the shifting fortunes of her research as hostilities engulfed the region and eventually overtook her research site at Boma. In her reflections, Felix da Costa emphasizes the 'accidental' and 'improvisational' nature of anthropology done in wartime. She argues that this makes for flexible and adaptive research, though the ethics and outcomes of such an approach may not always conform to institutional expectations of rigour. As such, the tension between subjectivity and objectivity in anthropology becomes more visible when research is conducted under duress.

Karen Lowton advances a perspective from the other side of the desk. Writing as a member of a university ethics review board (ERB), Lowton outlines how an ERB approaches high-risk research. Lowton argues that the ethics review process should be collaborative, not adversarial; the review allows the researcher to think through both ethical and practical considerations, in most cases making a more robust research plan. She concludes her piece with a list of key considerations for research in emergencies, gleaned from her experience as both a social scientist and an ERB member.

Melyn McKay and Alissa de Charbonnel argue that not only research institutions but also aid agencies should engage with these ethical guidelines. Positioning the aid economy in the field of ethics at large, the two authors explore how 'Big D' development has misapplied anthropology's disciplinary focus on the 'local'. They argue that the drive for community-informed development has objectified both local knowledge and local researchers. The rise of evidence-based programming, value for money (VfM) principles and 'remote' aid management contribute to the increasing, and competing, demands upon researchers. Ultimately, they write,

this subcontracts risk in the research apparatus to its most vulnerable actors – local researchers themselves.

While there is historical continuity to the dilemmas that confront anthropologists working in complex emergencies, there are emergent ethical dilemmas too. As Justin E. Lane demonstrates, the rise of digital technologies—in particular big data applications—raises new concerns for anthropological practice, especially for anthropologists working in insecure environments, where, in the wrong hands, some data can get people killed. Here, the emergent ethical dilemma coalesces in 'The Cloud'. As data management takes on new gravity, Lane makes a strong case for anthropologists to be better prepared to manage data security in the field.

The workshop presentations on the day—and in this issue—share certain common concerns. Perhaps the central concern is an awareness of the heightened moral, physical and emotional stakes that can exist between individuals and institutions in times of crisis. Ethnographers have a duty of care towards themselves, their informants, host populations and the discipline of anthropology. They must also be respectful and responsive to the needs of institutions such as the university, the host government and a variety of governmental and non-governmental responders. Consideration of how to navigate between these multiple obligations was a feature of every presentation.

Participants concurred that there is little published in the way of guidance for anthropologists setting out to work in extreme environments. Similarly, institutional guidance is limited or poorly mapped. Institutions, whether university departments, ERBs or aid agencies, are caught between obligations to their individual members and to the body corporate; they appear to struggle to provide adequate guidance and support in every instance. As a result, the workshop came together to recommend a further conversation on the rights and responsibilities of anthropologists working in crisis situations: how individuals and institutions can work together to better facilitate safe and ethical research.

Most of the responsibility for self-protection and integrity of research is borne by the individual researcher. It has always been this way in anthropology and should remain so—no institution, checklist or process can abrogate individual responsibility. However, the role and potential for institutional ethics review boards to support that process may be underestimated.

Participants concurred that a well-functioning ERB can strengthen the quality of planning, facilitate critical reflection and identify potential resources and partners.

Participants in the workshop identified particular institutional mechanisms that may be under-prepared to address questions arising from research conducted in conflict zones. The conclusions of our workshop echo an earlier special issue of *JASO* on the subject of sexual harassment in the field. In their introduction to that issue, editors Imogen Clark and Andrea Grant highlight the need to incorporate more danger-awareness and avoidance skills into pre-fieldwork training for student anthropologists, as well as the need for greater peer support upon return (Clark and Grant 2015: 4-6, 11). While Clark and Grant voiced these concerns with particular reference to young ethnographers confronted with changed sexual and gender norms, related concerns can be extended to all anthropologists, student or not, working in or near complex emergencies.

It is clear that more attention to individual welfare is needed, but this can be difficult to implement in an institutional setting, where solutions are ultimately administrative. It seems likely that any increase in welfare support for fieldworkers will be accompanied by increased scrutiny of itineraries and research plans. An over-protective institution can potentially add additional research administration or even discourage potentially valuable research without having a corresponding effect on welfare (Haggerty 2004: 392-4). Thus institutional administrators must balance individual and corporate needs, duties and risks. Our workshop highlighted that institutions cannot afford to allow corporate risk management (and the tendency to stifle research in favour of playing it safe) to predominate (Lowton, this issue). If they do, the gap between researchers and their subjects will become even greater (James, this issue). The borders between research autonomy, support and accountability are difficult lines that researchers and institutional officials must establish together.

As the articles in this issue make clear, planning, preparation and the institutional review process can be essential to success. Yet in unpredictable environments, much is down to the individual researcher. Ideally, the institution will equip each researcher with a robust toolkit of ethical guidelines and practical methods. But no matter how well prepared, the process of fieldwork is, by nature, organic and at times improvisational (Felix da Costa, this issue). The

anthropologist's practice makes the field—and this field is a space that must be negotiated daily. In exploring these issues in more detail, the *Ethics in Crisis* workshop, and this special issue of JASO, hope to help equip anthropologists in their daily practice.

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