

## **Anthropology in the context that produced it**

Terence Rajivan Edward  
University of Manchester

### **Abstract**

This paper evaluates a definition of anthropology at home formulated by Marilyn Strathern in her book contribution 'The Limits of Auto-Anthropology'. According to the definition, anthropology at home is anthropology carried out in the social context that produced this discipline. I argue that this is not an adequate definition of anthropology at home.

**Keywords:** Marilyn Strathern, anthropology at home, auto-anthropology, social context, essential premises, self-knowledge.

### **Introduction**

Some works of anthropology are classified as anthropology at home. One book that is classified in this way describes the different worldviews of some inhabitants of a village in the north of England (Rapport 1993; Rapport 2002, 6). Another book describes views about kinship within an English town, in response to new reproductive technologies (Edwards 2000). Here I have given two examples. By giving a series of examples, perhaps one can convey what it is for a work of anthropology to be a work of anthropology at home. But such examples do not amount to a definition.

In a book contribution entitled 'The Limits of Auto-Anthropology', the influential anthropologist Marilyn Strathern attempts to provide a definition of anthropology at home. Strathern observes that her definition is highly specific. According to her, there could be other definitions of what it is

for anthropology to be at home which, even if they differ significantly from hers, are also legitimate (Strathern 1987, 16). She suggests that the expression ‘anthropology at home’ can be used with different meanings and other legitimate definitions would capture other meanings. In this paper, I evaluate her definition. First I evaluate it without a clarification of hers. Then I evaluate it with the clarification. I argue that the definition, though a profound effort, is not acceptable when clarified in this way.

### **On Strathern’s definition, without the clarification**

Strathern refers to those works of anthropology which count as anthropology at home, when operating with her definition, as auto-anthropology. She offers the following definition of auto-anthropology, which I suspect is the best known definition of anthropology at home from her or anyone else:

Auto-anthropology, that is anthropology carried out in the social context which produced it, in fact has a limited distribution. (Strathern 1987, 17)

Anthropology at home, on Strathern’s definition, is anthropology carried out in the social context which produced it. By ‘it’, I understand her to be referring to the discipline of anthropology. Anthropology at home is anthropology carried out in the social context which produced the discipline of anthropology. (The discipline in question is, more precisely, social and cultural anthropology.) I will begin evaluation of this definition with a criticism that might come across as a verbal quibble, but needs to be addressed first. Note that in the course of this paper I move between referring to what is being evaluated as Strathern’s definition of anthropology at home and as Strathern’s definition of auto-anthropology. There are sometimes subtle reasons for preferring one or the other of these descriptions.

The criticism I have in mind concerns the presupposition that a social context can produce things, or at least one thing, namely anthropology. If anthropology at home is defined as anthropology carried out in the social context which produced it, then this is a background commitment, a presupposition. But

can a social context produce things? A person or a group of people might produce things, but can a social context literally produce things? Or is the ascription of productive power to social contexts to be understood non-literally? At present, we have a definition which has a presupposition that we do not know whether to take literally or not. Furthermore, if it is to be taken literally, we are left wondering whether it makes sense to represent a social context as a producer of things, for example anthropology. We usually conceive of contexts as things which other things are within – the research was undertaken in such and such a context, the crime occurred in such and such a context, etc. – but can we also understand a context to be a maker of things? A criticism of Strathern's definition is that it contains a presupposition that raises certain puzzles, puzzles which Strathern does not attend to.

Although this is true, it does not take much effort to provide a response on her behalf. The response is that what Strathern means by the social context which produced anthropology is the social context in which this discipline originated. Understood in this way, she is not vulnerable to the metaphysical concern articulated above, about whether a context can literally produce something, for this understanding can be stated without representing contexts as producers. But there is another criticism that we must consider.

The criticism comes from trying to specify which social context produced anthropology, that is to say, in which social context this discipline originated. Suppose that the discipline originated within nineteenth century and early twentieth century Western culture, which sounds like a reasonable rough specification. By the time that *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* was published (Malinowski 1922), anthropology indisputably exists. But if this specification or anything close to it is correct, then the social context which produced anthropology has long been inaccessible for the purpose of anthropological fieldwork, given that backwards time travel is not an option. When Strathern offers her definition of anthropology at home, she is seeking a definition which does not have the consequence that there cannot be any anthropology at home after the early twentieth century. Furthermore, it counts against the definition

if it does have this consequence. A second criticism of her definition is that it looks to have this consequence.

