
UNIT 1 FUNCTIONALISTS AND STRUCTURALISTS APPROACH

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Learning Objectives

Once you have studied this unit, you should be able to:

- define the concepts of “function” and “structure” in the study of societies/ cultures;
- describe different approaches to study ‘function and structure’; and
- indicate the differences between French ‘structuralism’ and British ‘function and structure’.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Anthropological approaches to study societies and cultures during the late nineteenth century have been named after ‘evolution’ which was a major concept in explaining how societies and cultures ‘evolved’ during the course of history. Evolutionary schools of thought gave way to ‘diffusion’ or ‘culture-historic’ schools of thought during the early 20th century that uphold the view that culture is a product of historical process.

The notion of function was not new as social philosophers right from ancient Greek scholars like (Herodotus, Plato, Aristotle and later Augustine, Hobbes and Locke),

recognized the relations between social institutions but they never developed a sound theory of 'function'. Even Henri de Saint Simon and Auguste Comte, while using function as a major methodological tool in their writings, were more intent in developing their theory of 'positivism' and left function largely unexplained.

The concepts of 'structure' and 'function' first appeared in the writings of Herbert Spencer in his book, *Principles of Sociology* (1885, vol.1), where he has dealt with fundamental similarities between 'organism' and 'society'. He has treated society as an integrated order of parts like an organism. As an organism is a composition of different parts, society also is a composition of different parts that are interrelated and integrated to provide the 'structure' of that society. As different parts of the organism perform different functions to make the existence of a body of the organism possible, in the same way, different parts of a society contribute indispensable functions for the existence of the society as an integrated whole.

Emile Durkheim, a well-known French sociologist, also used the concepts of structure and function in his books, *Division of Labour* (1893) and *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895); however, he preferred the terms 'monopoly' and 'physiology' respectively. It was only in his writings the concept of function got a greater methodological significance. He too likened the society to an organism. He held the view that just as an organism, in order to make the body alive, fulfills certain essential needs, society also has to fulfill certain needs for its existence and survival. The 'activities' by which the essential needs are fulfilled, he calls them as 'function'. Durkheim defined function as the combination that a part makes to the whole, which is for its maintenance and well being.

During the earlier part of twentieth century two British scholars pioneered what has come to be known as 'Functional and Structural' approach to the analysis of culture. Malinowski is associated with the functional approach, and Radcliffe-Brown is the pioneer of structural-functional approach. Both of them were critical of evolutionary and diffusionists views on culture. In their view, the evolutionists and diffusionists analyses of cultures, about which written records were lacking, was not historical but pseudo-historical. Similar cultural traits are generally accepted as indicating historical connections. They held the view that the purpose of comparison in Social Anthropology is to explore socio-cultural institutions of present day societies in terms of their structural functional aspects. Comparative studies could thus be carried out both synchronically (ahistorically) and diachronically (historically). Synchronic studies deal with the descriptions of social life in a point of time without reference to change in its general features, and diachronic studies deal with descriptions taking into consideration two points of time to study changes. Accordingly, discrediting the earlier evolutionists and diffusionists, they developed the concept of synchronic functional analysis of culture which deals with the 'present', or in the words of Radcliffe-Brown 'here-and-now'. The 'comparative method' of the evolutionists which involved reconstruction of the past by extrapolating from contemporary primitive societies also came into sharp criticism by them.

1.2 FUNCTIONALISM

1.2.1 Malinowski's Brief Life History

Bronislaw Kaspar Malinowski (1884-1942) was born in Cracow, Poland. He got his Ph.D. degree in Physics and Mathematics from the University at Cracow in 1908. Soon after, when he was recuperating from an illness, he read Frazer's magnum opus *Golden Bough* and immediately after reading it, he thought of taking up the career of an anthropologist. He moved to England in 1910, where he met C.G. Seligman and expressed his desire to become an anthropologist. On the advice of Seligman he enrolled himself as a post-graduate student at the London School of Economics.

