

# Diagnosing difference:

## Anthropology's heteronormativity

### ABSTRACT

[Indonesia, marriage, heteronormativity, difference]

**E**velyn Blackwood's provocative and informative article (this issue) asks us, as anthropologists, to reflect on the persistence of conceptual frameworks in our work. I take up this challenge with regard to the article's own arguments. I suggest that if we read this article diagnostically, rather than analytically, we can identify some important elements of the exhaustion of the cultural relativism paradigm in anthropology and can ask how rethinking conceptions of difference might provide new avenues for research, theorization, pedagogy, and activism.

Extending John Borneman's critique of marriage in the service of reviewing debates over woman-centered households, Blackwood reminds us that patriarchal notions of a dominant heterosexual male head continue to shape conceptions of the conjugal couple and the household, within and outside academic discourse. The conclusion that "the concept of 'marriage' continues to operate as a discourse to devalue, denormalize, and negate other forms of relatedness in which men are absent or ancillary" is hard to dispute—as, indeed, is the observation that the connotations of *bachelor* are primarily positive whereas those of *spinster* are primarily negative.

Although these conclusions certainly bear repeating, what piques my interest is the formula used to advance them—in particular, the following conclusion, emphasized at various points in the article: "I suggest that rather than positing a foundational model for human sociality, intimacy, or relatedness, researchers look for webs of meaningful relationships in their historical and social specificity." Why, in 2005, can the suggestion that, as researchers, we should not posit a foundational model for human sociality and that we thus need historical and social specificity still be presented as an innovative idea in anthropology?

To answer this question, let me begin by noticing that the call to "look for webs of meaningful relationships in their historical and social specificity" is a call to recognize difference. In Blackwood's formulation, the problem is sameness, a "foundational model for human sociality," a single

model assumed to be “instituted at Creation” (as claimed by the minister cited in the article’s epigraph). The solution is difference, “historical and social specificity.” This call for context is an anthropological ur-trope; from Franz Boas’s essay “On Alternating Sounds” to Margaret Mead’s metaphor of the color spectrum in *Sex and Temperament* to Ruth Benedict’s “patterns of culture,” webs of difference have been the self-prescribed medicine for what ails both anthropology (with its poorly thought out evolutionisms) and the broader Euro-American culture (with its racisms and sexism).

As anthropologists, we seem to have reached a point of theoretical and political exhaustion with this trope of difference; can we escape from this web? The idea that one should value difference is nowadays either taken up as self-evident by all parties (even the Religious Right, for instance, talks about the value of difference) or imagined to be an inadequate formulation for the post-September 11 world. The multiculturalist trope that asks for the recognition of difference meets its limit when it encounters forms of incommensurability that refuse the sameness on which that difference depends (Povinelli 2002). The trope of difference leads to particular problems with regard to gender and sexuality. There is, for instance, a fundamental contradiction in Blackwood’s argument: In calling for the valuation of difference over sameness, her argument is heteronormative—in the etymological sense of *hetero* as “different” (a point raised some time ago by Gayle Rubin [1984]). Failure to realize that the sameness–difference binarism is also a disciplinary folk model contributes to this conceptual logjam, wherein cultural anthropologists have largely ceded sameness to socio-biology and evolutionary psychology, permitting these reductive and deeply compromised modes of inquiry to

lay claim to categories of encompassment—the human, the universal, the panhistoric.

The task is not to reclaim sameness or the universal but, rather, to scrutinize the very binarism and imagine alternative rubrics for knowledge that sidestep this binarism altogether. How can researchers use the methodologies and theoretical insights of cultural anthropology to do more than call for context? In 1870, Louis Henry Morgan published *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family*, demonstrating that there was not a single model for marriage, household, and family. One hundred forty-five years later, what may push anthropology toward new relevance and insights may be not just the call for valuing difference but also a challenge to the implicit logics of sameness and difference that structure both the knowledge claims of anthropology and the systems of inequality that operate through the production and management of difference itself.

## References cited

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