

## **Engaged Anthropology in an Era of Security**

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### **Abstract**

Do the social sciences need to be publicly relevant? Do the social sciences have a moral responsibility to society? These questions have been present in the discipline right from the start. There still is no consensus on the role of the social sciences in nonacademic life or in anthropology. This paper discusses the debate surrounding the public relevance of the social sciences. There is some controversy between those who write about how, why and if anthropology should be applied, and those who actually apply. Nowadays, anthropological involvement in U.S. military action is one of the most precarious fields of engagement. At the core of this involvement are the ubiquitous arguments surrounding the debate between academic and engaged anthropology. Many critics of engagement also point to the past to substantiate their argument. Therefore, a short history of the relationship between engaged anthropology and academic anthropology will be presented. Afterward, the contemporary arguments in favor of and against applied anthropology will be outlined. In addition, the debate will be contextualized in terms of security. Finally, this paper will conclude with an attempt to suggest the future cooperation and merging of the academic and applied social sciences, specifically regarding anthropology.

**Keywords:** *engaged anthropology, academic anthropology, social sciences, security, war on terror*

### **Introduction**

In a discussion about the past, the present and especially the future of the social sciences, Ruud Abma claimed that the latter were in a state of “crisis.” They are increasingly seen as useless and unreliable by society, not least because of some public scandals (for example the Stapel Affair<sup>1</sup>). Moreover, universities are now typically oriented towards producing privatized market knowledge instead of socially engaged knowledge (Rylko-Bauer, Singer & van Willigen, 2006). Trust in the social sciences could be regained by increasingly applying academic knowledge for the benefit of society. According to Abma, people expect “practical wisdom, based on concrete and precise knowledge of the societal context ... not abstract and complicated theories of quotidian business” (Abma, 2013).

Calls for more social relevance of the social sciences have been repeatedly made over the course of the last century. In the 1980s, Freeman and Rossi (1984) argued that sociology should become more publicly engaged, because the discipline was losing its scientific status, its visibility and therefore its public funding. Anthropologists<sup>2</sup> voiced concerns about the relevance of their discipline since its very beginnings in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Onoge, 1979). At the moment, there continue to be calls for the practical application of anthropology to important social problems (Rylko-Bauer et al., 2006). Some anthropologists even argue that, without moral thinking and public engagement, anthropology will become nothing more than a

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<sup>1</sup> Former professor of social psychology Diederik Alexander Stapel used faked data in numerous studies over a period of many years. The chairman of the Committee appointed to investigate his conduct, Willem Levelt, concluded that “more important than Stapel’s fraud is that nobody in the scientific world raised questions [about the] strange things in Stapel’s publications.” (Berkhout, 2012)

<sup>2</sup> In this paper “anthropology” refers to cultural anthropology, not American four-field anthropology.

“quaint hobby of privileged post-colonials” (Scheper-Hughes, 1995, p. 415). Others, however, regard academia as a place where “knowledge for knowledge’s sake” is conveyed. While the application of knowledge is important to a certain degree, it should not get in the way of complicated theoretical questions and “objective” research. Sociologist Max Weber (de Jong, 1997, pp. 112-114) advocated natural science methods, striving for objectivity and value-free social sciences. Weber contended that sociologists should not design their research in order to produce results for their own interests or results corresponding to their political beliefs. Moreover, Weber agreed with the Kantian idea of an unbridgeable gap between ethics and science (pp. 112-114). Also sociologist Werner Raub (in Abma, 2013) thinks that an academic ought to be a good researcher in the first place. The ultimate goal of social scientists is advancing the social sciences.

There still is no consensus on the role of the social sciences in nonacademic life or in anthropology (Goldstein, 2010). There is friction between those who *do* and those who *write* about how, why and if anthropology should be applied (Smith, 1999). This is, however, not a universal phenomenon. In parts of India, Latin America and Europe (e.g., France and Italy) ethnographic research and political engagement are more enmeshed with one another than in the rest of Europe and North America (Scheper-Hughes, 1995, p.8; Rylko-Bauer et al., 2006). This enmeshment is partly due to the fact that research in certain countries tends to be driven by the wish to improve socioeconomic and structural circumstances (Rylko-Bauer et al., 2006, p.9).

Defining “engaged anthropology” is not easy, given that such a definition is determined more by the problem than by the discipline. In general, the term can be defined as the use of anthropological knowledge and/or methods to solve practical problems (Silliloe, 2007; Van Willigen, 2002, pp.7-8). “Engaged anthropology” includes a number of different fields, including teaching and public education, advocacy of human rights, activism for environmental injustice, anthropology as social critique and conducting research in sites of war and terrorism (Low & Merry, 2010).

