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Debate Article

Scales of relevance and the importance of ambiguity

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Michael Smith's debate piece (2021) provides some valuable perspectives on the question of why archaeology's relevance to global challenges has not been recognised. He laments that our burgeoning record of publications remains largely irrelevant to other disciplines, citing three main reasons that lie at the feet of archaeologists: a lack of understanding about the construction of relevance; a lack of rigorous scientific epistemology; and a confusion about target audiences.

Smith's argument about relevance and impact is insightful; he argues that "one cannot judge one's own relevance to a different domain" (Smith 2021: 1063), but rather, that relevance is determined by end users. Smith argues that although archaeologists may envision their research as relevant to policy-makers, in reality we might have more to gain by influencing social and natural scientists, for it is they who use our archaeological research to address contemporary issues. This is an interesting perspective as it creates intermediaries between our research and its relevance, with researchers in other disciplines as our target audience. It is notable, however, that Smith's discontent with the discipline relates to what he describes as "middle-range empirical and conceptual issues" (Smith 2021: 1062); that is, an eagerness to contribute to global issues, while often lacking the means to make an effective contribution. He cites, for instance, research that is concerned with economic systems, urban neighbourhoods, social inequalities or urban sustainability as falling into this 'middle range' category of relevance. 'Middle range', here, relates to "theory about how the world works" (Sampson, in Smith 2021: 1062), with Smith arguing that there are four types of relevance: 1) heritage or descendant concerns; 2) local practical topics; 3) middle-range empirical and conceptual topics; and 4) abstract conceptual topics.

Smith argues that the relevance of other scales of research (1, 2 and 4, above)—particularly the local level—is more self-evident. I am unconvinced, however, that pigeonholing the differing relevance of archaeology does justice to many areas of archaeological research, which I argue transcend the levels of relevance outlined by Smith. A project that investigates land claims (heritage or descendant concerns), for example, may also relate to local production methods (local practical topics), to social inequality and urban sustainability (middle-range empirical and conceptual topics), and to concepts of fairness and justice (abstract conceptual topics). Indeed, one of the strengths and delights of archaeological research is precisely the ability to engage at multiple scales, including multiple scales of relevance (a topic in my mind since writing about this in relation to archaeological teaching, research and practice (Cobb & Croucher 2020, inspired by Harris 2017)).

I believe that Smith is correct that we (archaeologists) need to go beyond our comfort zones and proactively collaborate with other disciplines, stakeholders and policy-makers, "rather than trying repeatedly to convince ourselves of the relevance of our research"

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(Smith 2021: 1061). I unequivocally agree about the value of transdisciplinary working, and advocate that relevance should remain an integral consideration in our research designs. Perhaps starting with a contemporary 'need' is the way forward—asking how our research can contribute to real-world solutions. This approach lies at the heart of my recent transdisciplinary research between archaeologists and healthcare professionals in the project 'Continuing Bonds: Exploring the Meaning and Legacy of Death Through Past and Contemporary Practice' (Büster *et al.* 2018; Croucher *et al.* 2021), the central goal of which was determining the role and value of archaeology in the development and implementation of end-of-life planning interventions. Through a transdisciplinary partnership between archaeology, end-of-life medicine, nursing and psychology, we explored the use of archaeology to open dialogues around death and bereavement, and to challenge concepts of 'right' or 'normal' ways to grieve or deal with death. This has fed into wider research with refugee and host communities using heritage for wellbeing and resilience (Evans *et al.* 2020).

I use Smith's (2021: 1064) definition of 'transdisciplinary' as meaning "research for which individuals collaborate deeply and learn elements of one another's discipline". Smith (2021: 1065) is correct in identifying such work as "difficult and time-consuming", with differences in language, approaches and knowledge-bases. I would add, however, that it can be incredibly enlightening, rewarding and even life-changing. Opinions are changed through 'threshold moments', often with a sense of cognitive dissonance, shaping and changing our experiences, knowledge and understanding of the world. Such work often also re-shapes understandings of our own disciplines. In the Continuing Bonds project, working with end-of-life care professionals, academics and psychologists led me to understand various models of bereavement (including their pitfalls). As well as shaping the project and leading to follow-on work (using archaeology) with counsellors and therapists, and with schools (Booth *et al.* 2020), it has also informed my interpretations of the past, urging me to rethink the phenomena of plastered skulls (Croucher 2017)—and, indeed, to think more widely about the concept of bereavement in archaeological interpretations. Whereas much archaeological research is happy to adopt interpretations that relate to hierarchy (or egalitarianism), status or ritual, more emotive interpretations are still rare (with exceptions, such as the pioneering work of Tarlow (2000), key research by Harris and Sørensen (2010) and case studies, such as those by Williams (2007), Giles (2008), Nilsson Stutz (2016), Harris (2017), MacDougal (2017) and Büster (2021)). While we cannot identify the exact emotions surrounding death in the past, recognition that grief may have played a role in the ancient treatment of the dead should not seem far-fetched—arguably we might have as much to say about reactions to loss as we do about hierarchical social structures in the past.

Smith (2021) is also an advocate of generating rigorous, usually quantitative, data. To refer back to giants on whose shoulders I metaphorically stand, there are critiques of an over emphasis on quantitative empirical data, with more nuanced understandings arising from different, often qualitative, methods (e.g. Wylie 1992; Conkey & Tringham 1996; Conkey & Gero 1997; Joyce & Tringham 2007). This is not to say that such methods are less rigorous, but they often provide complex, ambiguous and subtle results that are more realistic and less binary.

Finally, I would like to know more about how Smith sees his arguments relating to marginalised voices. Is it sufficient to communicate our "middle-range empirical and

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conceptual issues" (Smith 2021: 1062) to researchers in other disciplines? Or do we need to co-produce projects actively with our end users? Or, indeed, seek actively to include marginalised voices—whether related to the decolonising agenda, those with protected characteristics or even victims of climate change? Perhaps the way forward lies in multi-plural approaches to working with social and natural scientists, while also ensuring the questions that lie at the heart of our research are socially valuable and seek solutions to challenges at all scales.

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