This criticism, it might well be protested, is also uncharitable. It is based on detaching the definition from where it appears in the text, and ignoring that Strathern provides a clarification of what counts as the social context in which anthropology was produced. Let us consider the clarification then:

What one must know is whether or not investigator/investigated are equally at home, as it were, with the kinds of premises about social life which inform anthropological inquiry. One suspects that while Travellers and Malay villagers are not so at home, in their talk about 'community', 'socialization', or 'class', for example, Elmdoners are. Auto-anthropology, that is anthropology carried out in the social context which produced it, in fact has a limited distribution. (Strathern 1987, 16-17)

From this quotation, we can extract a clarification of the social context which produced anthropology. An anthropologist has carried out anthropology in the social context which produced it if, and only if, the following convergence obtains: their representation of the people studied and representations offered by the people themselves involve a common set of premises about social life, premises which are essential to anthropology. In light of this clarification, Strathern cannot be charged with offering a definition that does not allow for anthropology at home, after the early twentieth century. However, it was worth examining the criticism because Strathern's definition has been quoted without the clarification, in the belief that it is a tautology and therefore beyond contestation (Overing and Rapport 2000, 18). The definition needs the clarification alongside it, otherwise it is potentially baffling.

### **On Strathern's definition, with the clarification**

Strathern's definition of anthropology at home can be understood as involving a commitment to four propositions:

(a) There are premises about social life which are essential to anthropology. Any anthropological account of a society or social group relies on those premises.

(b) An anthropologist is carrying out anthropology in the social context that produced the discipline of anthropology if, and only if, the people they are studying represent the world in a way which also involves those premises.

(c) A work of anthropology is a work of anthropology at home if, and only if, the work is based on research carried out in the social context that produced the discipline of anthropology.

(d) The reason for grouping together works of anthropology with this quality is that they provide anthropologists with 'self-knowledge', specifically knowledge of the essential premises of anthropology.

I will make three objections to this definition of anthropology at home. They are independent of the criticisms introduced in the previous section, which will be left aside. In the course of making these objections, especially the second and third objections, further evidence will be provided for attributing this definition to Strathern.

Before coming to the objections, it is worth noting that there is a good question regarding her definition which I do not address. Intuitively, some premises an anthropologist might rely on are not themselves premises about social life, even if they have implications for it, for instance the premise that each human being occupies physical space. This observation gives rise to a question: why does Strathern demarcate the social context that produced anthropology by referring specifically to anthropology's essential premises about social life, rather than all essential premises of anthropology? I suspect there is some answer to this question which can be extracted from her system of thought, but am unsure what the answer is. If I write simply of 'essential premises of anthropology', unless indicated, I actually mean those essential premises which are about social life.

*Objection 1.* Strathern's clarification of when an anthropologist is doing fieldwork in the social context that produced social anthropology, captured by proposition (b), is not a good one. For it may be that a group relies on premises about social life that anthropologists also rely on, premises that are moreover essential to anthropology, but the group arrived at these premises independently of however they entered

anthropology. The convergence of premises may not be because there is some common cultural tradition which the group has at some point drawn from and anthropology originally drew from as well. Perhaps an independent convergence is unlikely, given some essential premises of anthropology, but I do not see why it is impossible. (See the next objection for some examples of essential premises.) It is surely mistaken to think of the social context that produced anthropology as defined merely by shared premises. To make this point especially vivid: such thinking would allow for an anthropologist among a newly discovered tribe to count as doing anthropology in the context that produced this discipline, should there be a convergence of premises.

Strathern's clarification of the social context that produced anthropology appears to be based on a false or highly dubious assumption:

*(The common tradition assumption)* The set of premises about social life essential to anthropology could never be arrived at independently of the broad cultural tradition which anthropology is part of.

