Armed Conflicts and Humanitarian Crises: Insights from the Anthropology of War

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1 Introduction

Interstate and intrastate armed conflicts have declined in number since the 1990s. According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), the year 2013 saw 33 ongoing armed conflicts in 25 locations worldwide—a decrease of almost 37% in comparison to the peak in the immediate post-Cold War period. Of these armed conflicts, seven were categorised as wars, namely conflicts with at least 1000 battle-related deaths in a year.[1] This is the good news. The bad news is that despite a general decrease in armed conflicts, people around the world continue to suffer from their effects. News of ongoing and new armed conflicts accompanied by shocking pictures of people in plight make it into our living rooms on a daily basis. As of 2016, 65.6 million people where forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations, and in February 2015, 12.2 million people—nearly half of the population—were in need of humanitarian assistance in war-torn Syria alone.

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[1]Organisations and research projects use different thresholds to define armed conflict and war and therefore produce divergent assessments of global trends. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), which is linked to the Department of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University, provides one of the most used data sources on armed conflicts. It defines armed conflicts as 'contested incompatibility, which concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths'. Wars, accordingly, are high-intensity armed conflicts with more than 1000 battle-related deaths.

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Yet numbers tell us little about the experience of people who live in the midst of armed conflicts and the impacts of humanitarian crises on virtually all aspects of society. In such contexts, the political and violent nature of these complex humanitarian emergencies poses significant challenges for humanitarian action. Experiences from humanitarian crises such as in Bosnia, Rwanda, Afghanistan and Syria have sparked debates among scholars and practitioners about the extent to which humanitarian principles can be upheld in situations of armed conflict. These debates were accompanied by the realisation that humanitarian action, despite good intentions, might have negative impacts on the conflict context itself. With humanitarian aid workers increasingly becoming targets of violence, the provision of humanitarian assistance in armed conflicts requires a deep understanding of the very context in which this intervention takes place in order to avoid causing harm and to ensure the protection of both humanitarian workers and the affected population.

The anthropology of war covers a broad range of topics of high relevance to understand contemporary armed conflicts and humanitarian crises. Looking beyond the immediate facts of the situation and highlighting the social dimension of armed conflicts, it allows grasping the broader context in which humanitarian crises occur. With the discipline's comparative and holistic outlook, anthropology thus offers important insights into causes, dynamics and effects of armed conflicts. Over the last 150 years, anthropologists have produced a growing ethnographic database on how material, institutional and cultural factors explain war and its effects, resulting in a rich body of empirically substantiated theories. Thereby, anthropological scholarship on war is far from systematic and homogenous. Covering the many aspects of the interrelationships between war, violence and society, anthropological scholarship in this field is vast, diverse and ever evolving.

This chapter only provides a glimpse of some of the many debates and themes in the anthropology of war. It presents several important anthropological approaches to explaining the causes and effects of war, introduces themes that emerged in anthropological scholarship on contemporary armed conflicts and links the anthropology of war to an anthropology of peace. In a final section, the chapter addresses the controversy regarding the role of anthropologists in armed conflicts and the challenges of conducting field research in war zones.

2   Anthropological Perspectives on Armed Conflict

The anthropological study of armed conflict differs from the perspectives of other disciplines, such as political science or law, in that it examines war as a social practice that is deeply embedded within the broader cultural context in which it occurs. In studying war, anthropologists are mainly concerned with its social dimensions. They ask questions, such as: how do cultural beliefs relate to the practice and experience of armed conflict? What are the norms and rules that govern warfare in different societies? How does armed conflict relate to other factors, including ecology, economy, kinship, gender, values and politics?

Although early anthropologists of the nineteenth century did not study war as such, their ethnographic accounts of small-scale societies include informative descriptions of feuding, raiding and warfare practices, offering important findings of cross-cultural variations in conflict resolution, the use of violence and the waging of war. With later anthropologists studying the phenomenon of war more explicitly, a lively debate has produced new valuable insights into the social dimensions of conflicts, violence and war. Dominant themes that emerged are questions concerning the universality and inevitability of war, evolutionary accounts of primitive/tribal versus modern warfare, the causes and practices of warfare and the effects of armed conflict on sociocultural systems.[2] More recently, new conflicts in the aftermath of the Cold War, the attacks on 11 September 2001, the so-called 'global war on terror' and the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria have provoked new debates and research in anthropology and related disciplines.

