

***I, Too, Have a Dream ... About Suicidology***  
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Scott Fitzpatrick, Claire Hooker, and Ian Kerridge (2014) offered an excellent and timely analysis of suicidology as social practice, which has provoked equally stimulating reactions. When asked to participate in the debate, I had to think twice. Not only am I much less qualified to comment on suicidology than other participants in the debate, but I also feel that many important points have already been made. Furthermore, since my own position is very close to that of other contributors, we may run into a real danger of preaching to the converted. This danger is inevitable because any wicked fosterer of suicidology's rigid epistemic purity is unlikely to join the debate, either as a straw man or someone of flesh and bone.

**Disciplinary Encounters**

Bearing this in mind, I will voluntarily take on the role of devil's advocate. Nevertheless, I will be a rather humble one, for my point is somewhat complementary rather than strictly controversial vis-à-vis the debate. I admire the move of Fitzpatrick et al. to scrutinize the nature of suicidology's methodology "beyond the traditional arguments concerning the need to accommodate humanities disciplines and qualitative methodologies in what is predominantly a science-based field" (18).

Nevertheless, I agree with what I believe Tom Widger (2015b) is touching on, namely that "moving beyond" the accommodation of other disciplines within suicidology still requires granting them a voice to start with. However, and this is my main (and only) point, disciplinary encounters, just like any other relations, are not one-sided affairs even if characterized by considerable power imbalances. Speaking from the specific perspective of my own discipline, social anthropology, I wish to point out that its marginality within suicidology is of its own making to a large degree, rather than unilaterally caused by the logic of suicidology.

The two components of suicidology as social practice described by Fitzpatrick et al.—the ambition to generate purely academic knowledge and the need to bring about social impact—tend to be uneasy bedfellows in many disciplinary contexts. Anthropology has often avoided potential tension by pursuing the former while allegedly abstaining from the latter. This is understandable, since historically speaking, the British social anthropologist needed to distinguish himself <sup>1</sup> from the two figures for whom the initiation and management of social change was the bread and butter of their vocation: the missionary and the colonial official. The differentiation was so important because anthropologists themselves sometimes served in colonial administration, if not in missionary structures, which became obvious during anthropology's painful process of decolonization while "coming home from the tropics."

The American counterpart to the British social anthropologist was subject to the biggest temptation to serve the state agendas in the 1950s and 1960s during the expansion of

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<sup>1</sup> Here the masculine form is consciously used.

anthropology departments thanks to Cold War funding (Low and Merry 2010, S205). Unsurprisingly, this was followed by a wave of critical reflection.

The aftertaste of colonial and Cold War engagement is probably responsible for the moral fears that have functioned as the discipline's insurance against being utilized (again) by aggressive and oppressive (state) agendas—see, for example the outrage in American anthropology vis-à-vis the use of anthropology in *The Human Terrain System* of the American military (Albro et al. 2009). Such opposition to the practical misuse of anthropology is itself an example of an active engagement, an ambition to foster a different social impact.

Recently, we have witnessed a rise in ways of rethinking the divide between (established) academic and (marginalized) applied anthropology. Many anthropologists now contemplate reformist concepts such as collaborative, public, or engaged anthropology, of which I have arbitrarily chosen the latter to refer to the motley trend as a whole. Such “engaged anthropology” seems alive and kicking, even fashionable, in its multiple forms. Having said that, I would argue that its continued appeal is derived in part from the fact that in many contexts, anthropologists still think that “engagement” (not to mention “application”) is a different enterprise to anthropology proper. Even worse, in congruence with the legacy of ivory-tower elite intellectualism, they treat “engagement” as intellectually inferior (discreetly, of course).

Bringing the argument home, I suggest that not only does suicidology often seem to disdain anthropology, but also vice versa, since an ethnocentric, paternalistic, and applied study of suicide is not a good match for our noble discipline. The story that Tom "Widgers gave us in his commentary, about his manuscript not even being allowed to enter the review process due to its ethnographic nature, is therefore fairly unusual. Not that many anthropologists present their work in major suicidology journals—rather, there are only a handful of anthropologists who actually have such ambition to start with.

### **The Future of Suicidology**

This leads us to another feature of our discipline: anthropologists are used to dissent. Bruno Latour (1993, 100–1) once described the situation very aptly when looking at the career of the distinguished French anthropologist Marc Augé. In Africa, Augé aimed at “grasping the full social fabric of Alladian culture.” When he returned to Paris, he decided to study the Metro, a fascinating socio-technological entity where one can observe everything from municipal and national politics to the logic of technological innovation. What a great choice of topic! Yet, Augé limited his interest to interpreting graffiti on the walls of subway corridors. Allegedly giving voices to marginalized people of the world, anthropology itself tends to get marginal within the scientific world and societies where it is practiced more generally.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> As always, exceptions exist. For example David Graeber, an LSE-based anthropologist, became a prominent public intellectual critically engaging with the very core of the Euro-American worry of our time: the financial crises.