Sometimes Strathern emphasizes shared concepts, rather than shared premises, but that only means she is relying on a comparably dubious assumption which refers to concepts instead:

Yet I do not mean [by auto-anthropology] rendering back information in the form in which it was given: rather, where the anthropological processing of 'knowledge' draws on concepts which also belong to the society and culture under study. (Strathern 1987, 18)

Here, Strathern overlooks the possibility of a society or culture which has the same concepts that anthropologists must use in their analyses of social life, yet arrived at these concepts independently of however they entered into anthropology. For she implies that a convergence of concepts is enough to be doing anthropology in the social context that produced it, when the possibility of independent convergence makes this implication false.

It may seem that there is a simple way of amending Strathern's clarification of the social context which produced anthropology to cope with the objection I have raised: just say that an anthropologist is only in this context if the convergence

of premises between studier and studied is because of a shared tradition from which these premises have been inherited. But there is a major obstacle to adopting this solution, owing to proposition (d). The reason Strathern gives for grouping together the works that count as anthropology at home, by her definition, is because they provide anthropologists with an explicit formulation of certain essential premises of anthropology and thereby provide anthropologists with self-knowledge (Strathern 1987, 27). If this is the reason, it makes no difference whether the premises are there because of a common tradition or because of independent convergence. Either way, the promise of an explicit formulation of essential premises of anthropology is the same, so the rationale remains for grouping works that deal with one or the other of these possibilities together. The reason Strathern gives for grouping together the works that she counts as anthropology at home does not allow us to draw a line that places outside this category cases of independent convergence.

*Objection 2.* In order to realize a second objection to her definition, we need to consider in more detail the grounds for saying that Strathern makes sense of anthropology at home in terms of the essential premises of anthropology being shared. Strathern can be understood as having three aims when she introduces her definition of anthropology at home. Two of these aims are almost explicit in the following passage:

Home can recede infinitely: would a Traveller studying the Travellers be at home? Or would it have to be a Traveller from this region as opposed to that Region? The answer I propose is highly specific, and does not preclude other ways in which one might be 'at home'. But it does point to an aspect of anthropological practice that cannot be ignored. I consider one way, then, of rescuing the concept of home from impossible measurements of degrees of familiarity. The continuum obscures a conceptual break. (Strathern 1987, 16)

One of Strathern's aims is to specify what it is to be at home so that to say that an anthropologist is at home is to draw attention to something important for anthropologists, to 'point to an aspect of anthropological practice that cannot be ignored.' Another aim is to introduce a definition of what it is to be at home in which there is a fundamental divide between being at home and not being at home, rather than there being degrees to

which an anthropologist is at home. Thinking in terms of a continuum is set aside by her in favour of thinking in terms of 'a conceptual break'. These two aims are almost explicit.

A third aim is to specify what it is to be at home so that this quality is not relative to any feature that potentially varies between individual anthropologists, aside from the object of study, such as relative to an anthropologist's cultural background. In other words, it cannot be that anthropologist A is at home when studying a certain group while anthropologist B, studying the very same group at the same time, is not at home. This aim is suggested when Strathern writes that 'a conceptual reflexivity exists outside the sensitivities of individual practitioners' (Strathern 1987, 18).

The second and third aims can only be achieved if the premises about social life that Strathern appeals to in her definition of anthropology at home are essential premises of anthropology. To realize this, consider an anthropologist who is reliant on some premises about social life which are not essential to anthropological accounts in general, as well as some that are. For example, consider a Marxist anthropologist who relies on the premise that there is a grand narrative to human history. If Strathern is referring to non-essential premises as well, then such an anthropologist could be at home to a degree if this non-essential premise is also relied on by those studied and to a greater degree if more non-essential premises are relied on by them. Another anthropologist studying the same group, however, might not be at home to the same degree because none of their non-essential premises about social life are relied on by those studied. Strathern has to focus on essential premises to achieve the second and third aims of her definition: to understand being at home in a way that avoid degrees of being at home in favour of a fundamental divide and to prevent the quality of being at home from being relative to features that vary between anthropologists. Her focus certainly is on such premises, writing, 'It is anthropologists themselves who constitute a universal class, they who share precepts and concerns and who as writers manage data in specific ways.' (Strathern 1987, 31)