Nowadays, anthropological involvement in U.S. military action is one of the most precarious fields of engagement. At the core of this involvement are the ubiquitous arguments surrounding the debate between academic and engaged anthropology (Goldstein, 2010). This paper is therefore an attempt to answer how the debate over engaged anthropology plays out in the war on terror. Current debate regarding anthropological engagement is strongly entangled with the past of applied anthropology. Many critics of engagement also point to the past to substantiate their argument. Therefore, a short history of the relationship between engaged anthropology and academic anthropology will be presented. Afterward, the contemporary arguments in favor of and against applied anthropology will be outlined. In addition, the debate will be contextualized in terms of security. Finally, this paper will conclude with an attempt to suggest the future cooperation and merging of the academic and applied social sciences, specifically regarding anthropology.

### **From colonial administration to a code of ethics**

“So called ‘applied anthropology’ is especially tainted by history. Born as a stepchild of colonialism . . . it came of age during the Cold War . . . only to find itself maturing into a partisan of neoliberal globalization in the name of a kinder, gentler cultural sensitivity and sometimes more openly as cost-effective market-based research” (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, as cited in Rylko-Bauer et al., 2006, p. 179).

As this quote shows, the reputation of applied anthropology is tied to its past. Critics often point to this entanglement, warning that history repeats itself. Thus, to understand the

contemporary debate between applied and academic anthropology, it is important to know at least the most debated issues in its historic reputation. I will provide a short overview of the most controversial issues in the past.

The genesis of applied anthropology can be dated to the colonial era (Rylko-Bauer et al., 2006). It was in 1908, that “Government Anthropologists” were first hired by the British colonial administration (Onoge, 1979, p. 46). In the beginning these practitioners trained administrators for the Sudanese civil service (McFate, 2005). In the 1920s, they started to conduct research. Besides gathering “knowledge for knowledge’s sake,” their goal was to produce information that could be used by educators, administrators and health workers in helping” the local residents. The colonials were grateful for knowledge about the natives in the interest of promoting “better government” (Onoge, 1979; Sillitoe, 2007). The goal was to rule as cheaply as possible over a territory and its people. Anthropological research contributed to this by showing that inserting precolonial rulers into the colonial hierarchy would avoid rebellion (Onoge, 1979).

During World War II, the number of applied anthropologists reached its height (Rylko-Bauer et al., 2006). Some 95 percent of anthropologists were involved in World War II. The bright side of this involvement was their role in openly criticizing the Nazi regime. The darker side was their involvement in the administration of Japanese relocation camps. The latter gave rise to an enormous outrage in the discipline (Low et al., 2010). This was one of the reasons for the “crisis” circulating in anthropology in the 1960s. Ethical questions were raised as to whose interests anthropologists actually served (Steenbeek, 2013, p.11).

Despite the beginning of an important shift in emphasis in anthropology following World War II (i.e., toward post-modernity) some anthropologists were again involved in war without the awareness of the larger anthropological community. During the Cold War, the U.S. government hired anthropologists because of their knowledge of “traditional” societies and for the purpose of investigating “military strategic regions and national-character studies” (Low et al., 2010). Anthropologists were involved in “counterinsurgency research in Vietnam, Project Camelot in Latin America, Project Agile in Thailand, and the Himalayan Border Countries Project in India.” (Sluka, 2010, p. 102). The involvement of anthropologists in “Project Camelot” in Latin-America for some (see for example Rylko-Bauer et al., 2006) represents the most tainted use of applied and academic anthropology. The original purpose of the research was to investigate how the opium traffic in Northern Thailand could be restricted. When the strategic value for the U.S. government of the region increased, the amount of funds made available by the U.S. government increased. It saw utility in the cultural knowledge of counterinsurgency purposes as this quote shows:

“Given the apparent importance of local factors to the recruitment of the Northeastern [Thailand] insurgents, it is important to learn the detailed content and credibility of communist recruitment, training, and propaganda messages” (Jason Summer Study in Jorgensen & Wolf, 1970).

When this came into light in the 1970s, the practice of the military use of anthropological knowledge was harshly criticized by the anthropological community (Van Willigen, 2002, p.51). In 1971, the first code of ethics was developed by the American Anthropological Association (AAA).

Anthropology now attempts to distinguish between the powerful and the marginalized. Especially the latter and their source of marginalization have become the subject of studies (Clarke, 2010). While the circumstances have changed, the same dilemmas regarding applied anthropology are still very much alive today. The problems, in terms of bureaucratic, political, legal and ethical issues, are very similar (Rylko-Bauer et al., 2006).

### **Dilemmas today: unforeseen consequences**

Applied anthropology evokes even more complex ethical questions than academic anthropology (Van Willingen, 2002, p.47). The two main questions will be stated here, and arguments for and against will be presented.

