

# **Functionalism and structural functionalism**

## **Concept of theory in anthropology:**

Every discipline is grounded on its own set of theories which develop over a particular point of disciplinary history. Unfolding of the discipline can be better understood in terms of its (i) theoretical rigor and (ii) methodological orientation. It's the theory that provides the broad frame work or orientation for interpretation of facts and the methodology provides specific rules, the logical guidelines for collection and analysis of the data in this regard. Theory provides the template of ideas to think, methodology provides the techniques for collection of ideas so that they can be logically connected to one another in form of a theoretical frame work. Thus theory and methodology are two important basis for sustaining the edifice of the discipline. The most important question remains before us – what is a theory? Theory is a set of propositions or postulates explaining the nature of 'society', 'culture', 'human behavior' and 'social relationships'. Theories, in simpler terms, are statements that use various concepts and ideas as analytical tools or heuristic devices to explain social phenomena of different scale and magnitude. Theories are generally able to explain a wide range of phenomena through a limited set of central and significant thought categories. Thus concepts constitute the basic elements and logics cement them together. The relationships among these concepts are weaved together in such a manner giving rise to a series of propositions or a grand proposition which is a theoretical explanation of the phenomena. Theory is thus a body of knowledge that explains a wide range of phenomena from different cultural back ground.

## **Major Theoretical Traditions**

There are many anthropological theories within the national traditions of Great Britain and USA. The British School mainly emphasized on the issues of society, social institutions and relationships. While the American tradition focused on culture, cultural beliefs, practices and ideologies. The French tradition explored the intricacies of human mind and its functioning following a universal principle. The anthropological theories we are going to discuss here are:

Evolutionism

Diffusionism

Historical Particularism

Functionalism

Structure-Functionalism

Structuralism

New-ethnography

Post-structuralism

Post modernism

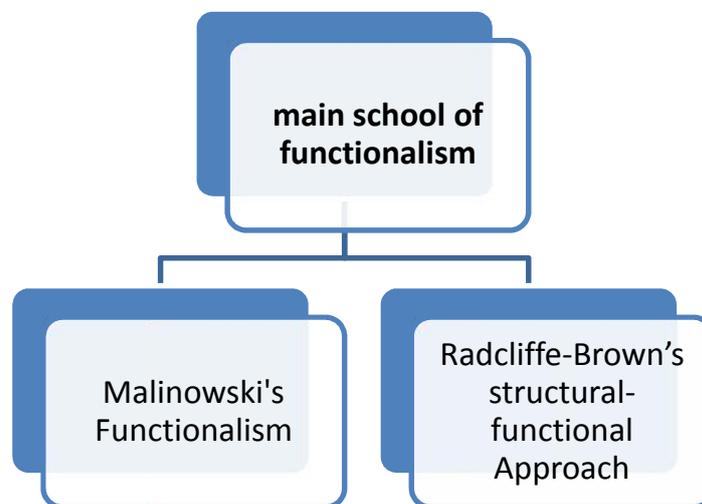
**functionalism** which has been considered one of the prominent schools of thoughts in order to understand various aspects of culture and society. Functionalism arose as a reaction to evolutionism and diffusionism in early twentieth century. Functionalism looks for the function or part that is played by several aspects of culture in order to maintain a social system. It is a framework that considers society as a system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability.

This approach of theoretical orientation looks at both social structure and social function. It describes the inter-relationship between several parts of any society. These parts or the constituent elements of a society could be named as norms, traditions, customs, institutions like economy, kinship, religion etc. These parts are interrelated and interdependent.

Functionalism was mainly led by Bronislaw Malinowski and A.R. Radcliffe Brown. Both were purely functionalists but their approach slightly differed as Malinowski is known as functionalist but Radcliffe-Brown is mainly known as Structural Functionalist. Malinowski suggested that individuals have physiological needs (reproduction, food, shelter) and these needs are fulfilled by the social institutions. He talked about four basic "instrumental needs" (economics, social control, education, and political organization), that require institutional devices to get fulfilled. While Radcliffe-Brown focused on social structure rather than biological needs. He considered society as a system. He looked at institutions as orderly sets of relationships whose function is to maintain the society as a system. Radcliffe-Brown was inspired by August Comte who was also a functionalist.

**Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942):** He was one of the founding fathers of British social anthropology. He did his honours in subjects like mathematics, physics and philosophy and in 1910 he enrolled in the London School of Economics to study anthropology. With Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski pushed for a paradigm shift in British Anthropology that brought a change from the historical to the present study of social institutions. This theoretical shift gave rise to functionalism and established fieldwork as the constitutive experience of social anthropology. Malinowski's functionalism was greatly influential in the 1920s and 1930s. As applied methodology, this approach worked, except for situations of social or cultural change. However, Malinowski made his greatest contribution as an ethnographer. He also considered the importance of studying social behaviour and social relations in their concrete cultural contexts through participant-observation. He considered it essential to consider the observable differences between what people say they do and what they actually do. His detailed descriptions of Trobriand social life and thoughts are among the well known ethnographies of world and his *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) is one of the most widely read works of anthropology. He was one of the leading Functionalists of 20th century.

**Main schools of functionalism:** Two versions of functionalism developed between 1910 and 1930: Malinowski's functionalism; and Radcliffe-Brown's structural-functionalism.



## Malinowski's Functionalism

Malinowski was an anthropologist from Poland and is one of the most famous anthropologists of 20th century. Malinowski at times is also known as father of Ethnography due to his extensive fieldwork in Trobriand Islands. He was strongly functionalist. This can be understood in following two ways:

- He believed that all customs and institutions in a society are integrated and interrelated so that, if one changes the other would change as well. Each then is a function of the other.

For example: Ethnography could begin from anywhere in a society but eventually get at the rest of the culture. A study of Trobriand fishing could lead to the ethnographer to study the entire economic system say role of magic, religion, myths, trade and kinship etc as all these institutions are interconnected. A change in any of the part of society would ultimate affect

the other. So in order to do a holistic study the ethnographer might have to consider other parts of the whole also.

- The second strand of Malinowski's Functionalism is known as „needs“ functionalism“. Malinowski (1944) believed that human beings have a set of universal biological needs and various customs and institutions are developed to fulfil those needs. The function of any practice was the role it played in satisfying these biological needs such as need of food, shelter etc.

Malinowski looked at culture, need of people and thought that the role of culture is to satisfy needs of people. Malinowski identified seven biological needs of individuals. Due to the emphasis on biological needs in Malinowski's approach, his functionalism is also known as Bio-cultural Functionalism.

Malinowski said, 'culture is a need surveying system'. Culture is a system which satisfies needs such as food, reproduction, security, health, protection etc. As Malinowski gave importance to individual needs so his functionalism is also known as „Psychological Functionalism'.

The most basic needs are the biological, but this does not imply any kind of reductionism, because each level constitutes its distinct properties and needs, and from the interrelationship of different levels that culture emerges as an integrated whole. Culture is the kernel of Malinowski's approach. It is 'uniquely human', for it is not found to exist among sub-humans. Comprising all those things – material and non-material – that human beings have created right from the time they separated from their simian ancestors, culture has been the instrument that satisfies the biological needs of human beings. It is a need-serving and need-fulfilling system. Because of this role of culture in satisfying biological needs that Malinowski's functionalism is also known as 'bio-cultural functionalism.'

difference between Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski may be noted here. A concept fundamental to Malinowski – the concept of culture – is a mere epiphenomenon (secondary and incidental) for Radcliffe-Brown. He believes that the study of social structure (which for him is an observable entity) encompasses the study of culture; therefore, there is no need to have a separate field to study culture. Further, whilst social structure is concerned all about observations, what anthropologists see and hear about the individual peoples.

Radcliffe-Brown wants to make social anthropology a branch of natural science, which would be possible when there is an empirically investigable subject matter.

The basis of Malinowski's approach is a theory of 'vital sequences', which have a biological foundation and are incorporated into all societies. These sequences number eleven, each composed of an 'impulse', an associated physiological 'act', and a satisfaction which results from that act (see Table 1).

