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Activism and academia: an interdisciplinary dialogue on academic freedom and social engagement

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the questions of academic freedom, scholar activism, public science, and social engagement. The five authors represent scholars from different disciplines and scientific paradigms as well as diverse gender, sexual orientation, nationality, ethnic, and class backgrounds, yet they share a joint passion for academic 'activism'. The paper, therefore, reflects a multitude of transdisciplinary perspectives and positionalities. This dialogue was born out of the group's desire to investigate the role of scientists in public and political matters, including engagement in social justice. The interdisciplinary nature of the dialogue allows for comparisons between how activism is defined, perceived, practiced, and considered (un)welcome in the disciplines of Sociology, Psychology, Law, Media Studies, and Medical Sciences.

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Introduction: the 'academic versus activist' discourse

Should academics engage in activism? In times of high polarisation and a rise in anti-intellectualism (Motta, 2018), we – a multidisciplinary group of young academics based in Amsterdam – came together to discuss this question. While not all of us self-identify as scholar-activists (cf. Richter et al., 2020), we had all experienced situations that triggered us to reflect on the relationship between our scholarship and activism. For some of us, these experiences revolved around our engagement with publics outside the university or the implications of activism for our research. For others, questions around activism emerged after confrontations with the structures and hierarchies that exist within the modern university and within our disciplines that constrain our aspirations to achieve social change through our scholarship. Rather than engaging in isolated efforts, we decided to reflect collectively by means of an interdisciplinary dialogue that allows for comparisons between how activism is defined, perceived, practiced, and considered (un)

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welcome in our disciplines – i.e., Sociology, Psychology, Law, Media Studies, and Medical Sciences.

The question – should academics engage in activism? – seems rather straightforward but the more we thought about it, the more we realised that there are different ways in which both the 'should' and the 'activism' are defined. For some of us, 'should' also implied 'could', meaning that for some of us it was (im)possible to engage with activism from a political and practical perspective and whether, in light of that, activism could be an option for academics (for risks faced by academics when they do engage with activism, see e.g., Aiston & Kent Fo, 2021; Carter Olson & LaPoe, 2018; Landy et al., 2020). To others, 'should' was questioning whether activism must be considered a moral imperative of sorts (see for e.g., Khaitan, 2022; López, 2023). Instead of trying to come up with a homogeneous notion of activism, we decided to keep the notion of activism as broad and inclusive as possible, seeing it as a spectrum ranging from public interventions (e.g., in the media) to involvement in public education, direct forms of public or policy advocacy (e.g., petitions or campaigning) and participation in (grassroots) movements. Despite this open definition, there were certain fundamental epistemological parameters that we agreed on.

Academic activism is concerned with integrating academic scholarship with social and political activism. It is a critical movement that wants scholars to use their expertise, knowledge, and academic platform to engage in social issues actively. It arises from the criticism against academia and academics for operating in isolated 'Ivory Towers', often disconnected from the practical realities of the world (Farnum, 2016), and sometimes disengaged from the people and communities they research with/for/on (Jazeel & McFarlane, 2010). Academic activism challenges the notion that academics should adopt a detached and supposedly 'neutral' and 'objective' stance towards social realities. It rejects the idea that academics should solely study and analyse these realities without actively driving or implementing change in the world. It posits, instead, that academics bear an advantage – if not a responsibility – to employ their knowledge and expertise in non-academic projects that aim to improve life and society.

Academic activism encompasses more than just the question of neutrality. One must not necessarily subscribe to sociologist Max Weber's neutrality in scholarship or pedagogy (Weber, 2004). One can maintain a morally and ethically inclined approach to research while avoiding direct, material or 'non-discursive' outcomes in specific cases to steer clear of academic activism (Khaitan, 2022). The notion of academic activism does not merely extend the current research practices to the realm of activism; instead, it has (potentially serious) implications for the way research practices are conducted by scholars. While truth-seeking and knowledge dissemination are constitutive of the role of academics, activism-driven research has been characterised by a motivation to directly pursue specific material outcomes through one's scholarship (Khaitan, 2022).

The paper also examines the role of academic freedom in academic activism. While there may be areas of overlap, we view academic freedom as a distinct concept from freedom of speech (Simpson, 2020). We do not intend to delve deeply into their distinction, as this has been extensively debated within scholarly circles (Scott, 2017; Simpson, 2020; Suissa & Sullivan, 2021; Sultana, 2018). In discussing academic activism, it is crucial to address the principle of academic freedom, a foundational tenet that allows scholars to pursue research and express ideas without facing restrictions or repercussions. This

principle has remained unchanged since the 1960s, when legal scholar Ralph Fuchs (1963) argued that safeguarding an individual academic's freedom from internal and external control over their thoughts and expressions lies at the core of the matter. Exclusion from the academic community on the basis of race also amounts to a violation of academic freedom, an issue that sadly remains relevant today (Doharty, 2020). Academic freedom is essential for scholars to produce critical ideas without backlash, pressure, or persecution from governments, public interest groups, corporations, States, and other biased/positioned parties. Academic activism will, therefore, not be possible if academic freedom is not guaranteed.