The primary question has to do with the possible harmful effects anthropological practices can have (Van Willingen, 2002). An important characteristic of anthropological fieldwork is “participant observation.” In short, this means anthropologists take part in the lives of communities that they study (Kottak, 2011, pp. 51-52). Anthropologists are inextricably linked to the communities they study, and therefore an intriguing question arises as to when “participation” should stop. This is because participation entails the risk of changing a community in ways that are not desired. This question is even more intriguing in the case of engaged anthropology, which at its very core is based on the idea of “changing.” (Low and Merry, 2010; Van Willingen, 2002). An example of the fieldwork of the anthropologist Cora Du Bois<sup>3</sup>, shows how serious and unpredictable consequences can be. During World War II, the Japanese came to occupy the area in Indonesia where the Alorese, the people Du Bois studied, lived. The Japanese found out that a couple of Alorese natives stated they wanted the Americans to win the war, because the Americans were good people. The Alorese in question did not know any Americans besides Du Bois, but they were publicly beheaded by the Japanese. (Du Bois in Van Willingen, 2002, p.49).

Others, on the other hand, argue that it is unethical not to intervene when necessary and possible (Scheper-Hughes, 1995; Susser, 2010). Scheper-Hughes even says anthropology is useless without moral engagement. Anthropology is, according to her, pre-eminently suitable for conveying a native point of view of human suffering. But this knowledge is useless when the researcher does nothing but collect data and report results. Huizer (in Van Willingen, 2002) mentions that the goal of research typically serves the interests of the researcher (e.g., advancement of his or her academic career) more than those researched. For this reason, he recommends that research subjects negotiate their interests in the research, although this is often seen as posing a danger to the scientific quality of the research (p. 55).

Herzfeld (in Smart, 2010) argues that not criticizing troublesome issues can even disadvantage marginalized people. When research data show the source of oppression, it would be unethical not to use this knowledge on behalf of disadvantaged people. Moreover, he contends that overlooking what seem to be problems sometimes reflects a will to preserve societies which seem to be hardly touched by modernity. Not criticizing may seem friendly and respectful, but might in fact be “inconsistent” with the desire of the populations in question to be treated as moral equals (Herzfeld, 2005 in Smart, 2010).

### **Dilemmas today: neo-colonialism**

“They were educated to look carefully, and with all the methodology of their discipline, at their specific group, tribe or village, without in fact being properly trained to look first at themselves as Westerners” (Huizer, 1979, p.5).

This quotation perfectly illustrates the second criticism of applied anthropology. As mentioned previously, anthropology played a significant role in colonial dominance. Asad (in Huize, 1979) perceives conducting research as maintaining and even deepening the unequal relationship of the “dominating (...) and dominated” (p.91).

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<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, this is not an example of engaged anthropology. While most authors who show the debate surrounding engaged anthropology argue that engaged anthropology can have negative effects, they never show adequate examples.

Smart (2010) states that colonies and former colonies have been excessively criticized by outsiders. Trying to change behavior can consequently be perceived as “tactless and insensitive” because people have suffered a lot due to colonialism. Therefore Smart calls for a more tactful way to express social criticism: indirectly through the use of anthropological data (Smart, 2010).

Others, however, argue that the world today is interconnected politically, economically and socially in a way that makes it possible for anyone to isolate themselves from the suffering of others. We are all citizens of the world. Therefore, the argument of not having the right to speak, because one is not a citizen of a particular country, becomes invalid (Susser, 2010). Those objecting to such activism in the name of universal human rights, oppose what they see as an agenda of “civilizing” people in undeveloped and underdeveloped countries. (Low et al., 2010; Susser, 2010).

### **Terror studies: security concerns providing funding opportunities**

A potential new utilization of applied anthropology emerged when the “war on terror” started. Once again, questions were raised as to whether anthropologists could be engaged in war “without compromising [their] intellectual agenda, the safety of the people [they] work with, [their] personal safety, and [their] ethical safeguards” (Werbner, 2010, p. 193).

The debate appeared to be among the following parties: suspicious and reluctant anthropologists (e.g., Goldstein, 2010, Sluka, 2010, Spencer, 2010, Werbner, 2010) optimistic anthropologists who were called naïve by their critics (e.g., Peteet, 2010); social science institutions that want to “answer to the Treasury about the usefulness of the research they fund”(as cited in Spencer, 2010) and people—including anthropologists, policymakers and people from the military—who opportunistically want to use anthropological knowledge and methods for national security interests (see for example McFate, 2005).