**Table1**

<b>Impulse</b>	<b>Act</b>	<b>Satisfaction</b>
1. Drive to breathe; gasping for air.	Intake of oxygen	Elimination of CO2 in tissues
2. Hunger	Ingestion of food	Satiation
3. Thirst	Absorption of liquid	Quenching
4. Sex appetite	Conjugation	Detumescence
5. Fatigue	Rest	Restoration of muscular and nervous energy
6. Restlessness	Activity	Satisfaction of fatigue
7. Somnolence	Sleep	Awakening with restored energy
8. Bladder pressure	Micturition	Removal of tension
9. Colon pressure	Defecation	Abdominal relaxation
10. Fright	Escape from danger	Relaxation
11. Pain	Avoidance by effective act	Return to normal state

### **Permanent Vital Sequences Incorporated in All Culture**

For instance, the impulse of somnolence accompanies the act of sleep, resulting in satisfaction by ‘awakening with restored energy’ (Malinowski 1944: 77; Barnard 2000: 68). Malinowski follows this eleven-fold paradigm with a set of seven biological needs and their respective cultural responses (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

<b>Basic Needs</b>	<b>Cultural Responses</b>
1. Metabolism	Commissariat
2. Reproduction	Kinship
3. Bodily comfort	Shelter
4. Safety	Protection
5. Movement	Activities
6. Growth	Training
7. Health	Hygiene

For example, the first need is of food, and the cultural mechanisms are centered on the processes of food getting, for which Malinowski uses the term 'commissariat', which means the convoy that transports food. Similarly, the second need is of reproduction (biological continuity of society) and the cultural response to which is kinship concerned with regulating sex and marriage. From this, Malinowski goes on to four-fold sequences, which he calls the 'instrumental imperatives', and associates each one of them with their respective cultural responses. The four-fold sequence is of economy, social control, education, and political organisation. From here, he shifts to the symbolic system – of religion, magic, beliefs and values – examining its role in culture.

### **Radcliffe-Brown's structural-functional Approach:**

Radcliffe-Brown was influenced by the French sociological school and emphasised upon the social function. This school developed in the 1890s around the work of Emile Durkheim who argued that "social phenomena constitute a domain, or order, of reality that is independent of psychological and biological facts. As per this sociological school the social phenomena, must be explained in terms of other social phenomena, and not by reference to psychobiological needs.

- Radcliffe-Brown focused on the conditions under which social structures are maintained. He also believed that there are certain laws that regulate the functioning of societies.
- He also modified the idea of need and replaced it with necessary conditions for existence for human societies and these conditions can be discovered by proper scientific enquiry.
- He argued that the organic analogy should be used carefully. In a biological organism the functioning of any organ is termed as the activity of that organ. But in a social system the continuity of structure is maintained by the process of social life.

In Radcliffe-Brown's concept of function, the notion of structure is involved. This structure involves several constituent unit entities which maintain the continuity of social structure.

The year 1922 is known as „the year of wonders of Functionalism' (annus mirabilis) as both Bronislaw Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown published their work as an outcome of intensive fieldwork in the same year. A.R. Radcliffe-Brown published 'The Andaman Islanders' and Bronislaw Malinowski published 'Argonauts of the Western Pacific' in the same year i.e. 1922.

**Structural Features of Social Life:** According to A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, the structural features of social life as follows:

1. Existence of social group: social structure consists of all kinds of social groups like family, clan, moieties, social sanction, totemic group, social classes, caste group, kinship system etc. The inter relations among these groups constitute the core of the social structural phenomenon.

2. Internal structure of the group: these groups have specific internal structure. For example, a family consists with the relations of father, mother and their children.
3. Arrangement into social classes: these groups are arranged into social classes and categories. For example, the economic classes in the Western societies and the castes in the Indian societies.
4. Social Distinctions: there is social distinction between different classes which is based on sex, economic distinctions, and authority and caste distinctions. For example, in India there is social distinction between the Brahmins and Shudras.
5. Arrangement of persons in dyadic relationship: an example of dyadic relationship is person to person relationship like master and servant.
6. Interaction between groups and persons: interaction between persons can be seen in social processes involving co-operation, conflict, accommodations etc. while the interaction between groups can be seen while nation goes to war with another nation.