Academic activism certainly overlaps with the movement towards open and public science and disciplinary variations of it, such as the type of public sociology advocated by Burawoy (2005). Among these variations, public science is a particularly accessible form of social engagement. It involves making scientific knowledge and research more accessible and understandable to a wider, non-specialised audience. This practice is essential for democratising knowledge and ensuring that scientific advancements are not kept within the confines of the academic ivory tower. Instead, they are communicated effectively to a broader public audience, fostering greater inclusivity and participation in the scientific enterprise. Other forms of praxis 'in and beyond the classroom' not necessarily outside the academy include union organising, off-campus mobilisations, ecological and anti-racist community organising, etc. Other non-classroom spaces are still linked with the university – such as digital practices using one's academic platform (Ramsey, 2018). Other forms of social engagement outside the university may include active involvement in community discussions and policy processes to participate more directly in social debates.

A discussion on academic activism is incomplete without considering the institutional development of the modern university. In the recent literature, discussions on activism have been placed in relation to the neoliberalism of the university, generally understood as a way of governing the university in accordance with market values, competitive positioning, and capital enhancement (Rhodes et al., 2018). This might mean, on the one hand, that the 'neoliberal academic' is forced to be so focused on producing research 'output' and obtaining research grants in a highly competitive system (Macfarlane, 2019) that social engagement is either considered 'less valuable' or even impossible. On the other hand, the neoliberal shift in focus on 'research impact' (Rhodes et al., 2018), works as a double-edged sword. It offers ways for academics to 'capitalize' on their activism by demonstrating the impact of their work in society while simultaneously risking a limitation to the 'right' types of 'apolitical' impacts that are seen as serving the socio-economic *status-quo*.

As the call for academic activism is becoming more prominent, there has also been a parallel growth in scholarship on the potential challenges associated with activist practices among academics. Some of these concerns revolve around the idea that engagement in forms of activism might result in biases seeping into research or comprise scholarly objectivity and rigour. Others are concerned about the fact that scholars may face various challenges, including backlash and intimidation from political, corporate, or even other academics with differing views (for some of this critique, see for e.g., Alemanno, 2022; Khaitan, 2022; Sultana, 2018). Such backlash can manifest in the form of funding cuts, loss of employment, harassment, or damage to one's reputation. Moreover, academic activism and social engagement can be time-consuming, and some

academics find it challenging to balance these activities with their teaching and research responsibilities.

Methods

Following extensive deliberation and exchange of ideas in three group meetings and exchanging thoughts orally and in writing about our vision of academic freedom, we decided to transform our conversational practice into a collaborative autoethnography. Autoethnography aims to uncover and comprehend personal experiences within a cultural framework, examining the connection between the individual and society. This research method inherently values the researcher's personal experience and subjectivity, challenging traditional notions of objectivity and neutrality. Building on this, collaborative autoethnography harnesses the self-reflective nature of autoethnography to investigate shared experiences within a communal setting, thereby deepening the understanding through the collective analysis of diverse perspectives (Adams & Holman Jones, 2011; Karalis Noel et al., 2023). The team engaged in iterative and systematic processes, maintaining ongoing discussions and critical reflections throughout. We found collaborative autoethnography to be fitting as we aimed to exchange, compare, and comprehend our individual experiences across diverse contexts.

We adopted the research process described by Hislop et al. (2023), carrying out the first two steps in in-person meetings and the remaining remotely: 1. Establish our principles and practices for collaboration, care (of ourselves and each other) and communication. 2. Identify and agree on a research question (criteria for this project were that the question would help us get to know each other, position ourselves as researchers and address a meaningful and under-researched topic). 3. Individually write a story related to the research question. 4. Locate relevant literature to inform critical thinking on the research topic. 5. Share our stories and literature. 6. Individually and then collaboratively identify themes from the stories. 7. Revisit our own stories and code thematically. 8. Allocate and write sections of the article.

