

ARE THESE TWO VIEWS ABOUT NEW REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGIES CONTRADICTIONARY?

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Abstract:

This paper responds to two seemingly contradictory views that anthropologist Jeanette Edwards identifies in an article on the impact of new reproductive technologies in the northwest of England. I argue that they are probably not contradictory. But I do so by modifying how the views are formulated and reflect on the significance of this for the aim of accessible anthropology at home.

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The social anthropologist Jeanette Edwards tells us about two views she encountered in a town in the north-west of England:

The first is that infertile couples suffer a great deal of heartache and pain and should therefore be helped by whatever means are available. The second is that interference in the natural processes of reproduction is dangerous and certain possibilities for assisting conception are inappropriate and unacceptable for the 'growing of babies'. (1993, 43)

Are these views contradictory? Edwards thinks they merely appear contradictory when placed side by side like this (1993, 43; MacDonald 1994, 763), but she does not explain how they can be consistently held.

A lot turns on "whatever means are available." Those who present themselves as subscribing to the first view probably do not think that children should be taken from other families with many children regardless of parental consent and given to infertile couples. When they say, "whatever means are available," they are probably best interpreted as meaning whatever means are available *within the limits of the morally acceptable*.

Now consider the two views with this qualification added, in a brief way.

- (a) Infertile couples suffer a great deal of heartache and pain and should therefore be helped by whatever means are (*ethically*) available.
- (b) Interference in the natural processes of reproduction is dangerous and certain possibilities for assisting conception are inappropriate and unacceptable for the 'growing of babies'.

There is no contradiction here, because the "certain possibilities" referred to in (b) are conceived as outside the realm of the morally acceptable referred to in (a).

Shortly after presenting the two views, Edwards expresses her aim to preserve the ways of speaking which those studied use, in her text (1993, 44). But, from the material above, to successfully respond to the change of contradiction seems as if it requires modifying how these views are formulated. Now there is a worry that anthropology at home will be carried out in a language that creates a barrier for those uninitiated into reading anthropology texts (see Strathern 1987, 17). I assume there isn't much of a barrier above, if at all, but in trying to spell out the views of those studied in their most coherent form, modifications to how these views are formulated may be called for and there is no reason to think that these modifications will always preserve accessibility. The anthropologist can be faced with a choice of using specialist terminology to formulate views or an illogical appearance.

References

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