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Citation for published version:

Edmonds, A 2024, 'Anthropology and complicated people', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 51, no. 1, pp. 57-62.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.13248>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1111/amet.13248](https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.13248)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

American Ethnologist

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FORUM

What Good Is Anthropology? Celebrating 50 Years of *American Ethnologist*

Anthropology and complicated people

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Funding information

European Research Council

Abstract

Revealing complexity in the world—but also creating it—is at the heart of anthropology. It shapes our engagement with theory and ethics, writing and visual style, and choice of research subjects. But does it create blind spots? I respond to this question by discussing studies of violence, and my ethnographic material in progress on British ex-soldiers. Owing to the ethical norm of suspending moral judgment of our research participants, we tend to avoid portraying their unlikable traits, internal contradictions, or troubling actions that do not advance our arguments. Ethnography often reveals florid complexity in structures or systems, but it creates simpler depictions of the people who inhabit these forms. Yet, since anthropology has long aimed to holistically capture the truth of social life, it should allow more space in ethnographic narrative for complicated protagonists.

KEYWORDS

British ex-soldiers, complexity, ethnography, perpetrators, protagonists, representations of violence, victims

On a March afternoon that never settles on sun or rain, I visit Cal's farm at the edge of the Scottish Highlands to meet Jamie.¹ Both men are ex-soldiers, and both joined the British army as minors. Jamie comes to Cal's farm nearly every day to be with the animals. I'm now three years into fieldwork on military mental health in the UK,² yet this encounter puts me on edge. As I alternately shield my notepad from drizzle or squint into the sunlight, the two men skip nonchalantly from army banter to serious talk about their struggles with PTSD.

Jamie, in his late 20s, 10 years younger than Cal, is less far along the path to recovery. A tat in neat cursive on his forearm warns, *When the rich wage war, the poor die*. He is prone to fighting and, I was warned, possibly still abusing alcohol. He became known in his regiment as “the cancer,” because he sent out “bad vibes.” But then, he snorts, “cancer’s not even contagious.” Cal had suggested I meet Jamie at the farm, in the calming presence of the goats and horses. His face obscured by a hoodie, Jamie reflects back on two tours of “Afghan.”

His spiral down into illness began after an incident on his second tour in 2012. One day, Jamie spotted a man with a sniper rifle. He communicated by radio the situation to his officer commanding (OC). The OC told them not to shoot, in line with the current rules of engagement (Ledwidge, 2012).

The sniper then aimed his rifle at Jamie.

“I was nervous because I could see the guy in my sights. I was really, really nervous,” Jamie describes to me. Still in “comms” with the OC, he heard over the radio, “Do not shoot unless he shoots you first.”

In what must have been a split-second decision, Jamie defied orders and shot the sniper. Four days later, his sergeant took him to see the OC, who said, “Right, next time I give you an order, you will follow it.”

Jamie came back with “a wee comment”: “If someone’s got a gun pointing to me and my pals, you can fuck off.”

Reflecting on this fieldwork, I got stuck on how to represent the violence that was narrated to me. To write war, one must know war, according to veterans’ identity politics in the UK. As a “civvy,” I don’t know war. And as an immigrant to the UK, I was a guest in the armed forces community, and I felt compelled to represent my research participants with empathy. Depicting their brutal violence might put them beyond the pale of anthropological redemption. Yet, as what human rights organizations call “child soldiers,” Jamie and Cal were perhaps victims of war. (Minors can join the British military at the age of 16 with parental consent, but cannot deploy to a war zone until the age of 18 [Basham, 2016]).

On the other hand, while British ex-soldiers now enjoy wide support among the UK public, internationally they are

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versal figures, associated with the figure of the “imperial policeman” (Porch, 2013, p. xi). Cal was a “damaged soul” and, in his account, a perpetrator of violence. Jamie was a subordinate in a total institution who, perhaps admirably, resisted an order from a powerful authority figure; yet in doing so, he had caused death or injury in a controversial war. If my account implied they were victims, would I minimize their responsibility for violence?