We often act resigned to this position; I suspect we even enjoy it sometimes. It is almost as if we think “Yes, we are marginalized in the attention paid to what we do, in funding, etc., but we are right, in both an epistemic and moral sense of the word.” We barely seem disturbed by the fact that in our analysis we subject both meanings of “rightness” to anthropological scrutiny, often treating them as a matter of social consensus and hence as somehow proportionate to social acceptance and appreciation.

However, disdaining suicidology and maintaining our elitist marginality are only part of the story. Until recently, anthropology ignored suicide as a topic to a large degree. To be sure, there have been some excellent works published over the years, and I will abstain from quoting them here, as I cannot possibly do justice to all of them. Nevertheless, in their years of publication, all of them look somewhat lonely—in other words, they were never part of a larger body of literature in the making that would constitute an anthropology of suicide. The reasons for this are complex; in fact, an anthropology of suicide seems in principle a mission impossible.

As Tom shows in his contribution, when looking ethnographically at suicide we always see something else; in a sense, the imposed universalizing category of “suicide-as-object” does not hold when exposed to the scrutiny of the comparative eye, unsettling the very ontology of what suicide *is* (to paraphrase Jennifer White 2015, 1). However, that is a standard development for many other entities that anthropology has focused its attention on, and it has not prevented us from building a robust body of anthropological literature on those entities (for example, once we proclaimed kinship a non-subject, we almost eradicated kinship studies in the short term while stimulating an imaginative and innovative wave of relatedness studies in the long term). Hence, in my understanding, it is more the methodological difficulty of studying self-harm ethnographically that is responsible for the weak presence, if not the virtual absence, of an anthropology of suicide.

Whatever the case, we overheard a call from the other side: it has been two decades since progressive voices in suicidology started to push for an infusion of “anthropological imagination” (Corin 1995; Kral 1998).<sup>3</sup> We anthropologists offered them very little support, but the story may not be so gloomy after all. Two decades are a long stretch of time in one’s life, but not necessarily in the life of a discipline. Although it was probably not directly caused by some suicidologists’ interest, anthropological study of suicide has grown remarkably over the past few years, offering an unprecedented concentration of relevant works (since the publication of the discussed article, the following monographs and edited volumes—not to mention articles—have appeared: Stevenson 2014; Chua 2014; Widger 2015a; Broz and Münster 2015). Some of these authors, namely Michael Kral (who has partly run over to our anthropological side), have even pioneered practicing anthropology of self-harm as an engaged enterprise, pursuing “Participatory Action Research” (Kral and Allen, forthcoming).

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<sup>3</sup> Speaking about “progressive voices” is, of course, a bit of a provocation. It is not a coincidence that the opinions I consider “progressive” are very close to my own views and, indeed, to the views of the scholars in discussion here.

## **Suicidology as an Open, Diverse Practice**

To conclude: I, too, have a dream—that one day suicidology will be an opened and epistemologically diverse social practice, one reflecting that, as Tom pertinently points out, we are all suicidologists. From the perspective of anthropology, I will express a dose of practical optimism. The aforementioned works, along with many others that have recently been published, lead me to believe that we are on the right track in overcoming many of the maladies of anthropology in relation to self-harm described above. As for our relation with suicidology, if we keep knocking on suicidology’s door while simultaneously building an anthropology of self-harm, our effort probably cannot fail, at least in the long term; I would not even be frustrated if it does. If a growing anthropology of suicide remains an alter ego of mainstream suicidology, it can still be useful in many senses of the word. After all, if the situation develops along those lines, we are likely to share the position of dissidents with critical (post) suicidologists while the mainstream field will “go on as usual” (Kral 2015, 10).

Also, as I have argued above, such a position, with all its pros and cons, would be business as usual for anthropology. What I genuinely fear, though, is an instant, superficial success in bringing anthropological agendas into suicidology, which would likely signal a taming or even a castration of anthropology’s potential contribution. It might lead to the “mechanical” accommodation of yet another discipline without helping to move “toward an inclusive, inventive and collaborative (post) suicidology,” i.e. truly challenging “limited (and limiting) underlying assumptions the field operates within and maintains” (Marsh 2015, 5).

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