

# No Science, Please. We're Anthropologists.

Psychology Today (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/fetishes-i-dont-get/201011/no-science-please-were-anthropologists>)

While I was down in New Orleans last week at the American Anthropological Association meeting, hanging out with some cool scientists, rumors were flying every which way that the AAA leadership (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/basics/leadership>) was attempting to create a new "long term goal" statement that would actively purge references to science from the AAA's stated mission. Supposedly the AAA executive board had decided not to actually attempt this purge through a straightforward change to the mission statement, because that would require a vote of the membership. Instead they were said to be doing a sneaky end-run to ditch science.

While I sat through a discussion of this at the Evolutionary Anthropology Society (a formal "section" of the AAA), I had two competing thoughts: (1) This couldn't possibly be true. Getting rid of science? (2) This is undoubtedly true. The AAA leadership has finally decided to make concrete their attitude that science is a four-letter word. (I learned about their long-running attitude through a little history ([http://alicedreger.com/Science\\_Darkness.html](http://alicedreger.com/Science_Darkness.html)) I spent the year of 2009 on; my Guggenheim-funded, peer-reviewed paper on that should be out shortly.)

Yesterday, confirmation arrived in my mailbox in the form of a forwarded email from the president of the Society for Anthropological Sciences. The message included a resolution from the SAS objecting to the AAA's executive board's attempt to remove science from the AAA's stated purpose. It also included a pasted-in text showing the proposed changes. (You can see it all here. (<http://www.unl.edu/rhames/AAA/AAA-LRP.pdf>))

Interestingly, it isn't just that the AAA leadership is ditching science. They're also trying to position the AAA as being primarily about "public understanding" of humankind. As Stu Plattner, who served for many years as Cultural Anthropology Program Director for NSF, observed in email exchanges, this looks like "another step in the conversion of Anthropology from a social science into an esoteric branch of journalism." Yeah, but the kind of journalism that is much more concerned with editorials than factual reporting.

Presumably, in the AAA's tradition, the promotion of the "public understanding of humankind" will include anything that is politically unoffensive to the AAA leadership, and nothing offensive. It's safe to assume the AAA will not be promoting the public understanding of how human behaviors evolved, especially if those human behaviors are anything that might make some or all humans look violent, greedy, harmful to the environment (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/basics/environment>), or (worst of all) sexually dimorphic.

Among the scientific anthropologists I talked to about this yesterday, pretty much to a one, they were unsurprised yet angry. The primatologist Sarah Hrdy (a member of the National Academy of Sciences) wrote, "My reaction is one of dismay-actually, even more visceral and stronger than that-albeit not surprise." The scientists I talked to want to know (as I do) exactly what is the AAA Executive Board's justification for all this. They are confused about whether they should bother to fight, or just give up and depart the AAA already.

The reason some anthropological scientists have stuck it out this long is for the benefit of their grad students and junior faculty who typically have to attend the AAA for purposes of career

(<https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/basics/career>) advancement.

Nevertheless, many scientists have quit the AAA in disgust over the years. This latest business won't draw more of them to it (and maybe that makes the AAA executive board happy?). When alerted to this latest development, Hrdy couldn't even remember over which offense she had quit the AAA. But she still expressed

some shock. "Why go backwards," she asked rhetorically, "abandoning the goal of using anthropology to try to understand human nature, especially now when it is a matter of increasingly broad interest?"

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In the messages flying back and forth, I was reminded why anthropologists refer to the annual conference as "the meetings," plural: it's because they go and meet with their own actual disciplinary types, in separate groups, so that the real scientists don't have to deal too much with the fluff-head cultural anthropological types who think science is just another way of knowing.

Not all cultural anthropologists are fluff-heads, of course. You can usually tell the ones who are fluff-heads by their constant need to look like superheroes for oppressed peoples, and you can tell the non-fluff-heads by their attention (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/basics/attention>) to data. But the non-fluff-head cultural anthropologists are feeling utterly beleaguered in this environment that actively denigrates science and consistently promotes activism over data collection and scientific theorizing.

Raymond Hames, Chair of the Anthropology Department at the University of Nebraska Lincoln, a scientific cultural anthropologist, said this to me when we talked about all this: "Advocacy is what we do as citizens in a democratic society. Even as anthropologists we must advocate on the basis of fundamental science. Science has a special currency in courts, public opinion, and in the legislative process. If we purge science from our mission statement we lose our credibility, the ability to advocate for effective change, and hence our power to do good. We become just another special interest group."

Hames brought up a useful example, namely the recent ruling in Florida allowing gay and lesbian couples to adopt children. In that case, the judge considered the scientific evidence showing that same-sex (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/basics/homosexuality>) couples can be just as good parents as opposite-sex (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/basics/sex>) couples. Wrote Hames to

me, "Evidence-based advocacy trumps special interest group advocacy." So, even if most of what the AAA wants to do is advocacy rather than data-driven scholarship, why ditch science in that pursuit?

Dan Gross, who nowadays works in applied anthropology for the World Bank, summed it up this way: "The willingness of some anthropologists to relinquish any claim to doing science is symptomatic of the low self-esteem (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/basics/self-esteem>) among many colleagues. They are happy not to be held to a high standard of rigor in their research and writing and pleased to be judged by the more open-ended and subjective standards of humanistic research."

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True enough. When all is said and done, science actually takes hard work, and a willingness to sometimes find out that your most cherished hypothesis is wrong. Ya gotta wonder, are those the real problems the AAA leadership has with science?

Want to read more? I recommend this post.

(<http://chronicle.com/blogs/innovations/anthropology-association-rejecting-science/27936>) You can also check out this

(<http://www.evobeach.com/2010/11/whither-anthropology-as-science.html>)

and this (<http://aapabandit.blogspot.com/2010/11/place-of-science-in-anthropology.html>).

Follow up from me here (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/fetishes-i-dont-get/201012/the-remains-the-aaa>).

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