In this commentary, I approach these questions as a lens onto the dilemmas posed by *complexity* and *complicated people* in ethnographic research and writing. For much of its history, anthropology has created complex representations of social worlds, partly as a counter to the simplifications proffered by evolutionism. As the discipline migrated out of the “savage slot” (Trouillot, 2003, p. 7) in the second half of the 20th century, it began to study “complex societies,” bringing into its purview new kinds of complexity. Faithfully rendering the world’s complexity—its heterogeneities, contradictions, multiple scales—became one way of doing good anthropology. But revealing complexity is not only an analytical aim but also a habit of thought. Much ethnography seeks to reveal intricacy in social forms that are deceptively simple, a move we sometimes convey with the verb *to complicate*. In my research, for example, I aim to complicate categories like counterinsurgency.

While anthropologists often look for complexity in social forms, we also do research with *complicated people*. The term might seem redundant in an anthropological context. All people are complicated in the sense that their motivations are never fully transparent to others. Moreover, the discipline has destabilized Western understandings of personhood; *complicating* people is an anthropological achievement. Ethnographers have long been interested in groups who are particularly difficult to study, or off the radar of other academic agendas. But all ethnographic research participants might be deemed complicated, given the challenges posed by rapport, collaboration, and other fieldwork ideals (Marcus, 1997).

While engaging with complexity is part of our disciplinary identity, do we have blind spots in how we do so? *Complicate* and *complex* derive from the Latin roots *com* (together) and *pli-care* (to fold), connoting intricacy or difficulty. The terms can evoke people or social forms whose internal “folds” remain in the dark. Deleuze (1986) references the unknowability of the complicated person when he quotes Leibniz: “[A soul] could never bring out all at once everything that is folded into it because its folds go on to infinity.” Cal’s “damaged soul,” as he put it, seemed to present to me complications beyond what ethnography might comprehend. I would be on surer ground, I reasoned, limiting myself to analysis of the structures that generated that damage.

Yet, as we complicate categories and structures, do we create simple—perhaps simplified—representations of people? What difficulties are raised by our commitment to complexity, and can we navigate them better? I respond to these questions by discussing studies of violence and my own ethnographic material in progress. Owing to the ethical norm of suspending moral judgment of our research participants, we tend to avoid portraying their unlikable traits, internal contradictions, or assertions

of agency that diverge from the direction of our arguments. I end with speculation on how ethnographic narrative could allow space for more complicated protagonists.

COMPLEX SOCIETIES, COMPLICATED PEOPLE

At the risk of simplifying complexity, I briefly reflect on its shifting *value* for anthropology. Historically, complexity has had a unique, and sometimes vexed, status in the discipline. In the first half of the 20th century, Boasian ethnography revealed complexity in societies that other sciences saw through the simplifying prism of racial determinism. Anthropology’s relationship to complexity was in a sense the inverse of sociology’s: whereas anthropology demonstrated the hidden complexity in the ostensibly simple (primitive society), sociology created theories that simplified the visibly complex (modern society). In the post–World War II era, interest in complexity grew. Lesley White (1959), for example, resuscitated the idea that society progressed from simpler to more complex forms, while Lévi-Strauss introduced a different kind of complexity to social theory with his computational structuralism (Pedersen, 2023).

The term *complex societies*, which came into wider use from the 1950s, was perhaps an unfortunate one, given that the discipline had already shown that primitive forms were complex. But it did serve to designate a new terrain for ethnography (Banton, 1973). The rising interest in new research sites—communities at home, social change—impelled ethnographers to grapple with new kinds of complexity. It also perhaps contributed to a crisis in disciplinary identity, since virtually any social form could be studied ethnographically. Since the 1980s, ethnographers have studied complexity not only in industrialized societies but also in more abstract systems: science, bureaucracy, markets, and so on. While many social sciences propose models of the world in order to *reduce* complexity, anthropologists often instead complicate other sciences’ models, from economic growth (Tucker et al., 2011) to menopausal decay (Lock, 1993). We often view as problematic what appears to be *uncomplicated*: black boxes, reductive representations, “dead zones” (Graeber, 2012).