In 1914, he was awarded Robert Mond Travelling Studentship and during his six years period at the Australian National University he made three extensive field trips to New Guinea, one to Mailu (1914-15) and two to Trobriand Islands (1915-16 and 1917-18). He obtained his D.Sc. degree in 1916 on the basis of his works on Australian aborigines and on Mailu. Later, at the London School of Economics in the Department of Sociology, he taught on Primitive Religion, Social Differentiation and Social Psychology. In 1924 he was appointed Reader in Anthropology at the University of London, and in 1927 he occupied the first Chair in Anthropology in the University of London. He received an honorary D.Sc. from Harvard University in 1936. From September 1940 he was Bishop Museum Visiting Professor of Yale till his death in 1942.

1.2.2 Malinowski's Criticism of Evolutionists and Diffusionists

He was critical of the earlier evolutionists and the diffusionists whose emphasis was on the study of forms of culture or cultural institutions without explaining their functions. He was critical of the evolutionists' concept of 'survival' maintaining that no custom or institution is functionless. He was also critical of the diffusionists who had treated cultures and cultural institutions in isolation. His main contention was to examine cultures, explain and analyse as to why and how culture functions, how different aspects of culture are integrated in the entire culture by their functions but not to seek answers for their evolution or distribution.

1.2.3 Malinowski's Fieldwork Method

His approach for doing fieldwork is known as 'participant observation' which has ever since become the hallmark of anthropological method. In his fieldwork, he practically lived with his subjects, speaking their language, participating in all their customary practices and rituals, thus making his subjects feel that he was just like them and one of them. Thus he acquired a new identity establishing full-fledged rapport with the natives. His approach was to learn the language of the natives and collecting data in their language, and also writing ethnographic diary everyday during fieldwork. His approach relied on "statistical documentation by concrete evidence" as the method for acquiring information about people, but not through the procedure of the fixed interviews with the help of the native interpreter. The *Argonauts of Western Pacific* (1922) is a typical example of his method. In the Kula district, the landscape is recreated and at each island the physical characteristics of the native and main features of their social and economic organisation are described. His approach is to make the readers slowly enter into different aspects of Trobriand life that are interwoven with their social organisation. On Kula system (which is a system of ceremonial exchange among the Trobriand Islanders), he dealt with different types of valuables involved and the norms governing their exchange, the basis of partnership, the importance of secondary economic transactions, and the background of ritual and ideology. The rest of the volume dealt with the documentation of generalisations by an account of the links in the chain of Kula performance – from the building of a canoe, the departure of an expedition to Dobu, the ceremonial procedure which occurs at each stage of journey. While the sequence of events provides the main thread of the argument, the themes of the sociological mechanism underlying the activities and the system of ideas at work in regulating labour and magic are developed. In demonstrating the interlocking of structural, technological and ritual aspects, he does not stop short at integrative description. He used it as a basis for the analysis of the rules governing the organisation of labour, the distribution of wealth, for the formulation of the principle of reciprocity and its importance in kinship, political relations and law. While passing from one dimension to another, from technological to structural or ideological, Malinowski has his own criteria of relevance and these are determined by the scientific rigour which he considers necessary for the documentation of his more abstract generalisations. In his accounts

of ceremonies, economic activities, domestic and village relations, he records the imponderabilia of actual life. Thus, his study of **Trobriand Islanders** involved the collection of statements of norms and concrete cases, genealogies, village census, maps and especially the preparation of garden land, hunting and fishing privileges, the dovetailing of rituals and technical activities, the distribution of harvest, the pattern of gift exchange in association with its sociological, ceremonial and economic aspects. From the writings of Malinowski, informants emerge as living personalities rather than the data providers. All details related to everyday life of the natives, the routine of their working day, the care they took of their body, their personal ambitions, their emotional behaviour including laughing and weeping, and every aspect of their social and cultural life, were recorded by him conveying a sense of actual reality to his readers. His approach to fieldwork is with a goal to grasp the native point of view, his relation to life, to realise the native's vision of this world, and these objectives Malinowski could realise getting inside the skin of the native. He presented his data in the form of narratives, developing in that process the implications of his generalisations for the theory in the fields of economics, law, kinship, magic and religion.