2.1 Violence and War as Social Institution

Conflicts, which form an inevitable part of daily life, may be settled peacefully or violently. The anthropology of law deals with comparative research on the different norms and institutions that exist in societies for settling conflicts among its members to maintain or restore order. Research in this field shows how norms, institutions and taboos by which the use of violence is controlled differ from society to society. What is regarded as legitimate and appropriate use of violence by one society may well be regarded as excessive and brutal by another. This insight of anthropology is also important for humanitarian workers who may have to get to terms with practices they find appalling. This does not mean that one has to accept violent behaviour, but that one needs to understand how norms governing violence are embedded within broader sociocultural contexts.

Ethnographic studies of different societies have analysed the practices of homicide, capital punishment, raiding, feuding and warfare and how they are embedded within and shaped by particular societies' belief systems, norms and institutions. The anthropology of war specifically deals with highly escalated conflicts that elude the normal mechanisms of control and order and where armed violence becomes a means of conflict resolution within a society or between societies. Bronislaw Malinowski, one of the most influential anthropologists of the twentieth century, has provided a prominent definition of war as 'the use of organized force between two politically independent units, in pursuit of [each unit's] policy'.[3] War can thus be understood as a long-term struggle for political ends within particular social contexts in which groups use, or threaten to use, lethal force against each other in pursuit of their aims. This implicates that warfare—in contrast to other forms of violent behaviour—is a form of collective (armed) violence used for collective

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[2]For an overview of the development of the anthropology of war, see: Otterbein (1999), pp. 794–805; Gusterson (2007), pp. 155–175.

[3]Malinowski (1941), pp. 521–550.

rather than merely individual ends. Thereby war is generally associated with the breakdown of order, viewed as an abnormality occurring outside of the social realm and lacking rules of its own.

One of the most important contributions of anthropologists has been to challenge this common understanding of violence and warfare as something exceptional that does not form part of ordinary social reality. They have argued that perceiving violence war as something inherently bad or abnormal detaches it from its social context—the very context we need to place it in, if we want to understand its causes, practices, experiences and effects. Rather, violence and war needs to be understood in relation to existing patterns of violence within a given society.[4]

Indeed, violence and war are intimately linked concepts, whereby violence is a broader phenomenon of which warfare presents a particularly severe form. Just like culture in general, patterns and practices of violence and warfare are not static but may change over time and may adapt to changing conditions at the local, regional, national or international level. Anthropologists have thus been particularly interested in finding explanations for the varying frequency, intensity, forms and meanings of violence and war across time and space.

2.2   Primitive Versus Modern Warfare

Due to the discipline's long-standing primary focus on indigenous and exotic peoples outside of Europe, early anthropological studies of war have frequently focused on primitive, stateless or acephalous (headless) societies. Assuming that primitive man was man in his natural state, anthropologists deliberated the causes of war in primitive societies and debated the evolution of war from simple to state societies.

Contrasting primitive or tribal warfare with modern warfare practised by large-scale societies, many early—but also later—anthropological studies analysed and explained the phenomenon of war within an evolutionary theoretical framework. For instance, in 1915, Hobhouse et al. published a study that placed its cross-cultural comparison of war and the treatment of captured soldiers within an evolutionary theoretical framework, arguing that the killing of prisoners taken in war decreased with higher levels of subsistence technology.[5] Malinowski, on the other hand, held that warfare evolved as a means to pursue national policies and differentiated six 'cultural phases in the development of organized fighting'.[6] In the same vein, linking warfare to a high level of sociopolitical complexity, numerous anthropologists have argued that war as collective violent action only emerged with increasing social stratification and organisation. Warfare was associated with chiefdoms and states, whereas more egalitarian band and tribal societies were believed to settle their

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[4]To gain a deeper understanding of this, see Richards (2005).

[5]Hobhouse et al. (1915).

[6]See Malinowski (1941), pp. 521–550.

(smaller) disputes by way of self-redress, homicide and feuds. If warfare played any role, it was considered to be more sportive and ritualistic in nature. Consequently, non-lethal tribal warfare was commonly contrasted with lethal warfare waged by modern nation states.[7] Thus, a dominant theme in the anthropology of war is the differentiation between primitive and modern warfare and the ways in which the modern state system and the emergence of military specialists and technological innovation have changed not only the motives and rules but also the magnitude of wars. In fact, witnessing the destructive forces of World War I and World War II, many anthropologists regarded large-scale wars and genocides as modern phenomena and claimed that traditional primitive societies were more peaceful.