Our interest in complexity may shape how we textually or visually present research. To “catch some of the realities” missing in conventional modes of representation, Van de Port (2016, p. 170), for example, draws inspiration from the “baroque’s preference for excess, fragmentation, instability, metamorphosis, labyrinthical complexity.” Many ethnographers eschew the charts and graphs commonly used by other social sciences, perhaps because they create an illusory simplicity, in favor of photographs, which often evoke complex emotions. Others have embraced multimodal work, or “more-than-textual mediations” of research experiences, from gaming apps to soundscapes to bootlegs (Westmoreland, 2022).

We are good at complicating, and to complicate is good anthropology. Yet this analytical move encounters difficulties. It may yield writing that is complicated (in the sense of difficult). If we can complicate nearly all social forms, is doing so banal? In worlds that feel already *too* complicated, could

destabilizing the categories that lend order to life contribute to the confusion of a posttruth era (Taylor-Neu, 2019)? Such questions have become more relevant in recent years with the rise of nationalist populism in the US and Europe. Anthropologists have critiqued “savagery” in the Global North, but tended to locate it in systems and structures, such as institutional racism and the war machine. But when our own research participants espouse or carry out violence from wherever we call home, we may become implicated in that violence, or impeded in our ability to hold space for its “situated integrity” (Mazzarella, 2019, p. 49). On the other hand, the discipline has tended to a catholic view of the question of who constitutes an appropriate ethnographic research group, and even criticized neglect of “culturally repugnant others,” such as Christian fundamentalists (Harding, 1991). In recent years interest has grown in “ethnographies of communities largely shunned by anthropologists” (Gusterson, 2017, p. 209), examples of which might include European fascists (Holmes, 2019), North American (MacLeish, 2015) and Russian (Hervouet-Zeiber, 2023) soldiers, and perhaps most abject of all, German child molesters (Borneman, 2015).

In the Global South, especially since the 1970s, many anthropologists have undertaken research with people who also diverge from previous assumptions about worthy ethnographic subjects, groups who fit neither the “savage slot” nor the “suffering slot” (Robbins, 2013). Some of these might stretch the limits of anthropological tolerance, such as ultranationalist Turkish veterans (Açıksöz, 2012) or Brazilian military police (Salem & Larkins, 2021). Others might be deemed complicated because their life concerns do not connect to academic or political priorities, for example, middle-class consumers searching for bargains (O’Dougherty, 2002) or elite plastic surgeons who want to help the poor by making them beautiful (Edmonds, 2010).

Our predilection for studying complicated people might be one source of the characteristic disorientation and stress of fieldwork. At the same time, ethnographers might be said to feel at home with complications of various sorts, to seek them out and perhaps relish them; I at least have done so. Why is this the case? Perhaps disciplinary inertia or personal temperament. But our attraction to complication is also entangled with our ethical and political commitments. As Robbins (2020, pp. 95–96) argues, the ethnographic aim of producing “complex cultural description” reflects the discipline’s ethical relativism, which makes “the withholding of judgment itself a virtuous act.”

Studying complicated people might allow ethnographers to display disciplinary virtues like suspending judgment, but it also threatens to fall into a disciplinary vice: failing to create good research relationships. From the 1950s to the 1980s, the central regulative ideal of fieldwork was to establish rapport with participants. Rapport entailed being close to participants, yet it also rested on hierarchy: once rapport was established, anthropologists could “pursue their scientific, ‘outsider’ inquiries on the ‘inside’” (Marcus, 1997, p. 92). Collaboration, as anthropologists have argued in recent decades, presents a better ethical model for research relationships. The shift is reflected in some formal research ethics contexts: the term *collaborator*, alongside *participant*, is used in the cur-

rent AAA ethics statement. Responding to US police violence, some ethnographers even aim to become “complicit with criminalized communities” (Gomberg-Muñoz, 2018, p. 36). But in collaborating with complicated research subjects, we can run into problems. Collaboration requires an “ethics of engagement,” but some interlocutors prefer a stance of “detachment and disconnection” (Trundle, 2018, p. 92). A “collaboration” with a perpetrator of violence raises other issues, such as “dealing with the enemy” (Anderson et al., 2017, p. 40) or becoming “seduced” by their account of events (Kovats-Bernat, 2002, p. 212).