This manuscript' objective is to explore whether academics should engage in activism. Different aspects of the benefits and drawbacks of academic activism are explored, drawing upon our expertise in the fields of Sociology, Psychology, Law, Media Studies, and Medical Sciences. The disciplinary differences may evoke an empathetic, interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary dialogue that seeks understanding beyond disciplinary differences. The article incorporates an interdisciplinary rather than multidisciplinary approach to draw on knowledge from different disciplines, and to integrate and harmonise this knowledge into a cohesive framework. By synthesising insights and creating connections between the various fields, the article seeks to develop a more comprehensive understanding that transcends the limitations of individual disciplines. This approach facilitates a coordinated and coherent exploration of the topic, allowing for a deeper and more holistic analysis than in a multidisciplinary approach that merely juxtaposes information from separate disciplines (Choi & Pak, 2006). We do not claim to discuss the advantages or problems of academic activism comprehensively; instead, we aim to employ the

general framework introduced above to make sense of our own academic environments.

Authors background

All authors are Amsterdam Young Academy members, an initiative of the University of Amsterdam and the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, launched on 6 November 2018. Each year 10 young academics from different disciplines are selected based on their motivation and achievements to join the Academy for a period of four years. The Academy aspires to develop innovative perspectives on science, scientific policy, and the bridging of gaps between science and society in Amsterdam. What is interdisciplinary about their approach is the collaboration among young scientists from diverse disciplines, allowing them to integrate and harmonise their expertise to create comprehensive and cohesive views (Choi & Pak, 2006). Their work is transdisciplinary as well, as it seeks to transcend traditional academic boundaries by actively engaging with societal issues and fostering a dialogue between the scientific community and the broader public (Choi & Pak, 2006). In this manuscript, we delve into different aspects of the benefits and drawbacks of academic activism, drawing upon our expertise in different fields and nationalities: Sociology (Ladan Rahbari, Iranian-Belgian), Law (Dion Kramer, Netherlands), Psychology (Marie Deserno, Germany), Media Studies (Tommy Tse, China), and Medical Sciences (Tiago R. Matos, Portugal).

Ladan Rahbari is a political sociologist and feminist researcher primarily focused on gender and sexual politics, with additional interest in academic precarity, especially among migrant academics. Her interest in precarity in the academy also connects to the notion of academic freedom, as expressed in Rahbari (2024), which takes epistemological, ethical, and political positions that can render one's position precarious both in the academy and society.

Dion Kramer is a legal scholar and political scientist. He combines doctrinal and empirical methods to study the law and politics of European Integration, with a specific focus on the free movement of EU citizens and the national welfare state. His interest in the socio-economic conflicts created by an 'open border' Europe also led him to research the posting of workers, tourism, and housing in the city and, most recently, homelessness.

Marie Deserno is a psychological scientist. She works on refining empirical methods to analyse developmental data, with the aim of detecting sensitive periods in cognitive and social development. With her background in both methods and clinical psychology, she works at the intersection of these fields to refine the way we conceptualise, analyse, and theorise about developmental dynamics and clinical profiles in cognitive development.

Tommy Tse is a media scholar and ethnographer who studies various types of cultural production, creative work and consumer culture in Hong Kong, China, South Korea, and East Africa. With the sociocultural specificity of his research, he strives to fill a significant research gap between theory and practice of the predominantly 'Western-centric' studies of cultural production, mediation, and consumption, in addition to the increasingly precarious conditions of creative workers in these regions.

Tiago R. Matos is a physician (dermatovenereologist) and scientist with two distinct PhDs, one in immunology and the other in biomedical sciences. He is dedicated to

advancing treatments for immunologic diseases and providing novel insights into human immune responses. A Portuguese national, Tiago has studied, worked, and lived in the Czech Republic, UK, USA, and currently resides in the Netherlands. He is deeply passionate about social justice, actively engaging in issues related to fair and transparent career progression, activism and advocacy, and global health.

The relational and interpersonal nature of our collaborative endeavour is central to our process, as emphasised by Chang et al. (2013) in 'Collaborative Autoethnography'. By engaging deeply with one another's personal narratives, we create a dynamic and reflective space that fosters mutual understanding and support. This interconnected approach compels us to critically examine our own assumptions and biases, enhancing our reflexivity. The collective scrutiny of our experiences allows for a more nuanced and comprehensive exploration of the cultural contexts we navigate, ultimately enriching the depth and authenticity of our research outcomes.