**Types of Social Structure:** According to Radcliffe-Brown the importance of social institution is that social structure is the arrangement of persons which is controlled and defined by institutions. There are two types of models of studying social structure i.e. actual social structure and general social structure. 'Actual social structure' according to Brown, the relationship between persons and groups change from time to time. New members come into being through immigration or by birth, while others go out of it by death and migration. Besides this, there are marriages and divorces whereby the members change in several times. Thus, actual social structure remains changes in many times. On the other hand, in general social structure, remain relatively constant for a long time. For instance, if one visits the a village and again visits that particular village after few years i.e. after 10 years later he or she finds that many members of the village have died and others have been enrolled. Now they are 10 years older who survive than the previous visit. Their relations to one another may have changed in many respects; but the general structure remains more or less same and continuing. Thus Radcliffe-Brown held the view that sometimes the structural form may change gradually or suddenly but even though the sudden changes occur the continuity of structure is maintained to a considerable extent.

**Structure and Function:** Radcliffe-Brown in order to illustrate the relationship between then structures and function he again turns to biology. The structure of an organism is consists of ordered arrangements of its parts and functions of the part is to interrelate the structure of an organism. Similarly, social structure is ordered arrangement of persons and groups. The functions of persons are to the structure of society and social organism. In fact, social function is the inter-connections between social structure and social life. Social structure is not to be studied by considering the nature of individual members of group, but by examining the arrangement of functions that make society persistent. He further points out that the relationships of parts of an organism to one another are not static. The whole point about an organism is that if the organism is alive so that study of its structure-the relationship of parts, must be activated by a study of its functioning of processes by which its structure is maintained. In all types of organisms, other than the dead ones structure and function are

logically lined. Thus, structure and function are logically linked and structure and function support each other and necessary for each other's continuity.

The social life of a community can be defined as the functioning of social structure. For example, the function of recurrent activity such as punishment of crime or a funeral ceremony is the part it plays in social life as a whole and therefore makes contributions to the maintenance of structural continuity.

According to Radcliffe-Brown, the importance of differentiation between structure and function is that it can be applied to the study of both of continuity in forms of social life and of processes of change. He is of the opinion that similar things may have different meanings in different cultures and also that different things may have similar functions. Although they have individual meaning and functions, they have a comparable social function at all.

**Radcliffe-Brown's Structural Functional Law:** Radcliffe-Brown is of the opinion that law is a necessary condition of continued existence. According to Radcliffe-Brown generalization about any sort of subject matter are of two types:

- Generalizations of common opinion
- Generalizations that have been demonstrated by a systematic examination of evidence afforded by precise observations systematically made. This particular type of generalization is also called as scientific law.

**Criticism of Radcliffe-Brown's Structural Functionalism:** The structural and functional approach of Radcliffe-Brown' has been subjected to a very great criticism. Some of them are useful and some of them are useless. The major criticisms are discussed briefly:

According to some critics, it is wrong to look at society as a living organism because the structure of the living organism does not change, but the society does?

1. There is an error arising from the assuming that one's abstraction of a social situation reflects social reality in all details.
2. According to this approach, the functions of unites of society are determined. The analysis is done on the basis of imagination, in the absence of any concrete cases.
3. Structural functionalism believes in static in place of dynamic; but it does not deal with the changes.

# Structuralism

The prevailing theoretical orientation in anthropology during the 19th century was based on a belief that culture generally evolves in a uniform and progressive manner; that is, most societies were believed to pass through the same series of stages, to arrive ultimately at a common end. Many scholars consider modern anthropology as an outgrowth of the Age of Enlightenment, a period when Europeans attempted to study human behaviour systematically, the known varieties of which had been increasing since the fifteenth century as a result of the first European colonization wave. The traditions of jurisprudence, history, philology, and sociology then evolved into something more closely resembling the modern views of these disciplines and informed the development of the social sciences, of which anthropology was a part.