2.3   The 'Myth of the Peaceful Savage'

Although from the 1920s on anthropological research on war was increasingly influenced by the anti-evolutionism of Franz Boas—often referred to as the father of modern anthropology who introduced culture as its primary analytical concept—and cultural relativist approaches, evolutionary accounts dominated well into the 1950s. Out of these evolutionary explanations of the origins of war emerged the myth of the peaceful savage and a romanticisation of hunter-gatherer societies.

Hence, another dominant theme in the anthropology of war is the debate revolving around the claimed 'warlike' or 'peaceful' nature of humans and societies. In what can be seen as a clear extension of the Hobbes-Rousseau controversy of the Enlightenment period, beliefs about human nature and war are implicitly reflected in the interpretation of ethnographic data. A tendency among ethnographers to ignore evidence of violence and warfare, presenting the people they studied as essentially peaceful—or essentially inclined to engage in warfare—resulted in contradictory research findings.

While some scholars produced ethnographies to prove the human predisposition to violence and war, others saw human nature as essentially peaceful and wars as a social construction. These two opposing positions defined the discipline's discourse on war and violence for a long time, resulting in a number of ethnographies on warlike and peaceful societies and still fuel controversy to this date.[8] Understanding war as a social construction and cultural institution, as famously described by Margaret Mead—a student of Boas—has, however, become the dominant view in the anthropology of war.

Despite the long-standing debate on the subject, no single explanation for the variance in violence and warfare has been found. In fact, there is no consensus among scholars on what exactly constitutes violence and war. Some have even argued that the constitutive and dynamic nature of violence and war renders any attempt to define the phenomenon futile and that studying violence requires a

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[7]For more information on this debate, see: Reyna and Downs (1994).
[8]Instructive to gain an understanding of this controversy: Kelly (2000) and Keeley (1996).

dynamic approach to grasp its procedural nature, the way it shapes people and their perceptions, the way it finds its expression in everyday life, as well as its underlying functions and dynamics.[9] More recently, scholars have shifted their attention to studying the conditions under which wars occur and the impact they have on society.

Anthropologists have shown how wars are not only products of social reality but also producers of the same by altering notions of solidarity, identity and social hierarchy.[10] This insight from the anthropology of war is significant for humanitarian action as it draws attention to the dynamic nature of violence and warfare, the way it is embedded in a specific sociocultural system and how the sociocultural system itself may change as a consequence. Pre-assumptions and perceptions of the context in which humanitarian actors intervene may thus have to be altered and adapted on an ongoing basis in order to understand the complex interrelation of culture, society and armed conflict. It also helps humanitarian aid workers to reflect on what they see and experience when deployed in the field.

2.4   Causes and Effects of Armed Conflict

Anthropology, like other disciplines, seeks to explain why societies wage wars. Particularly prominent are materialist explanations that see competition over scarce resources such as land or food as the fundamental causes of war.[11] One of the shortcomings of these accounts is that they explain the variations in the incidence of wars on the basis of the rational-choice paradigm. This, however, fails to explain the importance of other factors such as identity, culture and socio-psychological motivations. The 'greed versus grievance' debate in the explanation of ethnic conflicts is linked to this: 'greed' refers to the argument that people engage in armed conflicts because of economic rewards based on rational cost-benefit calculations; 'grievance' stands for the view that people fight over issues of identity (ethnicity, religion, social class, etc.). Today, most scholars agree that both factors contribute to armed conflicts and wars.

Approaches within the social-structural tradition understand warfare mainly as an ordering principle of social relations and social structures. As anthropologist Max Gluckman concluded from his research on political systems among African tribes, social relations that are formed through marriage alliances, trade networks, gift exchange and so forth play an important role in limiting the frequency and intensity of warfare.[12] Moreover, anthropologists have argued that war may

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[9]Robben and Nordstrom (1995).

[10]Rao et al. (2011) offers a collection of interesting case studies that examine the ways in which wars are not only products of specific sociocultural contexts, but produce cultural practices.

[11]See for instance Ferguson (1984).

[12]Gluckman (1956).

enhance social stability by maintaining intra-group solidarity vis-à-vis a common enemy. Correspondingly, societies with relatively fragile social ties between groups have been found to be especially prone to higher levels of violence and warfare.