The interdisciplinary dialogue

Ladan Rahbari: I am perfectly in favour of academics taking part in social debates, engaging with politics and policy publicly, and making their expert standpoints known in academic and public spaces. I think it would be fitting to begin this dialogue by saying that the arguments I want to make about the pitfalls of academic activism are not a rejection of its value as a whole but just a few concerns I have about how 'activism' may be practised. I acknowledge that academics can become activists in ways that align with their personal and professional values. But let us consider that there are pitfalls to academic activism too, or at least to how it is sometimes practised. I think I speak on behalf of us all when I say that there have been cases where academics who have become self-proclaimed activists have abused their position by intentionally or unintentionally blending their personal moral views with their academic status to create opinions that appear as impartial research outcomes. Before I continue, I need to be clear about what I mean by abusing one's position and by blending personal views. I am a feminist scholar, so I do not believe that one can be entirely 'objective' in their scientific practice. There is a long-standing feminist scholarship on this and on how one's position in society, often called positionality, leaks into axiological and epistemological standpoints and academic practices (Collins, 1999; Rich, 1984). However, a distinction should be made between how positionality impacts research and how blatant partiality could affect research and society. The importance of this form of self-restraint and external check when it comes to one's expertise is not only important for social sciences and humanities; we also saw it in the case of COVID-19 how the explosion of opinions on masks and the best ways to handle the spread of the virus led to confusion and the spread of disinformation (Rahbari, 2023a). This is part of the other potential pitfall of academic activism, which is about becoming prone to recruitment by blatantly partisan entities for one's expertise.

Dion Kramer: I want to clarify the other side of the argument, however, by pointing out that taking a more activist pathway can be the more ethical choice under certain circumstances. An example from my own academic work tries to understand the

ideological and political-economic context producing the law and, in turn, the dynamics and outcomes generated by that law. Because of this empirical focus, I used to refrain from explicitly taking normative stances against (government) authorities. But when I understood that migrants from other EU Member States were systematically denied access to homeless shelters in the Netherlands, I felt the duty to speak out publicly as an academic in the national newspaper, stressing the right to equal treatment those migrants should enjoy as EU citizens (Kramer, 2022). Since my publication, journalists have approached me to comment on the rights of homeless EU citizens and criticise government policies. I also started to engage much more frequently with organisations working with the homeless, giving workshops and legal advice in individual cases and thinking along with public campaigns and legal mobilisation while also being in contact with civil servants and politicians. For me personally, this meant a meaningful next step towards public engagement after years of research in relative solitude in the so-called 'Ivory Tower', giving concrete shape to my ethical commitment to the promotion of social justice and challenging hegemonic discourses (along the lines of Lennox & Yaprak Yıldız, 2020).

Marie Deserno: Another example of the complex view on how science and activism interplay can be taken from the discipline of psychology, which has recently experienced what I would call intra-disciplinary activism. This has involved all the ingredients of a traditional activist story: whistleblowers, bottom-up initiatives challenging the establishment, scientific boycotts, and many other factors that have eventually led to what we now refer to as the reproducibility crisis. If anything, this crisis has pointed out the weak spots of the discipline of psychological science: failing to publish studies that don't go your way, reporting the statistics in a way that skews the result in a favoured direction, criticising experiments that you don't like while letting equally bad but more sympathetic ones off the hook, et cetera. Essentially, these widespread practices are a consequence of what might be called the double bind of psychological research: first, we are dealing with one of the most complex measurement problems of all the sciences, that of measuring the (invisible) human mind, and second, that we are human, the very object of interest. This implies a constant tension between objectivity and subjectivity, replicability and originality, and timelessness and zeitgeist. This illustrates that in psychological research, sometimes even seemingly basic choices of measurement tools and analytic techniques are an act of activism.

Tiago R. Matos: Similar to psychology, medicine intends to constantly distinguish what is objective from subjective. But it is not always clear. When I was first invited to participate in discussions about activism in academia, I was very reluctant. As a medical scientist, I wanted to lead progression and learn effective ways to increase fairness, equality, and inclusivity. But I did not want to become an 'activist'. My conservative background as a methodological, scientifically trained doctor made me perceive activists as radicals who lead extreme public protests, calling for attention. Medicine and medical sciences are ruled by rigid protocols and guidelines. Physicians abide by the Hippocratic oath, pledging to prescribe only beneficial treatments according

to their abilities and judgement, to refrain from causing harm or hurt, and to live an exemplary personal and professional life. We should refrain from giving our personal opinions, treat everyone despite our faith or beliefs, and provide evidence-based information, allowing the patient to make their own decision. Therefore, while the term 'advocacy' is sometimes used in medicine, defined as 'public support for or recommendation of a particular cause or policy' (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.) 'activism' is often left out and heard in the context of news. Activism is 'the activity of working to achieve political or social change, especially as a member of an organization with aims' (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.). For example, the current healthcare system, sometimes focused on production, maximising the number of new patients, shortening consultation time, and increasing legal and bureaucratic duties, can feel industrialised, possibly neglecting human-patient needs. I noticed that I was well-trained in diagnosing and treating dermatological diseases but remained naïve to the specific human needs of my patients, especially those with chronic diseases. Therefore, I looked for ways to give a voice to patients by inviting several patient associations to talk to our department about their experiences and needs and mostly about what we, the medical workforce, could do to support their community and patient associations.

