Ethics in conflict in and outside academia: professional anthropologists versus anthropological professionals.

Alex Strating
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
University of Amsterdam

Last year some students asked me to devote the final lecture of the introductory course in Anthropology to the question of the relevance of anthropological knowledge and ethics outside academia. While preparing the lecture I had a long discussion with one of our graduates, Peter, who told me that he had just accepted a job with the Dutch army. After graduation he had finished a MA in Conflict Studies for which he had done research among Dutch troops in Afghanistan. Coming from a military family, he decided to pursue a career in the army. He was invited for a job interview and much to his surprise was offered a newly created job as 'cultural specialist'. After half a year of general military training he would start as an officer in a new unit of social scientists and linguists that will help to prepare troops that are send on missions abroad. The objective of this team is akin to that of the Human Terrain System teams of the US army: helping to understand the local situation and 'win the hearts and minds' of the local population. An important difference with the HTS teams is that the Dutch team will not be involved in actions on the ground and that their information will be based on secondary sources and not on actual fieldwork.

The reaction of his fellow students to his career move was quite diverse. He told me that anthropology students were overwhelmingly negative with reactions ranging from 'are you allowed to do that as an anthropologist?' to outright condemnation. Students from other disciplines, however, were much more positive, congratulating him with his new job. Especially students in political sciences were very positive about his 'great career move'.

We agreed that he would give a short presentation about his new job during the second part of the final lecture and that we then would open the floor for discussion. As was to be expected, the presentation was followed by a heated discussion. Peter illustrated his presentation with examples from Afghanistan and it was clear that the different points of view of the students was determined by their

position in the political debate in The Netherlands about the deployment of Dutch troops in Afghanistan. Students who thought that the war was 'good' were positive about the involvement of anthropologists whereas students who considered the war as 'wrong' were against it. They made no reference to the moral and ethical arguments that dominate the discussion within our discipline. For them anthropology's obligation to side with the subaltern was not self-evident. The colonial history of the discipline seemed irrelevant and they were unaware of the consequences of long term fieldwork and involvement with the local population and informants. When I introduced some of these arguments in the discussion – never do something that can harm your informants, side with the powerless and give them a voice, make sure that there is informed consent, avoid the mistakes of the colonial period, the risk of reductionist research and simplistic problem solving[1] – I expected that they would focus more on the anthropological ethical dimensions. That did not happen. The discussion moved to very practical questions like: "But this is true for all social sciences. What makes anthropology so special?" "If this is the case, then anthropology will never have an influence in the real world". "But this means that as an anthropologists you cannot work for a multi-national or even the government".

Mind you, these were first year students at the end of their first semester. They had just been introduced to complex and confusing concepts like culture, holism, cultural relativism, ethnocentrism. Some of them study anthropology because they want to help the poor and the powerless and aspire a career in for instance third-world development or with a NGO. A large majority of these students just want to know more about other cultures and societies and do not yet take their prospects on the labour market seriously into account. The first group was very vocal and outspoken during the discussion. The others probably concluded from the discussion that apparently it is not just the army that is suspect as a potential employer, but that other possible employers – government institutions, big corporations, and even some NGO's – are also problematic. I tried to explain to them that it was more complicated than just a simple good-bad dichotomy (after all we anthropologists are the masters of nuance and subtlety) and that the topic would be dealt with more extensively in different courses in the semesters to come.

[1]C.f. Lesley Gill (2007), Anthropology goes to war, again. *Focaal* (50): 139-145.

In the second semester of last year the topic of ethical dilemmas returned in my work as a teacher, but this time in the form of a few papers and theses by senior (mostly 3rd/4th year) students. What struck me was the level at which they could articulate their view on the ethical and moral dimensions of the discipline - verbally as well as in their written work – especially in relation to fieldwork and the use of information gathered during fieldwork. They had mastered within two or three years most of the knowledge and skills and attitudes that are important to be able to function as a professional anthropologist, that is as an anthropologist that works at an academic institution and has the opportunity (although not as often and as long as most of us would like) to do fieldwork. On the one hand this is very good, but on the other it is quite problematic. Contrary to other social sciences like sociology, political science or social geography, anthropology has a very ambivalent relation with the labour market. It is primarily an academic discipline (at least in the Netherlands, but my impression is that this is generally the case) that, with a few relatively small exceptions like medical anthropology, focuses on the reproduction of professional anthropologists and very little on the production of anthropologically trained professionals. As professional anthropologists (especially the tenured ones) we are in a very privileged position: to a large extend we are free to decide what we want to research and where we want to research it, free from demands by employers or financiers other than to produce results in the form of publications. This is a position that is more and threatened by different forms of university reform and it is very important to fight for this academic freedom. This also entails an ongoing debate about the ethics and moral standards of our discipline, especially in relation to the people we work with in the field and the potential use/misuse of our findings. However, we should be careful in projecting our professional mission and morality on our students as they will become professional anthropologists. They will not. If five students out of the 200 that started in 2009 would succeed in becoming an professional anthropologist, it would be a good result. More than 95% will have to find other jobs. That is not easy. In the Netherlands (and I suspect in many other countries) anthropologists are seen as not very practical and often *Weltfremd*, quite weird for a discipline that justifiable prides itself with first hand knowledge and experience of everyday life. Luckily most of the graduates succeed in finding a job, but from conversations with quite a number of them I know that even though they are content with what they have learned, they often feel themselves ill-prepared for a career outside academia, especially in

comparison with graduates from other social sciences. For me this seems to suggest that we should be much more aware of the fact that academic anthropologists and professionals with an anthropology degree face different realities and dilemmas. The latter almost never have the opportunity to conduct extensive fieldwork with it's freedom of action and it's specific practical, theoretical and moral problems. They often have to deal with concrete situations where they have to deal with problems and conflicts through interventions or intervene in peoples life by developing or implementing policies. With our professional sensitivity for power differences and the importance a holistic approach and the principle of cultural relativisme – elements that are very important in our teaching – we tend to be implicitly and explicitly very critical about interventions. As professional anthropologists we are good in understanding the complexities and nuances of cultural and social formations and know that easy solutions do not exist. Deconstruction is in our blood but construction is more problematic.

At the moment I am still thinking about possible suggestions to solve this problem and hope to discuss some of them during the workshop in Maynooth. But before focusing on the solution, I am very curious to know whether my somewhat impressionistic analysis makes sense to anthropologists who do research in conflict areas and no doubt have thought about the practical and ethical dilemmas that anthropological professionals would encounter and the kind of anthropological training they would need in case of an intervention.