



This isn't your usual obstacle course: Critical pedagogy with Special Operations Forces



Shannon O'Lear, Professor^{a,*}, Thomas Heilke, Professor^b, Mariya Omelicheva, Associate Professor^c, Eric Hanley, Associate Professor^d

^a Department of Geography and Atmospheric Science, University of Kansas, 1475 Jayhawk Blvd., Lindley Hall Room 213, Lawrence, KS 66045-7613, United States

^b College of Graduate Studies, The University of British Columbia, Okanagan Campus, 2133 EME Building, 1137 Alumni Avenue, Kelowna, B.C. V1V 1V7, Canada

^c Department of Political Science, University of Kansas, 1541 Lilac Lane, Room 504, Lawrence, KS 66045-3177, United States

^d Department of Sociology, The University of Kansas, 1415 Jayhawk Blvd., 716 Fraser Hall, Lawrence, KS 66045-7540, United States

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ABSTRACT

In an effort to practice what we teach, this paper moves beyond a simple academic-military binary and summarizes the efforts of four faculty members to teach critical thinking to US Army Special Operations Forces (SOF) officers. All four of us teach graduate level courses in a non-thesis, interdisciplinary Master's degree program intended to satisfy military interest in civilian education. We view our work as an effort to think both with security and as an intervention into security. We position this work as an endeavor of public geographies and critical pedagogy. The paper begins by considering public geographies and the supposed academic/military binary and explores subtle and not so subtle interactions between academics and the U.S. national security apparatus. Each of the four co-authors—a geographer, a sociologist, and two political scientists—describes a particular approach to teaching critical thinking and comments on how the SOF students have responded. We conclude the paper by reflecting on the value of this work within the broader context of our shared mission as scholars and teachers.

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1. Introduction

For most people, the first visual of U.S. Army Special Operations Forces officers that might come to mind is unlikely to picture them, laptops at the ready, in the classroom. However, there is heightened interest in the U.S. military to send select candidates from the Special Operations Forces (SOF) to civilian institutions for advanced, graduate degrees. In this paper, the four co-authors reflect on our classroom engagement with this particular segment of the military as part of a non-thesis, interdisciplinary Master's degree program (ISP) open to SOF officers of the US military. The program is designed to develop interagency skills that will be useful when these officers return to military positions in which they will likely be working with a broad range of organizations. We teach critical, academic perspectives on political theory, geopolitics, globalization, and other topics, thereby exposing these individuals to what may be substantially different perspectives than they receive in their military training and education. We view this effort as a positive contribution to the common good of the polity.

We intend in this paper both to think *with* security and to reflect on intervention *into* security. Our classroom activities are an intervention, not because we aim to change the mission of this military community, but because we are taking an opportunity to introduce into SOF education a critical perspective on geographical, sociological and political understandings that shape SOF practice. This effort is clarified and motivated by the fact that SOF officers are a captive audience for arguments that we, as academics, find problematic, and by the fact that there seems to be little room in SOF training for approaching these problematic arguments with a critical stance. One objective of our engagement is to provide at least a small subset of SOF—our students—with alternative perspectives and critiques that may (or may not) influence their decisions and actions, either while deployed or later in their careers as influential decision makers.

To be clear, the US military does not make policy. Its members agree by oath to implement policy as set forth by their Commander-in-Chief, the President of the United States. If the policy, informed by ideology, has been set, and it is the work of SOFs and others to implement and enforce that policy, why bother to intervene in how SOF officers view the world? The motivation here is not to help the military do its job more lethally. Instead, we intervene at this particular node of activity, because we can

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: olear@ku.edu (S. O'Lear), thomas.heilke@ubc.ca (T. Heilke), omeliche@ku.edu (M. Omelicheva), hanley@ku.edu (E. Hanley).

introduce a set of views and questions to which they may not heretofore have been exposed in their reading and training. The motivation is less about changing policy (although that may be a commendable accomplishment!) and more about influencing thinking and (possibly) action to be more reflective. This paper is a recounting and evaluation of that activity.

Our paper proceeds in seven sections. The first section positions this paper within a set of current concerns well beyond the traditional university classroom. It begins by considering public geographies and the supposed academic/military binary, and concludes with a critical look at security. After describing the SOF students, the paper turns to the efforts and observations of each of the four co-authors in our classes with SOF officers. We describe our approaches to teaching critical thinking and share observations about student responses. We conclude by reflecting on the value of our efforts.