Tommy Tse: I would like to redirect the angle towards the constraints imposed by the academic system itself. I used to work in Hong Kong academia. As a more junior academic, I could only do so much back then. Some people say Hong Kong creates one of the 'worst' academic systems, combining the UK's and the US's: firstly, while it is rather privileged and well paid, it's extremely competitive to secure a 6-year tenure track Assistant Professor position. Once you start, you will be familiarised with the stringent performance evaluation system: rigid adherence to journals with high Social Science Citation Index/Science Citation Index, preferably published by globally prestigious universities, huge pressure on getting external competitive grants (e.g., HK UGC General Research Fund) with 10 – 20% success rate, and so forth. . . If one does not get at least one grant in five years, their hope to get tenured is doomed, and they will be kicked out. Many of those who got through the threshold of getting tenure, as I have known many, already got severely burned out, often losing their passion for conducting new and innovative research. The academic environment itself is also very competitive and isolated. The more prestigious the university, the more hostile and competitive among colleagues – it's an academic 'squid game'. Teaching, administrative work, and social engagement often become less important, unrecognised, and/or shouldered off to the precarious part-time teachers, PhD students, and administrative staff. All these aspects make it very difficult for Assistant Professors to engage in socially important issues. That is, to publish non-academic popular press articles, write reflection pieces like this or take part in social activism, since otherwise they will be blamed for not being serious and fully dedicated to their academic work.

Ladan Rahbari: I agree that there are differences in how public engagement and activism are afforded to individuals depending on their contexts. I want to continue with your last note, where you mention that there is a fear that non-mainstream academic work, or so-

called activist work, may not be taken as seriously in academia. One worry that exists is that activist work, including student activism, becomes domesticated, neoliberalised, and formalised within the academy, potentially stripping it of its radical potential. In this process, activism is marketised and delineated as something very specific by the university, where deviation from this formulaic grid may result in individuals being easily categorised as problematic or less serious.

I think this is also a concern here, in Western Europe, where non-mainstream academic work–and that includes an array of things, including public engagements–may lead to one being perceived as a less serious academic. I recently co-edited the book 'Migrant Academics Narratives of Precarity and Resilience in Europe' (Burlyuk & Rahbari, 2023), an academic book based on autoethnographies and autobiographies by (formerly) migrant academics from the Global South, who tell their stories of precarity in the European academy. And even though this is a collection of chapters published by an academic publisher, both of us, the editors and contributors, feared it would not be taken seriously as an academic work. Mostly because it was based on narratives addressing individuals' experience with structural problems in academia. I think I even mentioned in my own chapter in the book–where I talk about microaggressions in conference spaces–that I am not sure how my colleagues will receive my chapter since it is not written in the mainstream academic way (Rahbari, 2023b). I think the negativity attached to activism, whether the critique of the institution itself or the critique of the social issues, in academia is very much a thing in the European academy.

Dion Kramer: This brings me to a question I have been struggling with: does the ethical commitment to justice and equality and alignment with social and political movements challenge compromise my integrity as a researcher or make me an activist scholar? In other words, are the contributors to your book less academic because they want to fix what is broken in academia? The problem here is that the authority of academic research in society precisely derives from such notions as objectivity, neutrality, and value-free knowledge (even though a science devoid of any societal objectives or values is difficult to imagine). The impression that the scholar diverts from objectivity – even when temporary – can, therefore, be enough to undermine the credibility of the scholar and scholarship. Academic activism is prone to criticism because it supposedly undermines scholars' moral role in society: that is, discovering truth and disseminating knowledge. A more targeted argument is that by compromising disciplinary and methodological virtues in exchange for short-term interventions, or even fame, activist research may not only lead to unintended outcomes but also jeopardise, in the long(er) run, the very ability of academia to contribute to a better world (Khaitan, 2022). Such critiques of activist scholarship rightly point to the pitfalls when we lose sight of our commitment to method, self-awareness, and independence. As already pointed out by Adrian Stone, however, these pitfalls also arise out of the many other vices inherent to contemporary academia with its incentives to 'publish-or-perish', be 'cited and invited', and produce 'original' research (Stone, 2023). In fact, caring about the real-world effects of your research might bring about the degree of passion, obsession, and persistence needed to produce critical knowledge in the long(er) term (Stone, 2023).

