

“What is the difference between your response to Marilyn Strathern on feminist anthropology and Victoria Loblay’s response?”

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Abstract. Regarding the argument by Marilyn Strathern which Victoria Loblay focuses on, I present two differences between my response and Loblay’s response. Also I raise a concern about Loblay’s response.

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I learnt about the sex selection test

In the East and in the West

Marilyn Strathern makes various arguments against the very idea of feminist anthropology. The one which will concern us here draws attention to the conflicting “prescriptions” that a feminist anthropologist will receive in the field from being a feminist and an anthropologist (1987: 288-289):

(Anthropological prescription) The feminist social anthropologist as anthropologist is tasked with studying a society by means of participating in the way of life of that society and fulfilling that task requires interacting with males.

(Feminist prescription) The feminist social anthropologist as feminist is tasked with not interacting with the source of oppression for females: that is males.

Given these prescriptions, it seems impossible to be a feminist social anthropologist when doing fieldwork. One of them has to be sacrificed. A solution I once proposed is that the

so-called feminist prescription is mistaken. The feminist project of reducing oppression for females only requires not interacting with males if it is a hindrance, all things considered, to reducing oppression and there is no reason to think that is always the case (Edward 2020: 19). For example, some interaction may help reduce oppression in the long-term – a brief period of oppression is compensated by gains against oppression later. In this paper, I wish to contrast this solution with the response of anthropologist Victoria Loblay.

Loblay focuses on the same argument from Strathern and objects as follows:

Given that numerous feminisms have long been engaging in political projects that transcend societal boundaries and negotiating the difficulties thrown up by cultural differences in the process, it seems likely that Strathern's model of feminist practices was based around a conception of western feminist traditions. Postcolonial feminist projects such as that of John (1996), demonstrate how feminisms can redraw the boundaries of feminist practice and incorporate experiences from multiple locations. I contend that the feminist anthropologist has much in common with such feminist internationalisms... (2010: 57)

Loblay sounds critical of the feminist prescription identified above. Loblay's objection seems to be this: given that there are international feminist projects, we can infer that they have some solution to the problem Strathern raises and the solution will probably reveal that Strathern only captures a prescription of a specific variety of Western feminism, not all feminism (see also Viswewaran 1988: 29-30; Boddy 1991: 126).

One crucial difference between Loblay and I is that I do not work backward from the existence of international feminist projects to "There must be something wrong with

Strathern's attribution of this prescription to feminism in general." (Or "There is probably something wrong." I do not refer to such projects at all!)

A second difference is that Loblay does not say what she plans to replace Strathern's feminist prescription with, so as to avoid the problem. I proposed this:

(Feminist prescription)* The feminist social anthropologist as feminist is tasked with not interacting with males if it is a hindrance to reducing the oppression of women, all things considered.

But what does Loblay wish to replace it with? My concern about Loblay's response, referred to in the abstract to this paper, is that something needs to be said about this.

Loblay provides details from her own ethnographic research, but the information is not explicitly directed at "How I interact with males during fieldwork without compromising my feminist commitments." As a fieldworker in India, she writes of:

...training myself to understand the feminist methods and practices that form part of contemporary Indian politics. So far this process has involved consultations with various people involved in research and activism in relation to women's health issues in Delhi and Chennai. The ideas in this paper have also been formed in the midst of interviews and meetings with non-governmental organisation (NGO) workers, activists, pregnant women, social workers, health professionals and families in Chennai. Moreover, my thoughts owe a great deal to my experience at the 2008 National Women's Studies Conference in Lucknow, for which this paper was conceived. (2010: 61)

For all we know, all of this involved interacting with females only, or the interactions with males were minimal. If there was substantial interaction with males, Loblay does not explain how she solved the issue raised by Strathern of staying feminist.

But examining what she says, I can reframe some of the material as a challenge to Strathern's perspective. Loblay discusses the introduction of tests for determining the sex of a child in early pregnancy and their uses in different societies (2010: 58-59). An issue raised in relation to India and China is the subsequent abortions of females because of a traditional preference for males. But in Australia the tests lead to abortions to realize another ideal: a gender equal family, e.g. one boy and one girl. Probably some feminists will converge with some others against certain uses of the tests – e.g. feminists who are against aborting females for the ends specified and some (non-feminist) males who say that using the tests to then abort females is “playing God” – and effective responses require that convergence. Some feminist projects probably cannot succeed without interaction with males, contrary to the feminist prescription identified by Strathern. But this is my reframing and probabilistic judgment!

References

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