**Historical Context Structuralism** represents a movement that began in the 1950's and 1960's in France. Emile Durkheim, a French anthropologist, generated the idea that human thought precedes observation and social and cultural phenomena derive from universal human cognition. Claude Levi-Strauss, consider the founder of Structuralism, expanded upon Durkheim's basic concepts to generate the main ideas behind Structuralism. In his definition, there are 3 fundamental properties of the human mind:

- People follow rules,
- Reciprocity is the simplest way to create social relationships, and
- A gift binds both the giver and recipient in a continuing social relationship.

Such social structures, according to Levi-Strauss, mirrors cognitive structures, the way in which mankind thinks and understands. Structuralism is the approach which seeks to isolate, and decode, deep structures of meaning, organised through systems of signs inherent in human behaviour (language, ritual, dress and so on). According to structuralisms, the mind functions on binary opposite; humans see things in terms of two forces that are opposite to each other i.e. night and day. Binary opposites differ from society to society and are defined in a particular culture in a way that is logical to its members for example shoes are “good” when you wear them outside but “bad” if you put them on the table; the role of an anthropologist is to understand these rules to interpret the culture.

## Structural linguistics

Let us now begin with what is structural linguistics. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1858-1916) is recognized as the founding father of the structuralist method. His views on the new method of studying linguistics are expounded in his seminal work *Course in General Linguistics* (1916). Four of his seminal ideas are especially relevant here: Firstly, he sees language as a social system that was coherent, orderly and susceptible to

understanding and explanation as a whole. Syntax and semantics together constitute a group of rules imposed on individuals, and to which individual thought must be submitted if it seeks expression to systems of rules and codes.

Structural analysis focuses on the underlying rules which organised phenomena into a social system, analysing such things as totemic practices in terms of divisions between the sacred and profane in traditional societies, or cuisine in modern societies in terms of culinary rules. Secondly, de Saussure points out the arbitrariness of the verbal sign, the signifier, which being conventional supposes neither an intrinsic rapport with the concept which constitutes its signification, the signified, nor in consequence any inherent stability with it.

Thirdly, de Saussure makes a significant distinction between, on the one hand, *langue*, the institution of language, and on the other hand, *parole*, or the particular and individual acts of linguistic expression.

Fourthly, de Saussure views the structures as entirely independent of history (diachrony). A diachronic approach to the study of a language involves an examination of its origins, development, history and change. In contrast, he opts for a synchronic approach which entails the study of a linguistic system in a particular state, without reference to time.

### **Claude Lévi-Strauss**

Strauss was born November 28, 1908 in Brussels, Belgium and lived to see an entire century, passing on October 30th 2009. He began studying law at the University of Paris in 1927 and after five years started working as a teacher's aid. Two years later, in 1934, he served as professor of sociology in Brazil at the University of Sao Paulo and began field work on the Brazilian Indians. Levi-Strauss taught almost all his life, moving to New York in 1941 as a visiting professor of The New School for Social Research till 1945. Levi-Strauss began his career with law and philosophy. In 1935 he left with his wife for Brazil to be the visiting professor of sociology at the Sao Paulo University while his wife, Dina, served as visiting professor of Ethnography. It was during this time that his wife was studying the natives of Mato Grosso and the Amazon Rainforest. More than halfway through the field work Dina sustained an injury preventing her from concluding the research which Strauss now had to complete alone. It was this experience that started Claude Levi Strauss's career as an anthropologist. As founder of the structuralism school of thought, Claude Lévi-Strauss believed that certain cultural facts are universal due to physical, or structural, factors. For example, all human cultures tend to divide larger concepts into binary oppositions such as left and right, black and white, or hot and cold. Levi Strauss left his legacy to future structural anthropologists

### **Method of Structuralism**

Lévi-Strauss' concept of model formation is influenced by structural linguistics. He uses the de Saussurean dichotomies between:

a) langue and parole

b) paradigmatic and syntagmatic

c) code and message (a spoken language is a code and its message is its substance. In the realm of sign, one's facial expression is a code giving message.) Each society has its own code to transmit a particular message or substance. But there are many other kinds of codes. Each such code is a language and the sum of all such codes is the culture.

d) synchrony and diachrony.

