

**Non-Western localities as axiomatically legitimate areas of study for social anthropology: can that explain the questions?**

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*Abstract.* This paper objects to an explanation I extract from Jeanette Edwards, concerning a pattern she observes of questions asked and not asked. There are propositions accepted as axioms which apparently lead to that pattern. I present an axiomatization but it leads to different questions.

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*“In your way of life I won’t immerse:*

*That’s the message of this verse!”*

Jeanette Edwards is a social anthropologist who did her fieldwork in a provincial town in Western Europe. She observes a pattern of questions asked and not asked (or which she at least is not familiar with) and suggests an explanation:

I am often asked, ‘Why Bacup?’ A question which requires me, I always think, to identify some significant or special feature that makes it a suitable focus for anthropological interest... perhaps the question, ‘Why Papua New Guinea?’ is asked but it seems peculiarly irrelevant to anthropologists. Non-Western localities are deemed axiomatically of anthropological interest and legitimate arenas of study. (2000: 8)

But what exactly is the explanation? This paper presents an interpretation of the explanation, but on this interpretation the explanation does not appear to work.

The explanation, on this interpretation, is slightly drawn out. Anthropologists and others who ask her this Why-Bacup question have a system of propositions they accept in their minds. At the foundation of this system are propositions that we can call “axioms.” Below are two such axioms, or one and a fragment of one.

*(Social anthropology definition)* Social anthropology is the study of non-Western societies.

*(Non-Western societies definition)* Non-Western societies are...

I have left the second proposition incomplete, because whoever defines social anthropology in this way has to somehow make room for the Hopi as a legitimate object of study for social anthropologists and this may be somewhat tricky. But I think you can find people who accept the social anthropology definition. Anyway, here is a further proposition, which may or may not have a foundational status, “foundational” meaning not inferred from other propositions within the system:

*(Bacup definition)* Bacup is a town which is part of Western society.

But accepting this combination would not obviously lead people to ask, “Why Bacup?” from trying to resolve a puzzle that arises from their commitments, rather “Do you understand what social anthropology is?” or “Do you understand where Bacup is? It’s in the West and it’s part of Western society.” (Imagine if someone says, “I am going to do geography of a computer keyboard.”) Perhaps they might ask “Why Bacup?” as a substitute for the latter question and remark, but I think that Edwards does not want to portray this degree or kind of puzzlement or the question as playing this substitute role.

One can refine this explanation somewhat, so that it does not refer to what is in inquirers’ minds, rather the propositions are part of a model to be judged by predictive success (see Edward 2022), but the model would not predict the pattern of questions which Edwards observes. How can one develop an explanation from what Jeanette Edwards says?

- References.** Edward, T.R. 2022. Do anthropologists use rational actor models? The case of Marilyn Strathern. *IJRDO Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research* 7 (3).
- Edwards, J. 2000. *Born and Bred*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.