Another, phenomenological, line of research in the anthropology of war is primarily concerned with the interpretation and translation of systems of meaning. Research that falls within this category attributes the variations in the nature and frequency of war to cultural differences in values and beliefs and studies the meanings and memories attached to war in particular societies. Ethnographic studies in this line of research have shown how memories about past injuries preserved by refugee communities or in institutionalised form as museums or war memorials are often selective and function as a mobilising force for collective violent action.[13] Anthropologists have further examined how living in a chronic state of fear affects the social fabric of societies and daily lives of people: neighbours and friends turn into enemies, families are separated by flight or forced conscription, with a general sense of hopelessness and trauma as effects of war on society.[14] Other topics in this line of research include the gendered dimensions of the practice and representation of violence and war, the body and symbolic performances of war and violence, as well as the adequacy of applying Western notions—such as childhood or trauma—to non-Western contexts. As such, anthropology poses critical questions regarding conventional approaches in international humanitarian action.

Moreover, the 1990s saw an increasing recognition that primitive wars could not be understood separately from the colonial encounter. In what has been termed the 'tribal zone', anthropologists have argued that the contact between state and non-state societies has exacerbated warfare within and between them.[15] Similarly, studies on contemporary ethnic and religious conflicts in Europe, Asia and Africa examined the legacies of colonial domination and the role of nationalism in these conflicts.

2.5 Anthropology and Contemporary Armed Conflicts

The end of the Cold War saw an increase in intrastate conflicts that were no longer dominated by the geopolitical and ideological battles between the East and the West. A controversy emerged as to whether they presented a qualitatively new sort of war. According to the new war thesis, post-Cold War intrastate conflicts are seen as being characterised by a change of actors, a massive increase of civilian casualties and development of new war economies. Where weak or failed states have lost their monopoly to conduct legitimate violence, various non-state actors that

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[13]See for example Malkki (1995).

[14]See Green (1994), pp. 227–256; Robben and Suarez-Orozco (2000).

[15]Ferguson and Whitehead (2000).

mobilise around ethnic, racial or religious identities challenge its authority and claim state power. Though regular armies still participate in these contemporary conflicts, a multitude of other actors, such as insurgents, paramilitary groups, local warlords, criminal gangs and mercenary groups, are also involved, making such conflicts more complex and uncertain to predict. War economies are mostly based on illegal trade in arms, drugs, natural resources and human trafficking.[16] Whereas the distinction between old and new wars remains disputed, conflicts in the Balkans, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Darfur or Afghanistan and a growing concern about international terrorism have informed research that addresses the complexities of the contexts in which contemporary armed conflicts and humanitarian crises unfold and in which humanitarian actors operate.

Moving away from the distinction between the primitive and the modern, anthropologists too turned towards studying contemporary armed conflicts. The debate revolving around new wars during the 1990s generated research on ethnopolitical conflicts, genocide and terrorism, among other things. Anthropological studies of ethno-political conflicts and genocide critiqued essentialist notions of identity, challenging common perceptions of these conflicts as originating in ancient tribal hatreds and linking them to the experience of colonialism, the emergence of nationalism and the dynamics of globalisation.[17] In their research on terrorism, anthropologists have focused not only on the victims of terrorist attacks but also on the experience of perpetrators and the transnational linkages of cultures of violence and terror.

Thus, over the last decades, a rich body of in-depth ethnographic studies on contemporary armed conflicts has emerged, addressing questions of the organisation of war, ritual aspects of warfare, its socio-economic consequences and the causes and experiences of organised and collective violence. Generally, anthropologists agree that mono-causal explanations fail to provide an accurate account of a phenomenon as complex as armed conflicts and humanitarian crises. While, at first sight, practices and experiences of violence may appear similar across the world, the everyday experience of war, its causes, expressions and effects are always situated within a particular sociocultural context. Hence, there is broad consensus within the discipline that war has to be understood as a historically and locally situated practice that is not only a destructive but also a productive part of social reality.

How are these findings relevant for humanitarian action? This field of inquiry is only emerging, and further debate and research is needed. However, we can maintain that only by understanding the everyday practice of war can we also develop meaningful efforts for peacebuilding and conflict transformation, breaking spirals of violence and addressing root causes of armed conflicts and humanitarian crises.

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[16]Kaldor (1999).

[17]Recommended readings on these topics include: Eller (1999) and Hinton (2002).