Tiago R. Matos: The negative perception of activist work extends outside of academia to the public. It is evident in the portrayal of all kinds of environmentalists and LGBTQ+ rights activists as eccentric and militant within social manuscripts or government reports (Brown, 2007; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2001). Similarly, feminists have been perceived and categorised as aggressive and unorthodox (Berryman-Fink & Verderber, 1985; Twenge & Zucker, 1999). While some activists may take pride in adopting radical positions and ignoring mainstream sensibilities, this approach can lead members of the public to distance themselves from activists. This is also the case in my field, among doctors, who retain a high social appreciation. Some cultures keep a rigid form of hierarchical thinking and engagement with teachers and supervisors, where the students can ask about medical or scientific topics but not question its validity or 'the system'. The incapacity to ponder on the logic or base of arguments forbids creative thinking and prevents innovation. Many doctors may find refuge in scientific research, when recognising the futility of trying to improve organisational processes and policies.

Marie Deserno: Furthermore, I believe activist movements have played a huge role not only in society but also in shaping academic disciplines. To illustrate, I will give a few examples of my own discipline: activist movements such as critical psychology and anti-psychiatry from the 1960s have challenged the legitimacy of mainstream psychology as it fails to consider the impact of power differences between social classes on mental health. Similarly, the neurodiversity movement is a more recently developed (controversial) perspective that opts for a social model of disability in conceptualising neuropsychological 'disorders' such as ADHD and autism, moving away from terms such as 'deficit' and 'suffering'. While this appears to be an internal discourse within the discipline, the opposite is true: society builds its moral and social infrastructure around these perspectives. The distinction between healthy and pathological, normal, and deviant, directly impacts collective decision-making in questions such as: what kind of mental health care should be subsidised, and for whom, or what to do with people convicted for crimes? Let us be reminded of the very dark chapters in history when the answer to these questions led to 'measurements' of intelligence being used for the Nazi eugenics program, or psychiatrists being expected to 'treat' LGBTQ people. If anything, this shows that my discipline is never free from the current zeitgeist and ideology.

Tommy Tse: I agree with all this and want to add that being unable to contribute to social issues as a scholar is sometimes frustrating. It is such an irony for someone like me, who tries to enhance the well-being of media/cultural workers while also, at times, feeling helpless within our own academic systems for its structural violence and being more and more socialised into its competitive logic and play along its rules to survive. I often feel guilty for not actually being able to do anything for many of the informants I interviewed and observed: the government is not listening, and many universities only recognise it if these stories get 'theorised' and published in top academic journals. The process usually takes at least two years if you're lucky. Most academics also find it difficult to excel in all

the demands placed on the modern academic. Through the first six years, most Hong Kong academics could only think of 'get the tenure! Get tenure!' and 'publish or perish', leaving little room for other meaningful initiatives for society but also for academia itself.

Tiago R. Matos: I would also like to add that this is not a problem limited to a specific geography, although we should acknowledge differences. I have worked in academia in the Czech Republic, UK, and USA and have witnessed the same problems and limitations of academic activism. And I am now based in the Netherlands. Being in Amsterdam, considered 'the world's most liberal city' (Shorto, 2014), I am still cautioned about the risks of activism. I recently published an article in the newspaper reflecting on the importance of transparency in universities (Matos, 2022). After the publication, colleagues cautioned me to 'not burn bridges'. That it should have been approved by the communications office prior to publication. Perhaps it is because the medical field is so hierarchical and political, maybe other academic fields would have reacted differently. But while it is frustrating to receive such discouraging comments, I am not disheartened. I don't think academics should be afraid to 'act' beyond 'advocate', while still being as much as possible based on evidence.

Tommy Tse: Indeed, problems with public engagement are also quite present in Western academia, including in the Netherlands. After moving to the University of Amsterdam, I initially thought it was a much better academic system enabling academics to go beyond the Ivory Tower of academia. After being here for two years and hearing more and more stories from colleagues, my reflection is that there is no perfect system. While many are happy with the stability of their full-time career, some colleagues feel stuck for being a lecturer/assistant professor forever. The work pressure that distracts them from social engagement/impact projects is typically not from research but from the heavy teaching load and administrative duties. There is also another layer of difficulty for foreigners/non-Dutch speakers to adapt to the work environment and social life.