Structuralism focuses on the effects of universal patterns in human thought on cultural phenomena. Although not attempting to explain these cultural patterns, it rather presents them as a result of the subconscious, of universal human knowledge. This link between societal norms and the mind's thought process is ingrained so deeply within individual cultures, it becomes logical thought, taking specific actions, thoughts and activities and conceptualizing them. The process known as psychic unity, states that the human species, despite differences in race and culture, share the same basic psychological make-up. Even with this universal knowledge, every culture retains its own specific cultural structure.

Levi-Strauss presented the idea of **binary oppositions**. This concept coordinates certain ways of thinking. Examples of binary systems studied could be: "life vs. death," "culture vs. nature," or "self vs. other." Each individual concept has an opposite concept that it is co-dependent on. This is known as unity of opposites; no one of these ideas can exist without the other. Every community takes these concepts and makes them specific to their individual culture. Presenting universal ideas and oppositions, and uniting them under a unique, cultural stand-point, eventually forming a structured and organized society. These ideas relate to linguistic anthropology, in that all humans have a common base for which can create complex sounds and develop different languages. Taking the idea of "phonemes," pairs of sounds that create meaning, and bringing the same concept into structuralism that human share a common base for thought, leading to the development of different cultures stem from the same unconscious roots.

### **Structuralism in Kinship**

In the studies of the structure of kinship, the systems derive from deeply rooted patterns of human cognition based on logical oppositions of contrastive categories. For example, a contrasting category of kinship could be the relationship within different cultures of immediate family members and marriage. Universally, studies have shown that in almost all cultures there is an incest taboo, marrying a direct family member is not allowed. The taboo demonstrates a universal logical opposition within kin versus non-kin categories. Although every culture has its own ideals and values on the topic of marriage, some including

matrilateral cross-cousin marriage or patrilineal cross-cousin marriages, there are no cultures that allow direct incest. The universal formation of ideas is the very basis of structuralism, allowing individual shifts in rules and structures of a society based on cultural history and tradition, yet still retaining a common base from which the culturally specific idea stems.

### **Structural analysis of myth**

Lévi-Strauss felt that because myth had no practical function, it could reveal the working of the mind at a deeper level. The meaning of a myth cannot be determined simply from listening to its telling, its surface characteristics. In a fashion parallel to language and grammatical law, myth creators are only partially or intermittently aware of structures of myth. Lévi-Strauss shows not how humans think in myth but how myths operate in human minds, without their being aware of that fact. He contends that myths have the same linear structure through time as language. Like language, a myth can be segmented into constituent units and these units analyzed in relation to each other. These constituent units or mythemes can be found at the sentence level. Lévi-Strauss further contends that the true constituent units of a myth are not the isolated relations but bundles of such relations, and it is only as bundles that these relations can be put to use and combined so as to produce a meaning.

In this usage, myth has no location in chronological time. A myth is akin to fairytales and dreams, especially in the complete absence of nature-culture distinction. Nevertheless, myths and fairytales are meaningful. As we cannot write lexicon without grammar, without structure also we cannot decipher meaning. As a follower of Freud's psycho-analysis he believed that the meaning of folktales/myths is hidden. Following Freud's analysis of dreams, Lévi-Strauss states myth to be a code, hidden behind the sense which the myth makes at face value. This message in code can be interpreted to reveal the hidden meaning. Then what is the nature of this hidden meaning?

Firstly, all myths present resolutions to contradictions that are inherently irresolvable. Lévi-Strauss states that as we decode myth we see repeatedly that the hidden meaning has to do with unwelcome, uncomfortable contradictions which plague all human societies.

Secondly, myths contain concrete messages passed on from 'senders' (not very clear who is sending, but we may think of the ancestors or the senior members of the society as 'senders') to 'receivers' (clearly the younger generation which must be indoctrinated by the bearers of the tradition). Let us represent the 'senders' as A and 'receivers' as B. Now if an individual A who is trying to pass a message to a friend B who is almost out of earshot and if the communication is further hampered by various kinds of interference noise from wind, passing cars and so on, what will A do? If he is sensible, he will not be satisfied with shouting his message just once, he will shout it several times, and give a different wording to the message each time, supplementing his words with visual signals. At the receiving end B may very

likely get the meaning of each of the individual messages slightly wrong, but when he puts them together the redundancies and the mutual consistencies