2.6 Anthropology of Peace

As noted above, anthropologists argue that conflicts form an inevitable part of daily life and may be settled peacefully or violently. So far, we have dealt with the sociocultural reality of violence and war. However, getting along, reconciling and peacemaking are very common and important aspects of social behaviour. If only a few anthropologists have studied the phenomena of war and violence, even less attention has been paid to the phenomenon of peace. Yet anthropology has a track record of investigating conflict resolution practices in different societies. Ethnographic studies of societies in various parts of the world show a wealth of peaceful means by which conflicts are settled, including self-redress, avoidance, toleration, negotiation and third-party intervention.[18] Anthropology's insights into the relationship between culture and conflict resolution has thereby informed theoretical models of mediation and reconciliation and has been put into practice by people working on conflict transformation and peacebuilding.[19]

One of the dominant approaches in the anthropology of war (and peace) that has been already addressed is the classification of societies according to their perceived peaceful and violent natures. Thus, anthropologists have asked why some societies oppose aggressiveness, violence and warfare while others tolerate it. Focusing on peaceful societies, they have examined how their particular belief systems and world views foster non-violent attitudes and behaviour. Moreover, they have studied the various structures and societal organisation that promote peacefulness and harmony among their members, for example by discouraging competition and self-focus.[20]

More recently, ethnographic studies focusing on everyday experiences of violence have exposed the simultaneous existence of suffering and laughter, fear and hope. By doing so, they have challenged a narrow conceptualisation of war as being apart from the ordinary and have placed it in the daily lived experience of people. War and peace are then not exclusive but coexisting social realities. Thinking of war and peace as a continuum instead of as a sharp dichotomy allows a shift from explaining the causes of war to analysing processual aspects of the practices of war and peace.[21] Anthropology may thus not only provide unique insights into the causes, dynamics and effects of war but also shine light on the potential for peace. For this reason, anthropologists are often sceptical of internationally driven peacebuilding interventions. Emphasising the local potential for peace, anthropologists have focused on peacebuilding activities at the grass-roots level, including studies on the role of ritual for peacebuilding and reconciliation.[22] As anthropologists have shown, if war is a social construct, so is peace.

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[18]See Fry (2006).

[19]Important works in this field include: Avruch (1998) and Lederach (1997).

[20]See Sponsel (1996), pp. 95–125.

[21]Richards (2005). Instead of advancing a sharp dichotomy between war and peace, this edited volume advances the argument that we should think of war and peace as a continuum.

[22]See Schirch (2005) and Ross (2002).

3   Anthropologists in Armed Conflicts and Humanitarian Crises

This chapter has so far focused on anthropological research on violence and war. Another related topic of high relevance is how anthropologists work in contexts of armed conflict and humanitarian crises and the ethical implications this has on their actions. Anthropologists may work in these contexts in several ways, all of which give rise to particular questions and concerns. They may act as staff of humanitarian organisations or be embedded in counter-insurgency operations, conduct research in conflict zones and provide recommendations for policymakers.

Two themes that have provoked debate within the discipline will be addressed in this part of the chapter: the role of anthropologists within the military—or military anthropology—and the role of anthropologists as researchers in and on war.

3.1   Anthropologists and Counter-Insurgency

In the aftermath of 9/11, and with the US military recruitment of anthropologists for their operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, a renewed debate on the role of anthropologists in counter-insurgency operations emerged. Believing that the war on terror would benefit from anthropologists' language skills and familiarity with the sociocultural context of certain areas of operation, the CIA and military institutions sought to contract a number of them. The rise of what has been termed 'military anthropology'—referring to the increasing recruitment and use of services of anthropologists for military goals—has prompted a heated debate on the academic and professional ethics of anthropologists. While some anthropologists responded enthusiastically, other anthropologists cautioned against the harm that such initiatives would do to the credibility and neutrality of the discipline.[23] Especially the practice of the United States military of embedding anthropologists within the controversial Human Terrain System (HTS) in Iraq and Afghanistan has come under critique. The HTS is designed to provide military commanders and personnel with an understanding of the local population in the regions in which they are deployed.

Anthropologists' collaboration with the military and intelligence is, however, nothing new. As early as 1919, Franz Boas criticised anthropologists who acted as spies during World War I. The role of anthropologists in counter-insurgency in Latin America and Southeast Asia in the 1960s also provoked a debate on the discipline's ethics and professionalism.[24] In 1971, the American Anthropological Association took a clear stand against these kinds of covert services from

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[23]For details on this controversy, see: Lucas (2009).
[24]Wakin (1992).

anthropologists by adopting the Principles of Professional Responsibility, which have been further developed in 2009 and 2012.