Ladan Rahbari: Yes, and now that we have come so far in our arguments, I would like to explore the importance of separating the notions of freedom of speech and academic freedom by arguing that each is connected to different types of discourse as well as spaces and spheres of social life (Simpson, 2020; Sultana, 2018). So, I think if we mean activism is engaging in public debates regarding what is covered under academic freedom, then there is enormous value in that. Suppose we mean academics engaging in what is covered under the principles of freedom of speech but is not protected under academic freedom. In that case, I think while academics should be able to engage with those, they need to assess their roles more carefully. I am not claiming that the position of an academic or the spaces in which we engage in debates are always clear-cut or that it is easy to say what falls under freedom of speech and what is protected under academic freedom, but that the distinction is one that is useful to think through. I am not against scholars contributing to public debate in areas that fall outside their expertise (Macfarlane & Cheng, 2008) but

against using one's platform to claim authority on topics they are not experts on. An example of this is psychologist Jordan Peterson, who is, for instance, not an expert on gender or climate science but engages in uninformed discussions on such topics. The problem here is not that he holds those ideas; he is entitled to them both as a person and as an academic, but to engage in seemingly academic conversations on matters one is uninformed about is where it becomes problematic. So, the authority as 'experts' in a field is used to justify personal views masked in academic discourse that are not in that initial field. Therefore, I agree with all that has been said so far, but I think it is also important to think about such cases, even if most academics do not engage in them.

Dion Kramer: These examples highlight how far the abuse can go, even though we start to touch upon debates around the role of the public intellectual in society (Said, 2012). I also think that activism can sometimes compromise the ability to conduct research, and my example is in relation to qualitative empirical methods. A certain public profile as a scholar shaped by acts of activism or public engagement might make it more difficult to use methods that require the participation of actors in the political arena. In my research, for example, I use semi-structured interviews to understand how practitioners interpret the law, breach the law, take risks, etc., to understand what the law does, and interviewees might be less open when they somehow perceive me as partisan. So, there is always that risk, even when you are an ethical scholar and stay within the framework of your own expertise. Yet, at the same time, to use that same example, my engagement with organisations and the very act of being a critical public voice can also become drivers of my research. Because of my visible profile, doors opened to a range of actors, helping me gain a much more intimate understanding of 'law in action' by bridging theory and practice. From this perspective, activism could even be considered a heuristic and part of a methodological toolkit.

Marie Deserno: Let me jump in here to say something about the risks that Dion and Ladan are talking about. Indeed, your example is apt and says something about my discipline, and I recognise the risks you talk about. Unless one is wilfully blind to it, being a psychological scientist means constantly navigating public discourses that are bound to be ambiguous and polarising. Essentially, because they affect everyone, and in turn, everyone feels affected by them. Psychology studies the vast neurodiversity of humanity: how people think, feel, interact, and learn, the fine line between the healthy and the pathological, and what it is that we call consciousness. Naturally, these are the things that everyone has an opinion about – because we all live them. Absurd as it may seem in the face of such complex questions, as scientists, we are still looking for patterns, similarities, and differences – useful predictors of any kind that might help us to signal mental difficulties and develop tailored support for those who are struggling (or not). The implications of our findings, in turn, have major implications for society and the individuals who live in it. That is, they shape the way we collectively reason about what it means to be a human. The role of the activist in public spheres is, therefore, not easy to establish, and it is an uncomfortable one as everyone feels entitled to the truth of their own anecdata, their lived experiences, and personal realities. Scientific myths based on

a 'single experience' are perhaps more persistent within psychology than in other disciplines. Every interpretation will find someone who feels seen or heard in it, and psychologists are far from immune to that. Sartre (1971) once diagnosed the discipline of psychological science with the inevitability of remaining an agglomeration of unrelated observations and interpretations because we will never get to the 'essence' of the human mind (Sartre, 1971). To this day, we have yet to prove him wrong.

Concluding remarks

At the outset of this essay, we asked, 'Should academics engage in activism?'. In a truly academic manner, we have not responded directly to this question in our conversation. What we did instead is to draw on our own expertise and experience to highlight different ways academic activism is understood and which forms of power could be involved in the practice of academic activism. The roundtable has also drawn on examples outside of the Dutch academy to compare different national contexts.