2. Public geographies and the academic/military binary

Geographers have long considered how what they do within the university has an impact on society (Harvey, 1972; Castree, 2002) and have asked, “whose interests are being served by the geography that is taught?” (Sharpe, 2009, p. 131). Similarly, the practice of public sociology was promoted at the American Sociological Association in 2004 (Burawoy, 2005; for a critique see Fuller and Askins, 2007). So, too, *Perspectives on Politics* of the American Political Science Association states on its masthead that “*Perspectives* seeks to nurture a political science public sphere, publicizing important scholarly topics... and promoting broad reflexive discussion among political scientists about the work that we do and why this work matters.” Geographers have considered potential trajectories of public geographies and how geographic work might be made more visible and relevant to public policy (Ward, 2005, 2006). They have also thought about how geographic work could be written more effectively for public audiences as opposed to academic audiences (Castree, 2006; Murphy, 2006; Fuller, 2008; Kitchin, 2014). Our efforts discussed here are an example of public, pedagogical geographies, mixed with sociology and political science, in that we are promoting geographical ways of thinking to wider audiences (Kinpaiby, 2008).

Castree (2008) has observed that, “*consequential choices* are constantly made about what sort of knowledge to create, disseminate, revise, validate and challenge – choices that could, in theory, be otherwise” (p. 683, emphasis in original). Traditionally, teachers have the power to make such knowledge choices and transfer knowledge to students who are then emancipated. We focus, instead, on a pedagogy of enabling reflection. It encourages the capacity to act autonomously in the future (Pykett, 2009). It is “necessarily ‘fat’: resource rich in terms of time and labour, reflective and dialogic, situated, culturally contextualized and inevitably inefficient” (Blackmore, 2009, p. 866).

Our public pedagogy is also critical. In a special issue in which *The Canadian Geographer* focused on critical geographies of education (McCreary et al., 2013), Martin and Brown (2013) make the case that everyday critical pedagogies may serve to, “decolonize and revitalize processes of learning in ways that make space for knowledge outside of hegemonic norms” (p. 382). Critical pedagogies challenge “academics to make ‘defiant choices’ in their teaching roles that are committed, political and risky” (Newman, 2006, cited by Martin and Brown, 2013, p. 387).

Inwood and Tyner (2011) advocate a pro-peace critical pedagogy. They argue that universalizing metanarratives divide the world, as territorial units and groups of people, into binaries of “us” and “them” enabling a mindset of violence and killing. They promote critical pedagogy to examine ways in which economic,

social, and cultural influences may either serve in processes of domination or present alternative solutions. Taking the call for a pro-peace agenda seriously, we think of our work with these officer-students as a form of scholar-activism (Burgess, 2005). Whereas, “Good research can change the definition of what is ‘relevant’ and to whom” (p. 277), our critical pedagogical efforts with SOF officers are a form of intervention aimed at widening the aperture of how they identify, interpret, and approach problems in their work. Our work is not purely or generically “subversive:” we were told repeatedly by their commanders that a selection criterion for membership in SOF, and a further objective of training upon achieving such membership, is the ability to think critically outside the standard norms of military thoughtways.

Our critical pedagogy necessarily critiques security and takes up the challenge to security politics as summarized by Neocleous (2008):

The constant prioritizing of a mythical security as a political end – as *the* political end – constitutes a rejection of politics in any meaningful sense of the term. That is, [politics] as a mode of action in which differences can be articulated, in which the conflict and struggles that arise from such differences can be fought for and negotiated, in which people might come to believe that another world is possible – that they might transform the world and in turn be transformed. Security politics simply removes this [quality]; worse, it removes it while purportedly addressing it (p. 185).

Academics working to critique and challenge security range widely from traditional conservatives to leftist radicals, and they have offered a variety of guidelines and conceptual footholds to support their efforts. *The Network of Concerned Anthropologists* (2009), for example, published *The Counter-Counterinsurgency Manual: Or, Notes on Demilitarizing American Society* to challenge ways in which military predominance has become normalized in the US. Rather than learning from past empires how to fight smarter, as suggested by the military-supported *Counterinsurgency Manual* (Nagl et al., 2008), they argue that perhaps the lesson to be learned from past invasions and occupations is that the US should not be fighting these kinds of wars at all, but engage in “a new foreign policy of “humanpolitik” – a human-centered foreign policy based around diplomacy, international cooperation, non-aggression, and the protection of human security as the best way to protect the security of the US and, ultimately, the world” (p. 175).

Academic collaboration with the military has been challenged as “enabling the kill chain” (Vine, 2007). That argument was directed against academics who opt to embed in military efforts and to work indistinguishably in uniform with military counterparts, while applying academic expertise for military purposes. A key critique of that work (such as the Human Terrain Systems program) is that academics operating in such a context cannot collect data according to the ethics and standards of scholarly conduct since they cannot explain the purpose of data collection to informants, seek voluntary consent, or identify themselves as researchers. Such collaboration can also serve to support counterinsurgency efforts or otherwise encourage the deployment of the US military into places where it is not welcome (Vine, 2007).

Part of our effort described in this paper is to engage with the seeming binary of academic vs military.¹ Binaries can provide an insidiously simplified view of the world that limits our perception of a situation and our options for response (Hartmann et al., 2005). Binaries hinder our ability to view a situation with refinement and

¹ For a “radical conservative,” somewhat journalistic view and review, see Kauffman, 2008.

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