1.2.4 Malinowski's Functionalism

It was only in Malinowski's writings, *A Scientific Theory of Culture and Other Essays* (1944) and *Dynamics of Culture Change* (1945), a full-blown 'functional approach' in the analysis of culture appeared. According to him, functionalism attempts to explain the part institutions play within the interrelated whole of culture. Malinowski defines functional method as: "The functional view of culture lays down the principle that in every type of civilization, every custom, material object, idea and belief, fulfills some vital function, has some task to accomplish, represents an indispensable part within a working whole". His emphasis is mainly on the role the institutions of a culture play in satisfying the needs of the individuals and that of society as a whole as every aspect of culture has a function. All aspects of culture are interdependent and interrelated as there is a functional unity among them.

Malinowski notes that human beings have different kinds of needs such as social, economic, biological, religious, etc., and in order to get these needs satisfied they have developed material and non-material aspects of culture. Accordingly social, economic, political, and religious institutions have originated. The purpose of inventing language, literature, art, technology, etc., is to satisfy the human needs. Again all human needs are interrelated to one another because they are related to man as a whole. In the same way, culture traits appear externally as different but they are integrated and united internally and the basis of this integration and unity is the satisfaction of human needs. Malinowski maintains that change in one aspect of culture results in change in culture as a whole. According to him 'function' is a specific way of understanding institutions and customs of primitive life. In his book, *Magic, Science and Religion* (1929), he saw function as largely fulfilling the psychological need. Magic was the standardisation of optimism serving to provide human beings with necessary confidence to carry out his tasks, to maintain his poise and his mental integrity in times of anger and anxiety. Religion also provides outlets for emotional stress and also in maintaining moral law and order and works towards the identification of the whole tribe as a unit. Eventually, Malinowski related psychological and social functions to biological ones. Optimism and confidence enabled Trobrianders to become better food providers and magic, thus, also contributed to physical survival. This notion of function as serving biological needs became the core of Malinowski's functional theory. In his book, *A Scientific Theory of Culture* (1944), he reiterated his conviction that the functional method of investigation is best suited to give an accurate picture of the realities of culture.

Malinowski's main contention in 'functionalism' is that every aspect of culture has a function, i.e. the satisfaction of a need. In this context, he distinguishes three

levels of needs: (i) basic, (ii) derived, and (iii) integrative. By basic needs, he means biological needs such as nutrition, reproduction, growth, health, etc. The primary function of culture is to fulfill these requirements for survival and well-being. The basic needs themselves are essentially constant across all populations, but the cultural mechanisms people develop to fulfill them vary from place to place and time to time. Humans do not meet their needs in isolation from other humans. They organize cooperative groups to meet their basic needs (or imperatives) more effectively. They develop institutions to give their need-serving activities regularity and predictability. People, therefore, must maintain the groups and institutions that serve their bio-psychological needs. The behaviour of group members must be regulated, roles must be doled out to individuals, access to natural resources must be assigned, and so forth. Malinowski called these “derived needs” – in essence, the needs of groups and institutions to be maintained and perpetuated over time. By derived needs, he means production and distribution of consumer goods, regulatory mechanisms of human behaviour, well defined authority to carry out forceful executions, etc., and their corresponding cultural responses are those institutions such as economic, educational, legal, which help to satisfy primary needs. Finally, Malinowski argues that people will adhere to the requirements of their groups and institutions only if they become committed to the norms and standards that guide behaviour. This commitment is achieved through creating emotional attachment to the whole way of life. These are the integrative needs that help the society to cohere such as religion, magic and play.

In functional approach, it is the researchers task to discover the specific functions of the element of culture within the integrated whole. Functional analysis of culture reveals that culture is the handiwork of man and it is the medium through which he achieves his end, a medium which allows him to live, to establish a standard of safety, comfort and prosperity; medium which gives him power and allows him to create goods and values beyond his animal, organic endowment, that culture, in all this and through all this, must be understood as a means to an end, i.e., instrumentally or functionally.

Reflection

One important thing about Malinowski’s approach is that it considers individuals as the starting point for explanation. Directly or indirectly, all cultural elements function to meet the bio-psychological needs of individuals.

According to Malinowski the following are the general axioms of functionalism:

- a) Culture is essentially an instrumental apparatus by which man is put in a position to cope better with the concrete specific problems that face him in his environment in the course of satisfying his needs.
- b) It is a system of objects, activities, and attitudes in which every part exists as a means to an end.
- c) It is an integrated system in which the various elements are interdependent.
- d) Such activities, attitudes, objects are organised around important and vital tasks into institutions such as the family, the clan, the local community, the tribe, and the organised teams of economic cooperation, political, legal and educational activities.
- e) From the dynamic point of view, that is, as regards the type of activity, culture can be analysed into a number of aspects such as education, social control, economics, systems of knowledge, belief and morality, and also modes of creative and artistic expression.