I encountered these dilemmas in my fieldwork. Cal appeared to show fewer signs of illness than Jamie. He spoke optimistically about his plans: applying for EU funding for a wellness center, which Brexit later scuttled; commissioning a monument to fallen soldiers. Yet it was his, not Jamie’s, narratives of violence that unsettled me more. In one meeting he casually narrated his first contact in Iraq: “We got ambushed by 30 or 40 insurgents, and we killed them all, my little recce unit. That was my first kill, and it felt good.” Other ex-soldiers I knew spoke with critical distance about combat, as a present-day self looking back at an earlier, more naive one. Cal seemed to lack this distance, as well as remorse. He jumped around in place and time, narrating violent events that spanned his childhood, military service, and postservice work as a security contractor in Iraq.

Could I use my encounters with Cal in an ethnographic publication? I couldn’t be sure if all his recollections were factually accurate. I decided to try to verify aspects of his narrative. Doing so gave me pause, since it seemed to violate the ethnographic ethic of trust. I discovered some news stories that supported the account he’d divulged to me. Whatever I included in my own narrative had less potential to harm, I reasoned, given that it was already in the public sphere.

But I kept returning to the question whether I was naively accepting a perpetrator’s account of events (Kovats-Bernat, 2002). During our meetings, I found myself stuttering on questions. Did Cal sense my disquiet—or was he trying to provoke it? It occurred to me that he was possibly seeing me as he did his psychotherapists, whom he tried to dominate. “You’re not going to get into my head. I’m going to get into yours,” he recalled thinking during his treatment. But I wondered, was he trying “get into my head” as well? This thought in the end made me decide that I should *not* ignore this material. Discarding my notes might “clean” my data but distort the complexity of representing violence.

One result of ethnography with complicated people is complicated research relationships. Research ethics compels ethnographers to aim for collaboration or even complicity with research participants. The ideal of mutual trust in fieldwork can make ethnographers reluctant to verify the narratives they elicit. At the same time, we are drawn to study peoples who pose various complications, such as offering us unreliable accounts of their past or challenging our capacity to feel empathy. There may thus be a tension in the norms underpinning how anthropologists work with complexity. One kind of disciplinary virtue, suspending judgment, can conflict with another kind, conducting research with complicated people

whose actions may in fact prompt judgment from ourselves or readers.

COMPLEX VICTIMS AND COMPLEX PERPETRATORS

Should we thus “write around violence” (Jaffe, 2019) to avoid sensationalizing it or giving voice to the self-justifications of perpetrators? Or should we “write in violence” in order to reach the ambitious ethnographic goal of capturing all aspects of social life? One response to these questions is to approach ethnography as a mode of bearing witness to suffering. In the post-Holocaust “era of the witness” (Wieviorka, 2006), ethnography has become only one of many sources of narrative grounded in the moral urgency of testimony. For ethnographers, one reason for the growing allure of witnessing may be that it bestows on our work the benefits of both impartiality and gravitas.

The position of witness, however, can rely on a claim of unmediated access to reality that derives from simply “being there” in the field, or the kind of naive empiricism that anthropology holds in suspicion (Reed-Danahay, 2017). To do justice to the lives of victims, ethnographic witnessing may need to rely on plainer language than other kinds of ethnographic writing. Critiquing the figure of the “noble witness,” Angel-Ajani (2004, p. 134) argues that “the act of witnessing is not as uncomplicated as is often represented.” Moreover, ethnography in the witnessing mode tends to exclude the experiences of perpetrators (Jones & Rodgers, 2019). And to honor victims, it may neglect complications—such as their own violent acts—that threaten to muddy their victim status.

In response to these issues, anthropologists have complicated the position of the victim. By the end of the 20th century, victims enjoyed more moral authority than in the past, especially when psychiatric or judicial institutions recognized their status (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009). Yet attributions of victimhood can also fuel the politics of resentment. They can support “any version of politics,” for example, when men claim that feminism has turned them into a vulnerable population (Butler et al., 2016). Even Western militaries can put themselves in a victim position, stabbed in the back by civilians (Porch, 2013).

