

## **Societies differ in how they handle the same facts: an axiom of social anthropology?**

*Author:* Terence Rajivan Edward

*Abstract.* This paper challenges Marilyn Strathern's claim that it is, or was, an axiom of social anthropology that societies differ in how they handle the same facts. I present a set of foundational commitments for conducting social anthropology which leave the truth of the proposition as an empirical question of the discipline.

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*There was a chapter all Persian*

*In my science's first version*

I wish to respond to a claim which the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern makes in her book *After nature: English kinship in the late twentieth century* (or "I shall respond" if it is not best described as a wish). She writes:

The facts, it is held, are universal whereas ideas about kinship obviously vary. In this view, for instance, cultural dogmas differ in the extent to which they recognise biological connection, social classes in the extent to which they emphasise maternal and paternal roles, and historical periods in the emphasis given to family life. In short, societies differ in the way they handle the same facts. This is an axiom or assumption that is as much part of English kinship thinking as it is of social constructionist theorising about it. (1992: 3)

I interpret Strathern as presenting the proposition "Societies differ in the way they handle the same facts" as an axiom of English social anthropology, and more broadly British social

anthropology. I would like more evidence for this axiomatic status,<sup>1</sup> because I can readily imagine an anthropologist in the 1920s thinking that previous anthropology was unscientific, especially for relying on the reports of travellers about different peoples; and deciding that the discipline must be made scientific; and conceiving that transformation as leaving the proposition not as an assumption or axiom, rather a result of empirical research at best. By “readily imagine,” I mean to convey that it does not seem unlikely, at least given what I know (see also Marett 1923: 107).

I imagine an anthropologist who accepts the following three commitments as axioms (as well as perhaps some others):

*(Fact-universality)* If something is a fact, for example that the Earth is round, then it is a fact wherever a human being may be and whether it is recognized as a fact or not.

*(Non-recognition possibility)* For at least some facts, perhaps all, it is possible for some human being without impaired faculties to not recognize that it is a fact, i.e. not believe that it is fact.

*(Discreteness criterion)* If A and B are two current but distinct societies, then they occupy non-overlapping territories.

Now let us simplify and suppose that there are only two ways of handling a fact: recognizing it, i.e. believing it to be a fact, and not recognizing it, i.e. not believing it to be a fact. An anthropologist with these commitments is likely to hold that it is an empirical question of anthropology whether societies differ in how they handle the same facts, that is to say, which facts they recognize. “Anthropology has to start again, owing to its unscientific history, and this is not something to be assumed by the new scientific anthropology. Rather it should

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<sup>1</sup> I am taking an axiom here to be something one might list in a set of foundational commitments.

emerge, if at all, as a result of anthropological research.” (Perhaps Strathern would say that actually English anthropology is informed by common sense experience.<sup>2</sup>)

The scientific project of social anthropology which arose in Britain in the 1920s rejected inquiry into beliefs as psychological states, or at least some participants did (see Leach 1966: 40), but that would still leave the question of whether two societies differ in the facts they publicly recognize, as an object of empirical investigation. Also you might propose that there is some incoherence, because the revolutionary scientific anthropologist imagined above must concede at the outset that earlier anthropologists did not recognize what was scientific, differing in their handling of facts about that. An interesting point, but it seems that this lack of recognition would not be included in the foundations of the revolutionary systematization of this discipline. It is not on the list of axioms and the application of these leaves it as a possible object of empirical inquiry.

## References

- Leach, E. 1966. Virgin Birth. *Proceedings of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 1966: 39-49.
- Marett, R.R. 1923. Anthropology. *The London Mercury* 8 (43): 106-108.
- Strathern, M. 1992. *After nature: English kinship in the late twentieth century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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<sup>2</sup> I shall not try to support this point here, but of the two famous founding figures, I think Malinowski was more receptive to incorporating common sense than Radcliffe-Brown.