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The "science" of anthropology?

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By Jacob Hickman

I am posting this on behalf of Jacob Hickman, a PhD student from the University of Chicago's Department of Comparative Human Development.

Two recent pieces in the Chronicle of Higher Education (available [here](#) and [here](#)) document something that happened at the past American Anthropological Association meetings that I was not aware of during the meetings. I went to the general business meeting to hear about some of these developments, but what is interesting is that this particular development occurred during the Executive Board Meeting, rather than being presented before the general AAA body for debate and a vote.

So, what am I talking about? In short, the AAA Executive Board has decided to strike all mention of "science" from the language of the AAA mission statement. One of the pieces I have attached shows all of the changes, omissions, and alterations in the new statement. The obvious thrust is to re-characterize the AAA's work in non-scientific terms. In one of the Chronicle pieces, an apologist for the AAA Executive Board argues that the intention was not to attack "science," per se. However, if this is the case, how does one justify substituting for 'sciences' the phrase "knowledge disciplines?" is that simply a stylistic move? I think not.

I am sure that amongst the HD crowd we are likely to find a diversity of opinion with regards to these issues, and I am quite interested in hearing about them. I recall one night last Spring, Abbe, Les, Teo, and I debated over dinner whether or not we (and our advisors) were "scientists," and I must say that even with this small group I found a much wider range of opinion than I had expected (I will let you all characterize your own positions, if you care to!).

For me personally, I disagree with this move by the AAA Board, and I think it is counterproductive. Roy D'Andrade recently started a discussion on this topic on the Society for Anthropological Sciences (a AAA section) listserv (you can read the exchange [here](#)). I agree that this threatens what little legitimacy "anthropology" maintains outside of its own borders, in the public sphere. This is especially threatening at a time when funding for academic research is shrinking and we are finding ourselves harder pressed to justify funds to do research, such as carry out international

fieldwork and hire research assistants.

For one, I don't conceptualize "science" as narrowly as those who like to use "positivism" as an epithet. I regard science as disciplined, systematic inquiry that attempts some degree of transparency (i.e., NOT "objectivity") in staking claims about the world, regardless of the relative social constructedness of those worlds. In fact, I think that interpretive anthropology can be scientific. Geertz seemed to think so as well, as he states in his essay on Thick Description:

"Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning."

It seems apparent to me that from this essay Geertz allows for more-or-less defensible interpretations to be made of any given cultural happening, and that one should be able to cite evidence to back up one's interpretation. As far as I am concerned, this interpretive 'science' is just as fundamentally concerned with issues of reliability and validity as much as any other discipline, such as quantitative psychology or sociology or physics. I don't take anthropology to be any more or less scientific than any other disciplines typically found in "social science" divisions at universities across the world. Certainly, methods tend to vary from one discipline to another (despite many of our efforts to fight against a priori methodological biases), but methods don't make research scientific. Engaging in qualitative analysis isn't un-scientific unto itself any more than counting anything makes it scientific just because it involves counting (or structural equation modeling, for that matter).

In sum, I lament the move to eradicate "science" from the mission statement of the AAA. I think this represents the taking over of one particular political faction in the organization, and if anything it is likely to drive the discipline into further obscurity, further drive archaeologists and biological anthropologists (and many are even saying linguistic anthropologists) from the organization, and therefore drive the final nail in the four-field coffin. I honestly think that many of the anti-scientific sentiments pervading contemporary anthropology are perhaps essentializing "science" in a way that most of these critics would never allow to be done with "culture." I also think that this move is largely political, yet another attempt to "stick it to the man," even though we know that "the man" (or "the woman", if you like) could care less what the AAA thinks. The world certainly doesn't care whether the AAA recognizes the current government of Honduras (cf. the debate during last year's business meeting), but I worry that eradicating science from the AAA mission statement will make the organization even more irrelevant, and

prove to anyone that may actually listen that, in fact, the AAA *is* completely irrelevant.

SCIENTISTS OF THE WORLD, UNITE!!!

{fist raised in the air}

Thoughts?!?

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