While granting victimhood can confer societal recognition, it can simplify the experiences of those put in this position. Some of my participants, for example, rejected a view of themselves as victims, even when they could lay claim to it, for example, through their diagnosis of service-connected PTSD. Daniel, a Special Forces veteran, had been beaten every day by his father, an ex-soldier, before joining the army himself as a minor. He might seem to qualify as a victim of war, yet during an encounter with a therapist (which I observed), he insisted on his own culpability. Reflecting on a day when he’d caused many casualties, he said emphatically to his therapist, “It was nothing you could blame the government for. We weren’t conscripts. It was our choice. . . . It eats away at your soul when you think of the damage you’ve done.”

He chose to join up, and he chose to stay in the forces, Daniel said. Of course, he might fail to see his own victimization. Yet the effort to nudge him into a less harsh self-judgment,

which I observed his therapist do, can backfire. In some military subjects, therapy can provoke “moral dissonance” (Edmonds, 2016, p. 292), as it opens up a gap between the clinical attitude—of sympathy or exoneration—and their own sense of responsibility. To portray him in a victim position might violate his own self-understanding.

To contest simplistic understandings of victims and perpetrator roles, anthropologists have proposed terms such as “imperfect victim” (Hussain, 2022, p. 97), “complex victim” (Bouris, 2007), and “paradoxical victim” (Gribaldo, 2014). This work critiques expectations that victims are wholly innocent and aims to diminish the suspicion that some victims can attract. The term “complex political perpetrator” similarly blurs dichotomies of “victim and perpetrator” (Baines, 2009, p. 187). These terms introduce complexity into the very terminology used to understand and represent violence. As is often the case, this complicating move does not simply value complexity for its own sake, but serves a moral or political purpose: to counter the simplifying judgments proffered by others, which can be harmful. For example, if perpetrators of physical violence are seen as victims of structural violence, they might be spared condemnation or even retributive violence.

Structural explanations of violence, however, may downplay personal moral culpability. They deflect judgment from individuals, yet might overlook complications of another kind: the internal contradictions of a damaged soul, for example, or actions that are inexplicable within the political context under consideration. Historically, anthropology has tended to skirt moral evaluations, at least overly simple ones, but Robbins (2020) has claimed that relativism in anthropological is now in “disarray.” With the rise of “dark anthropology” (Ortner, 2016), focused on misery and exploitation, ethnographers more commonly exercise moral judgment. But we tend to direct that judgment at oppressive structures, not our research participants. Thus, the classic anthropological suspension of judgment persists, but selectively. When ethnographers *do* occasionally judge people’s actions, we often take aim at those we do not know personally, exempting our interlocutors. This selectivity is understandable, compelled to an extent by research ethics. As a result, however, ethnography often reveals florid complexity in structures or systems, but creates simpler depictions of the people who inhabit these forms.

COMPLICATED PROTAGONISTS

Revealing complexity in the world—but also creating it—is thus at the heart of anthropology, shaping our engagement with theory and ethics, writing and visual style, and choice of research subjects. That is perhaps unsurprising. It may reflect our inclination to do critique or to work with marginalized peoples. Yet are there aspects of life that we miss when we “do” complexity? And ways we might do it differently?

To discuss one such way I propose the heuristic of *complicated protagonist*. A protagonist, or a lead character in a narrative, is used in the context of fiction and nonfiction, including some ethnography (Szmagalska-Follis, 2008). In contrast to the term *character*, which applies mainly to fiction, and can

imply psychological depth or moral qualities, the term *protagonist* is more neutral. As implied by its root, *agōn*, it connotes action and conflict, as well as movement. A protagonist pushes narrative forward, often through struggle.

When we create ethnographic narrative, we create protagonists willy-nilly. But they may not be as complicated or as “round” as they could be. E. M. Forster (2002) distinguishes the round from the flat character. The flat character is defined by a single quality and is unchanging. A round character has multiple, competing qualities; changes over time; and is unpredictable: “It has the incalculability of life about it” (p. 56). While round or complex might sound more appealing than flat or simple characters, Forster argued that both have value. In genre fiction (detective, romance, etc.), all characters may be flat (Figlerowicz, 2017). At first glance, the idea of a complicated protagonist might seem limited to the modern novel, with its ambition to depict psychological depth, and hence unsuitable for ethnography. Yet narratives in many traditions feature complications of various sorts: unpredictability, inconsistency, flawed character. As one translation of *The Odyssey* begins, “Tell me about a complicated man” (Homer, 2018).