1.2.5 Criticism of Functionalism

The main problem with such an approach is that, by themselves individual needs provide no explanation for why cultures in the way they meet basic needs. Why do different people fulfill their needs in different ways? For example, unless we know why some people satisfy their nutritional needs by eating beef, whereas, others refuse to consume cattle flesh even though they are hungry, we have not explained a population's food getting behaviour. It may be noted here that human biological and psychological needs are relatively constant across societies and, therefore, cannot by themselves explain cultural variation.

1.3 STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONAL APPROACH

The second variety of functionalism that arose in Great Britain takes the needs of society and not the needs of individuals as its starting point. Its adherents became known as Structural Functionalists, because they believed that the function of some particular cultural element is the contribution it makes to the persistence of social structure. Social structure refers to the enduring pattern of relationships between individuals and groups. The leading proponent of this approach was A.R. Radcliffe-Brown who imagined that human societies are in some ways like living organisms.

1.3.1 Radcliffe-Brown's Brief Life History

Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown was born in 1881. He started his career as a student of W.H.R. Rivers, a British diffusionist, who was strongly interested in history. Rivers sent Radcliffe-Brown to Andaman Islands (of India) in 1906 with the task of reconstructing the cultural history of these non-literate Andaman Islanders. Averse to making conjectural and hypothetical reconstructions, he dutifully recorded Andamanese myths, ceremonies, and customs. Much delayed his book on the *Andaman Islanders* appeared in 1922. In the mean time he got acquainted with the writings of Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, and realised that it was much more important to study meanings and function.

1.3.2 Radcliffe-Brown's Theory of Social Structure

Although Radcliffe-Brown used the concept of 'social structure' while delivering a lecture in Birmingham as early as 1914, he described it in detail only in 1940 while delivering his Presidential address at the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain. On that occasion he divided anthropologists into students of 'Society' and 'Culture'. He was of the opinion that Social anthropologists main concern was with the study of 'society' and its 'structural features'.

In his book, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (1952), he has elaborately dealt with his concept of 'social structure' and the features of 'function'. He has defined 'social structure as the complex network of actually existing relations'. He maintained that the "components of social structure are human beings, the structure itself being an arrangement of persons in a relationship institutionally defined and regulated" (1950:82). 'Function' is defined by him as "the contribution a partial activity makes to the total activity of which it is a part". The function of a particular social usage is the contribution it makes to the total social life as the functioning of the total social system. Such a view implies that a social system has certain kind of functional unity. He defines it as a condition in which all parts of the social system work together with a sufficient degree of harmony or internal consistency.

1.3.3 Types of Social Structure

Radcliffe-Brown distinguished 'social structure' (the actual social structure) from 'structural type' (general social structure). According to him in actual structure the

relations of persons and groups of persons change from time to time. New members come in by birth and immigrations while others go out by death and migration. Besides this, there are marriages and divorces, whereby members change several times. Thus while the actual social structure changes many times, the general social structure may remain relatively constant for a long time. He held the view that the structural form changes gradually but abrupt changes could be witnessed during the times of revolution or military conquests. But, even in sudden changes the continuity of structure is maintained to a considerable extent.

1.3.4 Radcliffe-Brown's Structural-Functional Approach

To illustrate the relationship between structure and function, Radcliffe-Brown turned to biology. The structure of an organism consists of an ordered arrangement of parts. The function of the parts is to interrelate in the structure of an organism. Similarly, social structure is an ordered arrangement of persons and groups whose function is to inter-relate the structure of society. Social function is the interconnection between social structure and social life. Like an organism, the social life of a community may be defined as the functioning of its social structure. The function of any recurrent activity (such as punishment of a crime or a funeral ceremony) is the part it plays in social life as a whole and therefore, the contribution it makes to the maintenance of the structural continuity. The importance of the differentiation between structure and function is that it can be applied to the study of both continuity in the forms of social life and the processes of change.