Anthropologist Julie Peteet (2010) argues that, “Anthropology can offer insights about history, memory, and resistance” and in this connection she discusses the inability of “the U.S. administration (to) distinguish between Islamist militants and secular nationalists or between local and regional movements (..) or even between Sunni and Shi’ite Islam.” (Peteet, 2010, p.86). She emphasizes that anthropological insights in local culture could be used “to inform the military and the defense establishment.” Retired Major General Scales asserts likewise by stating that the war on Iraq cannot be won by technological advantage, but by “an exceptional ability to understand people, their culture, and their motivation.” (as cited in McFate, 2005, p.24) McFate (2005) continues by arguing that most national security failures are due to “a lack of cultural awareness” (p.25). These failures evolve when it is wrongly assumed that the enemy would do as you would. In this view, it is therefore desirable to attain in-depth anthropological knowledge of the enemy (McFate, 2005).

At first sight, Peteet’s objectives seem to be similar to Scales’ and McFates, but her intentions actually markedly differ from theirs. McFate and Scales (2005), on the one hand, have national interests. In their eyes, “cultural intelligence” is necessary to “modify local systems” in order to win the war and establish national security (Goldstein, 2010, p.129). Peteet, on the other hand, strongly criticizes the U.S. for harming local residents and therefore wants to establish “counterinsurgency tactics” in a “culturally resonant” way (Peteet, 2010, p.85). In other words, she wants anthropologists to turn warfare into a less harmful business, by attaining knowledge of local culture and local perceptions of warfare. Peteet’s point of view reflects the standpoint of others who think anthropologists could alter future wars in culturally resonant ways. Berreman (as cited in Sluka, 2010, p. 103) called persons holding such views “naïve” and said that they were “being used by [their] employers for the latter’s own ends.”

McFay (2005) accuses anthropology of being stuck in the past. According to her, anthropologists should not be reluctant to become involved in security issues following the ethical issues that arose in connection with the Vietnam War. Sluka (2010), on the other hand, argues that McFay “forgets” to notice that anthropology’s reluctance could be an effect of the U.S. military’s violations of human rights, former damage done to research subjects—“including murder and torture”—the misuse of research data, the strengthening of the idea of anthropologists being spies, which undermines constructing *rapport* (trust) with research subjects, and jeopardizes the safety of other anthropologists (p. 102).

## Conclusions

The social sciences are mainly concerned with social life. Therefore, many social scientists think the discipline should enhance the public good by contributing “practical wisdom” instead of abstract theories (Abma, 2013) and privatized market knowledge (Rylko-Bauer et al., 2006). Some even regard the social sciences as useless without moral thinking and public engagement. In their terms, conducting research without public engagement becomes nothing more than a “quaint hobby of privileged post-colonials” (Scheper-Hughes, 1995, p. 415). Others, however, regard enhancing the public good as the job of others. In their terms, academics is the place where “knowledge for knowledge’s sake” is conveyed. The principal task of social scientists is to conduct research and to promote the social sciences to a higher level.

There still is no, and there probably will never be, agreement on the level of engagement in the social sciences. This issue is not merely debated in terms of the moral role of the social sciences, but also practical affairs play an important role. What will happen to society when social scientists apply their research for society’s sake? Does society want social scientists to “help”? Could there be unexpected negative effects? In this paper, I have attempted to show how anthropologists add critical observations to engaged anthropology. These observations are tied to engaged anthropology its past. Anthropological knowledge has been used during colonization and wars, most of the time in favor of the oppressive party. This has tainted engaged anthropology’s reputation and made anthropologists conscious of the possible harmful effects of engaged anthropology. Still, critics see a chance of unforeseen consequences and neo-colonialism in engaged anthropology. Nevertheless, most authors take on an optimistic view toward anthropological engagement. They regard engagement as an opportunity to criticize society and enhance the position of marginalized people. Peteet, for example, argues that engaged anthropology can enhance the position of people in warzones by establishing “counterinsurgency tactics” in a “culturally resonant” way (Peteet, 2010, p.85). Others, however, point out that this is a very naïve point of view. In their view, when cultural knowledge comes into the hands of the military it could be misused at the expense of local people.

I find it true that the social sciences should use their knowledge for the sake of society. I agree with Scheper-Hughes that sciences concerned with the social world are useless when the researcher does nothing but collect data and report results. The discipline is paid by society and has a certain social responsibility to society. That does not mean, however, that the social sciences, specifically anthropology, should gather knowledge in favor of the military. Social responsibilities do not stop at national boundaries. Fortunately, many anthropologists acknowledge the dangers of cultural knowledge in the hands of the military. If marginalized people have now become the research subjects of engaged anthropologists, maybe engaged anthropology could contribute to the position of these people by criticizing negative military action.

“Practical wisdom”, as Abma pointed out, could be an opportunity to add something valuable to society. But how do we decide what is valuable for society? How do we avoid to

become paternalistic? How do we avoid neo-colonialism? Maybe social scientists should acknowledge that people are intelligent creatures. Maybe people in question know better than we do, what is best for them. Maybe we should, as Huizer suggests, negotiate with our research subjects, instead of only observe them.

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