Many of our ethnographic protagonists—not the real people they represent—are relatively flat, for better or worse. In this sense they are like the characters of genre fiction, though perhaps even flatter, since they rarely have characteristic flaws. It’s true they can offer a window onto an unfamiliar, disturbing, or complicated world. But as social scientists, we tend to locate complexity in the structures that form people or limit their agency. The ethnographic genre does not allow much space to portray how protagonists change over time, or their conflicting qualities. Complicated protagonists may have unlikable traits (e.g., selfishness, pettiness, vanity) that we shy away from depicting. Or they may embellish or lie, undermining our truth claims (Bleek, 1987). Yet, since anthropology has long had the ambitious aim of “representing the reality and truth of life” (Fassin, 2014, p. 41), it would benefit by portraying more complicated protagonists.

One way of doing so would be to include in our narratives turning points where their actions trouble, rather than simply illustrate, the direction of our argument. When I first began to analyze the incident where Jamie shot the sniper, I connected it to my critique of the British practice of counterinsurgency. I felt I could complicate this military doctrine by showing its inconsistencies. For example, the British military ethos of “cracking on”—or a predisposition toward quick action and aggression—conflicted with official slogans like “courageous restraint” (Ledwidge, 2012, p. 181). Yet, when Jamie decided to fire his weapon at the sniper, he was acting *against* his superior’s orders. His decision, whether in self-defense or not, did not advance my critique: it was his action, not military exploitation, that resulted in violence in that instance, though it also may have protected him from harm. I could leave this material out of my ethnography. But doing so might flatten my representation of him into a vehicle for my argument. Instead, I thought about how to depict him as a more complicated protagonist, one who exercises their agency, as it were, within ethnographic narrative, by moving it in an unanticipated direction.

More attention to complicated protagonists in ethnography might contribute to a more public anthropology. We do not just represent complicated people; we also aim to engage with publics that are now more complicated too. The internet and political polarization have fragmented the “people formerly known as the audience” (Rosen, 2012). While many of us seek to do public anthropology, the concept of the *general public* is possibly obsolete. In its place we have new public-private hybrids: echo chambers; citizen scientists; counterpublics (Warner, 2002). As a result, we must consider new ways to make our research relevant or interesting to the people we want to reach. Foregrounding the complexity of our research participants might be one way of doing so.

As its metaphor of holism can imply, anthropology often strives to capture aspects of the human ignored by other sciences. We seek to understand not only the rules of a system but also how it feels to “have the game under the skin” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 80). Reliance on modes of representation from the natural sciences may impede us from reaching these goals (Van de Port, 2016). While accounts of violence often try to hit a balance between “structural oppression and individual action” (Bourgeois, 2003, p. 12), we may be predisposed toward structure. It’s true that we are bound to protect participants from harm, but is it desirable or possible to create representations of them that are immune from judgment? A protagonist with flaws or internal complications might be more recognizable to readers or better engage them emotionally or morally. By finding a place for complicated protagonists in narrative, we can better attend to our interlocutors’ unlikable aspects or actions that trouble our analysis. The *ethnographic method* remains a core part of anthropology’s identity. So too is research with myriad kinds of *complicated people*. We may have more to learn about how to use the former to understand the latter.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I’m grateful for helpful comments from the reviewers, editors, Magnus Course, Maya Mayblin, and Barney Edmonds, and for research funding from the European Research Council.

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ENDNOTES

¹ All names in this commentary are pseudonyms.

² Since 2015, I have intermittently conducted fieldwork in the UK with current and former military personnel and their military and civilian mental health clinicians and pastoral carers.

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How to cite this article: Edmonds, Alexander. 2023. "Anthropology and complicated people." *American Ethnologist* 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.13248>