An institution is an established norm of conduct recognized as such by a distinguishable social group. Social institutions, in the sense of standardised modes of behaviour, constitute the machinery by which a social structure maintains its existence and continuity. Radcliffe-Brown defines the social function of a socially standardised mode of activity (or mode of thought) as its relation to the social structure, to the existence and continuity of which it makes some contribution. Thus, the social structure consists of the ordered arrangement of parts and the function of the parts is to inter-relate the components of the structure, and to maintain its integrity. Social function is the interconnection between social structure and social life.

He applied his structural-functional principles mainly to the analysis of kinship systems in his work *Structure and Function in Primitive Societies*. His discussion of the role of mother's brother in the kinship system of some South African tribes (such as the Bathonga, Nama-hottentots and Tongans) is very distinctive. Avunculate refers to the privileged relationship that exists between mother's brother and sister's son. He explains this relationship from the structural-functional point of view by focusing on the relatives in the kinship structure and their roles (or functions) performed by them. In order to explain avunculate, Radcliffe-Brown considers the relationships on the father's side and then sees how these are balanced by the relationships on the mother's side. He demonstrated that as in a patrilineal system, authority over a man is vested in his father's lineage, he seeks indulgence from his mother's lineage, and by extension from the men of his mother's lineage. Thus, while deference characterises the relationship on the father's side, it is structurally balanced by the indulgence in the relationship with the mother's side. The reverse occurs in matrilineal systems. To explain avunculate, he made use of the functional extension of sentiments and the structural equivalence of siblings.

Structural functionalism emphasizes that various customs and beliefs of a people form an integrated system. Parts cannot be understood in isolation from each other or from the whole system because each has definite relations to the others and each has its function to perform on behalf of the social body. Incidentally, structural-functionalists disliked the diffusionist term 'trait' because it implies that cultural elements are sufficiently independent from one another and can be transmitted

freely from people to people. By emphasizing the integration of culture, structural functionalism strengthened the holistic perspective of anthropological thought.

1.3.5 Criticism of Structural-Functional Approach

Despite the above cited contributions, the structural functionalists failed to answer many questions adequately. First, because of their emphasis on steady states, they did not produce an adequate theory of why cultures change. Such a theory is a reasonable requirement of any approach, because change occurs everywhere at varying rates. Second, most structural functionalists treated widespread conflict as an abnormal state: if individuals and groups regularly quarreled or fought with one another, structural functionalists believed that something had gone wrong with the mechanisms that restored equilibrium. Most anthropologists now recognize that conflict is a normal condition in almost all people.

Reflection

Radcliffe-Brown, although initially used the term 'culture', later he confined himself to 'Social Structure', whereas Malinowski has treated Social Structure or Social Organization as one of the aspects of Culture. Thus, Malinowski deals with Culture and Radcliffe-Brown with Society. Malinowski holds the view that the functional whole of culture could be understood in its relationship to man's biology and his environment. He was not concerned with the universal sociological principles or laws as Radcliffe-Brown was. Malinowski's cultural laws were the relations that exist between individual needs and social institutions, which can be discovered through a comparative study of cultures. To Radcliffe-Brown, each institution of society contributes functionally in the existence of society.

1.4 STRUCTURALISM

The famous French anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss is the founder of structuralism. The term structure as used by him should not be confused with Radcliffe-Brown's 'social structure'. Whereas social structure refers to the pattern of network of actually existing social relations between individuals and groups, Lévi-Strauss is concerned with the structure of the human mind. His goal is to show how the structure of the mind unconsciously rearranges available ideas, themes, symbols, and objects into patterns, and thus creates culture itself. The basic assumption of structuralism is that the mind possesses certain given properties which are the source of all human achievements. Structural analysis attempts to unravel the logic of the human mind.

1.4.1 Lévi-Strauss' Brief Life History

He was born in 1908 in Belgium but lived near Versailles with his parents from 1914 to 1918. He was a student in the University of Paris during 1927 and 1932, where he took a degree in Law with aggregation in Philosophy. French school of sociology, notably Saint Simon, Comte, Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, influenced him immensely. He worked as a teacher in Lyc'ee during 1932-34 and was Professor of Sociology at the University of Sao Paulo, Brazil from 1934 to 1937. He researched on Nambikwara and Tupi-kawahib Indians in central Brazil during 1938-39 and later served French military for some time. After a brief stint at the New York School of Social Research, he came back to France in 1950 to occupy the post of Director in the Laboratory of Social Anthropology at the University of Paris. In 1959, he was appointed as Professor of Social Anthropology at the College de France.