It seems though that degrees of being at home can arise with essential premises as well. Suppose that there are twenty-one premises about social life that are essential to anthropology. What though if a group relies on some of these premises, but not all of them, sixteen premises say? Working with Strathern's understanding of at home, it is reasonable to say that any anthropologists who study this group are at home to an extent, but not completely at home. But then there would still be degrees of being at home, contrary to the second aim, though at least every anthropologist there would be at home to the same extent, in accordance with the third aim. At no point does Strathern consider that degrees of being at home might enter into her analysis by this route. If Strathern is to achieve all three aims, she needs to say that the premises about social life that she is referring to are essential premises of anthropology, but also to say something else:

*(Essential premise holism)* The premises about social life that are essential to anthropology come together in the following sense: one cannot represent the world in a way that involves a commitment to one of these premises without also representing the world in a way that involves a commitment to all of the others.

This thesis would rule out the kind of situation conceived above, where a group rely on only some premises about social life that are essential to anthropology. Strathern never articulates the thesis, but I do not see how her definition of anthropology at home can fulfil her aims without it, or at least fulfil them without arbitrary stipulation. My second objection is to this thesis.

In order to object to it, consider two premises about social life that look to be essential premises of anthropology, as an academic discipline:

(E1) Some sets of individuals are not just random sets of individuals, because they consist of individual members who are socially connected to one another.

(E2) Social interactions in dreams do not count as actual social interactions.

Regarding the first premise, it does not seem that an anthropologist can say that they are studying just random individuals. They must represent most of the individuals they

write about as part of a group or community or organization or as contributors to a common cultural environment, or else in some other way that appeals to ‘social connections’ to set them apart from being just random individuals (Strathern 1987, 26). Thus anthropology involves the first premise. Regarding the second premise, an academic anthropologist cannot justify something they say about the people studied because of interactions that occur in their dreams. When writing anthropology, they are under an obligation to discount interactions in dreams as actual social interactions. A conception of dreams which undermines this obligation is not something that one has the option of working with in an academic context. But (E1) and (E2) can come apart. A group studied by an anthropologist can consistently accept one of these premises yet reject the other. My second objection then is that Strathern needs to appeal to the holistic thesis above in order to realize her aims, in particular the aim of avoiding degrees of being at home, yet this form of holism is false.

*Objection 3.* The third objection I shall make focuses on Strathern’s reason for grouping together the works that count as anthropology at home according to her definition. It is possible to define a category of anthropology which a person can apply to classify actual anthropological works but leaves us wondering what the reason is for grouping together those works that fall into the category. Take, for example, the following definition of what I shall term Franco-Melanesian anthropology: an anthropological work belongs in this category if it focuses exclusively on France or if it focuses exclusively on Melanesia or if it focuses on both France and Melanesia but nowhere else. Though we can apply this category to classify anthropological works – some are clearly instances of Franco-Melanesian anthropology; others are clearly not; I am not sure whether there are any borderline cases – we wonder what the reason is for grouping together the works that fall into this category. Similarly, though with less initial bafflement, one might inquire into the reason for grouping together the works that Strathern groups together as auto-anthropology.

According to Strathern, the significance of the category of anthropology she specifies is that works within it provide

anthropologists with 'self-knowledge', by which she means knowledge of the nature of their discipline:

We can now add a second characterization for auto-anthropology... The second characterization comes from an insider's view, from the folk model that anthropology contributes to self-knowledge. And this is self-knowledge both for those under study (as author he/she presents a new version for them), and for the anthropologist as scholar (as writer he/she uncovers the premises of scholarship). (Strathern 1987, 27)

On the basis of this statement, I have attributed proposition (d) to her: that the reason for grouping together the works Strathern counts as auto-anthropology under a single heading is that they that they provide anthropologists with self-knowledge, specifically knowledge of the premises about social life that are essential to anthropology. This attribution, apart from fitting with the statement quoted, also fits with the label 'auto-anthropology', 'auto' meaning self. In the quotation, Strathern refers to self-knowledge not just for anthropologists but also for those under study. However, elsewhere she sounds sceptical of or uninterested in the prospects for furthering the self-knowledge of those studied (Strathern 1987, 26), hence I have attributed to her a definition of anthropology at home which focuses on self-knowledge for anthropologists.