But if anthropologists with their contextual knowledge may help counter terrorism, war and suffering, why shouldn't they lend their services to the national security apparatus? Or are there alternative strategies to use anthropological knowledge to mitigate the suffering imposed on civilian populations without jeopardising the integrity of the individual anthropologists and the discipline in general? The relationship between anthropology and the military is complex and multifaceted, as personal accounts of anthropologists working in this field reveal.[25] The issue remains highly controversial and raises a whole set of ethical questions, not least about the responsibility and credibility of anthropology as an academic discipline that produces important insights of practical relevance. Could similar ethical questions arise in the context of humanitarian action?

3.2   Fieldwork in Conflict Zones

Conducting field research in conflict zones and during humanitarian crises raises a whole set of ethical and security issues. Participant observation and collecting information in volatile contexts do not only endanger anthropologists but also increase the vulnerability of their informants and the local population.

Prolonged field research in local communities affected by war is difficult and dangerous. In 1995, Robben and Nordstrom published an edited volume entitled Fieldwork under Fire: Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival. The collection of essays covers various aspects of conducting fieldwork in zones of violence and war. Focusing on everyday experiences, the authors give voice to those affected by violence and war, including perpetrators, victims, profiteers and the researchers themselves. Apart from the obvious questions of security—of the researcher, the informants and the local people—it raises a number of theoretical, ethical and methodological questions. One of the most fundamental questions in this regard is how anthropologists in such contexts cope with witnessing violence and suffering first-hand. They may even become targets of aggression and violence themselves. With an increasing number of anthropologists conducting research on armed conflicts and humanitarian crises, questions of protection and dealing with trauma need to be addressed within the discipline.

Methodologically, the issue arises how fear and silencing—both common features of conflict environments—may affect the research process and research outcomes. Field researchers in situations of armed conflict need to constantly separate facts from rumours. While questions concerning data reliability and the subjectivity of perceptions and interpretations are not unique to this field of research, in contexts of armed violence that are characterised by a heightened degree of uncertainty and

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[25]Rubinstein et al. (2012).

fear, rumours spread easily, and it is often difficult to differentiate between truth and falsehood. Anthropologists should be sensitive to this and reflect this in their evaluation of data.

Another central issue in conducting research in contexts of armed conflict concerns the presentation of research findings: how does an ethnographer write about armed conflict without producing a pornography of violence?[26] Should anthropologists bear witness to the terror and violence they encounter during field research, even if it compromises their safety? Anthropologists have done so in the past and continue to do so, but the question is not easily answered. Apart from security concerns, anthropologists from the Global North speaking or writing on behalf of people affected by armed conflicts and humanitarian crises in the Global South may unwittingly reinforce existing power relations and postcolonial discourse. On the other hand, it may be argued that, precisely because of their privileged status, anthropologists who witness injustices have the responsibility to bear witness.[27] Ultimately, each person has to decide for himself.

4   Conclusion

War, international terrorism, ethno-political conflict and insurgency not just happen out of the blue but are highly organised events and have to be understood in the social contexts in which they occur. Mono-causal explanations fail to provide an accurate account of a phenomenon as complex as armed conflicts and humanitarian crises. A contextual approach to understanding the occurrence and dynamics of armed conflicts and wars in specific situations is needed to allow for conflict-sensitive humanitarian action. Understanding war as part of the social reality of human beings and lived experiences, anthropology can offer humanitarian actors important insights into the social dimensions of war. Anthropological research on war shows how it is not only a social construct but also constitutive of social reality. If war is a social construct, so is peace. War and peace are not exclusive but coexist in the shared experience of people. The best analytical approach to understanding armed conflicts and humanitarian crises is through an examination of actual practices of war and peace in particular localities. Only by understanding the everyday practice of war can meaningful efforts for peacebuilding and conflict transformation be developed. For anthropologists working in contexts of armed conflicts and humanitarian crises, a number of ethical and methodological questions arise that need to be addressed both on an individual level as well as within the discipline at large.

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[26]For a though-provoking reflection on this and related issues, see Daniel (1996) and Waterston (2008).

[27]See for instance Scheper-Hughes (1992).

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