1.4.2 Lévi-Strauss' Structuralism

Lévi-Strauss believes that our thought is patterned in dual contrasts – the mind works by “binary oppositions”. When we think about something we unconsciously

think about its opposite. The mind imposes a logical order on natural and social phenomena by opposing certain qualities to other qualities. Such binary oppositions are not real or objective characteristics of reality; actual objects and qualities in the real world grade into one another. But because the mind thinks in dual contrasts, it makes reality intelligible by breaking it up into pairs of opposites, then rearranging the opposites into a pattern. This structure of thought, which is common to all humanity, underlies culture, for culture results from unconscious activity of the mind.

The inspiration for structuralism came from linguistics: just as a grammar selectively recognizes and makes patterns, structures, and meanings from distinctions between sounds and morphemes, so does the mind impose patterns, structures, and meanings on phenomena of all kinds. Further, like Noam Chomsky's universal grammar, which underlies a linguistic diversity that is only superficial, Lévi-Strauss believes that cultural diversity is more apparent than real. In many of his complex empirical studies of myth, he tries to show that some myths are merely transformations of other myths, the same themes rearranged in new ways.

1.4.3 Lévi-Strauss' Models

He regards Social Structure as a 'model' and the aim of studies on social structure is to understand social relations with the help of the models. According to him, the term 'social structure' has nothing to do with empirical reality, but with models which are built after it. Social relations are the raw material, out of which the models making up social structure are built. Social Structure thus belongs to a different epistemological category and it can "never be reduced to the ensemble of social relations to be described in a given society". A structure consists of a model meeting with the following requirements:

First, the structure exhibits the characteristics of a system. It is made up of several elements, none of which can undergo a change without effecting changes in all other elements; second, for any given model there should be a possibility of ordering a series of transformations resulting in a group of models of the same type; third, the properties make it possible to predict how the model will react if one or more of its elements are subjected to certain modifications; fourth, the model should be constituted so as to make immediately intelligible all the observed facts.

In the structural analysis the following distinctions have to be made between different kinds of models:

- a) **Conscious and Unconscious Models:** The distinction between the two models is one of degree but not one of categorical difference. Conscious models are the "home made models" (or norms) that stand in the "collective consciousness" hiding deeper and un-transcendental, according to which the society views itself. It is generally more profitable for anthropologists to work with unconscious models that they constructed out of the deeper-lying phenomena than with the conscious models. But conscious models are more accurate and they are not intended to explain phenomena but to perpetuate them. For these reasons anthropologists cannot dismiss conscious models when analysing the structure of society.
- b) **Mechanical Models and Statistical Models:** A model, the elements of which are on the same scale as phenomena, is called a 'mechanical model'; when the elements of the model are on a different scale, it is called a 'statistical model'. The laws of marriage provide the best example to illustrate this difference. In primitive societies these laws can be expressed in models calling for actual grouping of the individuals according to kin or clan; these are mechanical models. On the other hand, kinship in our own society would have to be interpreted according to a statistical model because permitted and prescribed marriages are not governed by a set of generative rules, but by factors as diverse

as chance, social mobility, social class, and even the pure emotional desires of those involved. A satisfactory attempt to formulate the variants of our marriage system would therefore have to determine average values—thresholds; it would be a statistical model. He, thus, makes a distinction between jural rules (mechanical model) and statistical norms (statistical model).

In studies on social structure, two important things have to be kept in mind: First, there may be intermediate stages between mechanical and statistical models, such as ‘the case in societies which have a mechanical model to determine prohibited marriage and rely on a statistical model for those which are permissible. Second, in order to explain a given set of social facts, it may be necessary to construct both these models, depending on the inter-relationship of these facts and their relationships to other facts. For example, in a study of a society which recommends cross-cousin marriage, where this ideal type of marriage occurs with limited frequency, in order that the system may be properly explained, both these models become necessary. Lévi-Strauss maintains that the value of social structure studies lies in the comparable nature of the structures as models.

