

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

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Abstract. Marilyn Strathern claims that it is, or was, an axiom of social anthropology that societies differ in how they handle the same facts. I present two clarifications neither of which looks suitable for axiomatic status.

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“No system can explain this thing:

A bee that promised not to sting

If I should ride upon its wing.”

In her book *After nature: English kinship in the late twentieth century*, the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern tells us:

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 intending to communicate that the proposition “Societies differ in the way they handle the same facts” is or was an axiom of English social anthropology. But there is a brief case against its ever being suitable for this role.

Here are two clarifications of the proposed axiom (leaving “handle” still unclarified):

(Clarification 1) Take any two societies and they differ in how they handle the same facts.

(Clarification 2) There are some cases of two societies which differ in how they handle the same facts, even if not all cases of two societies differ like this.

Let’s say that an axiom of a framework of social anthropology is a foundational commitment of it. It is suitable for putting on a list of foundational commitments of this framework! (The obvious way of clarifying “foundational” is that it is not inferred from other commitments.) The proposed axiom on clarification 1 seems too general. One does not want to rule out in advance the possibility of two societies which handle the same facts in the same way (see also Jarvie 1967: 225). But clarification 2 seems too specific. An anthropology framework should provide a way of doing anthropology in a possible situation in which two societies do not differ like this, a very strange situation perhaps.

Is there some way of meeting this challenge? I don’t know. It needs to be registered, I think. And it makes us wonder whether the supposed axiom was ever an axiom. (This line of doubt does not focus on whether commonsense experience of differences, or some findings of an earlier anthropology, do not count as scientific evidence. See Edward 2022.)

References. Edward, T.R. 2022. Societies differ in how they handle the same facts: an axiom of social anthropology? Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/EDWSDI>

Jarvie, I.C. 1967. On theories of fieldwork and the scientific character of social anthropology. *Philosophy of Science* 34 (3): 223-242.

Strathern, M. 1992. *After nature: English kinship in the late twentieth century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.