The term 'self-knowledge' here sounds as if it refers to something psychological. To acquire self-knowledge, according to a familiar conception, is to acquire knowledge of one's beliefs, emotions, or character traits. But Strathern does not mean anything psychological, which is why I have put scare quotes around the term when articulating proposition (d). What she means is coming to know which premises anthropological accounts must involve a commitment to or else they would not be anthropological accounts at all. The commitment is a logical relationship or something close to it. Whether the premises are also somehow present in anthropologists' minds is something which her methodology requires neutrality on (Strathern 1992, xvii; 1999, xii).

My third objection is a simple one. There is no reason to think that works of anthropology at home can provide the self-knowledge which Strathern depicts them as providing. To realize this, consider again the two premises introduced when

making the previous objection, labelled (E1) and (E2). Let us imagine that a work of anthropology at home identifies both premises as relied upon by those studied, which it might well do when describing aspects of their worldview. Nevertheless, this does not put us in a position to know that these premises are essential premises of anthropology. In order to put us in this position, the work needs to say that these are essential premises and to provide some argument for why anthropology cannot be pursued without these premises. More precisely, some argument must be provided to achieve the kind of knowledge sought after by academic work.

Anthropology at home may be useful for uncovering premises that are plausible candidates for being essential premises of anthropology, but it is not the business of anthropology anywhere to provide arguments that establish essentiality. Consequently, there is no reason to suppose that what Strathern counts as anthropology at home will include such arguments. I wonder whether she overlooked this point because she assumed the following thesis, which if true would remove the need for argument:

*(The self-evidence thesis)* If a premise about social life is essential to anthropology, this will be self-evident when the premise is stated.

Contrary to this thesis, (E1) and (E2) appear to be examples of essential premises because of certain arguments. Perhaps the arguments required can easily be supplied by some readers, but if no arguments whatsoever can be provided, there would be no grounds for regarding these premises as essential. We should not dismiss the impression that they are essential premises just because it is not self-evident that they are essential, i.e. just because some argument is needed to establish essentiality. Since the self-evidence thesis licences this dismissal, it should be rejected.

The project of identifying the premises about social life that are essential to anthropology looks to be a philosophical project (D'Oro 2011, 633-635), not an anthropological one: part of a broader project in the philosophy of anthropology which aims to identify the essential premises of anthropology, whether about social life or not. To my knowledge, there are no philosophical works that pursue this project, but there is a

philosophical work that pursues a comparable one: that seeks to identify the presuppositions of critical history (Bradley 1874). Of course, it is nothing new for an empirical researcher to propose that the goal aimed at by a particular philosophical project can be achieved by empirical inquiry. But Strathern does not show consciousness of this project as philosophical nor does she explain how empirical anthropological research could achieve the goal of this project. It is mysterious how it could. Works of anthropology, including works of anthropology away, may be very useful for such a project. They may be useful not only for drawing attention to plausible candidates for being essential premises, but also for familiarizing those who pursue the project with some or all of the ways of anthropology. However, usefulness in these respects is not enough to enable anthropology to achieve the knowledge that the project aims for. Consequently, I do not think that some works of anthropology should be grouped together in the belief that they provide such knowledge.

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**Terence Rajivan Edward** teaches Ethics and Political Philosophy at The University of Manchester. He has a PhD on the idea of a conceptual scheme and currently pursues research in the following areas: the possibility of alternative conceptual schemes, modularity and theory-laden experience, and the distinction between science and pseudo-science. Publications: *The Dualism of Conceptual Scheme and Undifferentiated Reality* (2012); *Theory-Laden Experience and Illusions* (2011); *Are there Uncontroversial Error Theories?* (2011).

**Address:**

Terence Rajivan Edward  
Philosophy, Arthur Lewis Building  
The University of Manchester,  
Manchester, M13 9PL, Great Britain  
E-mail: [t.r.edward@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:t.r.edward@manchester.ac.uk)