A start of an answer seems to lie in the dual role of academics: serving broader society while practising self-restraint. The neutral and expert position held by publicly funded academics enables them to participate in public discourse or engage in activities that enhance the material conditions of marginalised groups, address injustices, or question dominant ideologies. From this perspective, activism could be seen as a public service inherent to academic citizenship (Macfarlane, 2007). Institutionally, universities and research funders often expect this kind of societal engagement, albeit sometimes framed in the neoliberal terminology of 'valorisation'. However, caution must be exercised to avoid the pitfalls of academic activism. This includes guarding against being co-opted by overtly partisan entities or succumbing to the temptation to provide hasty solutions to urgent and immediate problems, risking rushed or biased research (Khaitan, 2022). A continued commitment to good and slow scholarship requirements seems pertinent here: reading, thinking, discussing, workshopping, getting peer-reviewed, revising before publishing, and disseminating research. Scholars such as Fish (2015) and Macfarlane (2021), however, argue that academic activism should not be narrowly defined, as it might inadvertently deprive students from freely developing and voicing their own views. Fish argues that the exercise of academic freedom at times involves 'flouting the institution's protocols in the name of a higher obligation'. Academic freedom can be perceived and interpreted as *freedom from the academy*: 'what professors and students should be autonomous from is the monitoring by the university of whatever they choose to do' (Fish, 2015, p. 278). Fish made his alternative view clear: 'I don't mean that professional values take precedence over more general human values, but that more general human values should not be the ones dictating your behaviour when you are acting as a professional'. Macfarlane (2021) also warned to not be co-opted by the mainstream narratives of 'grand challenges', 'corporate citizenship', 'corporate social responsibilities' increasingly advocated in the world of higher education, as they appropriate the counter-culture, increasingly corporatise activism within the university, and narrow down the university's research agenda, 'threaten academic freedom of enquiry… closing down debate on social and political issues'. While McClennen (2023) reflects on David Horowitz's drastic political turn from the New Left to the New Right and his evolved

notions of academic freedom, her discussion draws our attention to the controversial practices on academic freedom: should a professor – left-wing or right-wing – be fired for their political views and affiliations? These divergent stances, in fact, provide us with critical insights into the definition of academic freedom: what and whose freedom are we fighting for? Whose stances are amplified, and whose stances silenced? And are the less powerful stakeholders in academia (e.g., students) free to disagree with the powerful academic figures' views or just to not take a stance?

Academics' public engagement is also perceived differently depending on their respective discipline. Tiago's experience exemplifies how academic activism may not be as readily embraced in his field (medicine and biomedical sciences) as in Ladan and Marie's disciplines (Sociology and Psychology). However, we argue that this discrepancy does not necessarily stem from inherent characteristics of the disciplines themselves; while Sociology and Psychology may be more relatable for a lay audience, more people have come to realise, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, that medical findings hold tremendous social relevance and important implications for people's lives. We believe that the resistance within certain disciplines to engage in social activism can be attributed to the historical development of these disciplines and the prevalence of the prestigious ivory tower – practised all over and across all disciplines. In contrast, the social and political aspects of the humanities and social sciences tend to be more apparent, while demonstrating the political relevance of medical and psychological research requires more convincing.

Some of the policy implications that derive from this discussion include, first, establishing initiatives that promote collaboration between different academic disciplines. This would help bridge the gap between fields of study (e.g., medicine and biomedical sciences with the humanities and social sciences) to enhance public engagement and activism. Second, boosting academic activism and public engagement can be achieved through incentivising and providing funding opportunities, grants, and awards that specifically recognise and support such engagements. Public engagement and activism, however, extend beyond the realm of research and are relevant for classrooms and other teaching environments. One way to normalise academic activism is by encouraging educators to include discussions on the role of academics in society and the value of their public engagement in academic curricula, in a concrete way (e.g., by discussing tangible examples and case studies). While policies and changes involving university management are important, it is vital that universities adopt policies that, above all, democratise activism and avoid reductionist interpretations. Defending academic activism, safeguarding academic freedom, and ensuring that scholars who engage in public activism are not penalised but rather recognised for their contributions to societal discourses is crucial.

To conclude, our paper has primarily focused on the individual engagement of academics in activism, with limited emphasis on a structural analysis of the role of universities. However, we recognise the significance of extending the conversation to the institutional level, considering the various ways they play a role in bridging the gap between academia and other societal realms. Many academic institutions, including those in the Netherlands, are increasingly investing in and promoting community engagement research that aims to have a tangible real-world impact. This encourages research projects that address community needs, moving beyond purely academic curiosity and

potentially creating new avenues for academic activism (Mkono, 2020). It might be that this focus of Dutch academia, in combination with (relatively) secure tenure and working conditions for academic staff compared to other countries, explains why our accounts do not reveal the same level of concerns about the neoliberalism of universities (e.g., Rhodes et al., 2018; Richter et al., 2020). Nevertheless, a persistent challenge lies in the alignment of 'societal impact' initiatives with the broader neoliberal trends within academia, which often place the burden of action solely on individual researchers. To truly facilitate social engagement by academics, universities should assume a more critical and structural role. This involves not only making social engagement attractive to researchers – which is currently a common approach – but also upholding the principles of academic freedom and providing protection for academics who use their expertise to engage in social debates.

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