1.4.4 Main Areas of Study

Structural Anthropology has focused mainly on three areas of study: (1) kinship analysis; (2) analysis of myth; and (3) semantic analysis.

In his monumental work, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949), Lévi-Strauss took incest taboos as the point of departure because only when these are implemented human beings can cross the threshold from ‘nature’ to ‘culture’. Incest taboos are universally present in all cultures though the specific rules differ from society to society. It is a fact that incest taboos possess social functions, but these cannot account for their origin because it is impossible to believe that early man who instituted these rules could have known their possible advantages. Instead, incest taboos ultimately depend upon the property of human mind to think in opposites and the most fundamental dichotomy is the distinction between “self” and “others”. This distinction makes ‘communication’ possible between ‘own group’ and ‘other group’. Only when this distinction is made, a true symbolic communication is possible. The communication is reciprocal exchange that takes place on three fundamental levels: (i) exchanges of message, (ii) exchange of goods, and (iii) exchange of women. For Lévi-Strauss, it is the ‘communication of women’ that is the focus of interest in kinship studies. What determines the communication of women is the universal structural ‘principle of reciprocity’ which necessitates the ‘exchange’ of women. Generally, marital exchange may be accomplished through either of these two ways: (1) restricted exchange in which two groups exchange women directly, and (2) generalized exchange in which more than two groups exchange women indirectly in a circular fashion. Lévi-Strauss has discussed elaborately on the structural implications of the several forms of exchange in his book.

In his paper on “The Structural Study of Myth”, Lévi-Strauss dealt with various versions of the Oedipus myth. He maintains that myth is not to be read as a story, but must be broken down into its basic constituents which he called “mythemes” analogues to the linguistic phonemes. These mythemes represent the nature-culture dichotomy hinging on incest taboos. Lévi-Strauss elaborated his method in his four volume *Mythologiques* published during 1964 and 1972. He explored 187 South American myths in *The Raw and the Cooked* (1969) and in subsequent volumes another six hundred myths were analysed. Although they are all different in content, Lévi-Strauss tried to demonstrate that their underlying structures display remarkable similarities. The differences in myths are brought into harmony by working out relatively simple oppositions in which nature and culture figure prominently. For example, honey is always consumed ‘raw’, and it represents nature, but honey is also enticing and seductive. Hence all myths dealing with seduction stand in the

same structural position as honey. Lévi-Strauss could thus demonstrate that myth, like the rest of language, is made up of constituent units. These constituent units presuppose the constituent units of the language when analysed on other levels—namely, phonemes, morphemes—but they, nevertheless, differ from the latter in the same way as the latter differ among themselves; they belong to a higher and more complex order.

Lévi-Strauss explained the Oedipus myth and a series of North American myths by employing the structural method of analysis. He contends that the structural method has the advantage of bringing some order into what was previously chaos. It also enables to perceive some basic logical processes which are at the root of mythical thought. In his *The Savage Mind* he elaborately showed that the intellectual process involved in mythical thought is as rigorous as that of scientific thinking.

He resorted to Semantic Analysis in all these areas of study while working out the 'binary opposites'.

1.4.5 Criticism of Lévi-Strauss' Structuralism

Lévi-Strauss holds the view that the prerequisites of structural analysis are to collect the facts and to order them, but he does not mention the criteria by which the researcher should go about collecting facts. Unless there are independent criteria for selecting the facts, how can the researchers decide which to include or which to exclude. Lévi-Strauss tried to counter this criticism by distinguishing observation and experimentation.

Observation and Experimentation: To observe facts and elaborate methodological devices, permitting construction of models out of these things is not the same thing as to experiment on the models. By 'experimenting on models' is meant the set of procedures aiming at ascertaining how a given model will react when subjected to change and comparing models of the same or different types. At the observational level, the principal rule is that all the facts should be carefully observed and described, without allowing any theoretical preconception to decide whether some are more important and the others less. This rule implies, in turn, that facts should be studied in relation to themselves and in relations to the whole. There should be a direct relationship between the level of observation and experimentation, or between "the concreteness of ethnographic detail" and the models constructed after it, for in the final analysis, the best model is that which is true, i.e., that which accounts for all of the observed facts.

1.5 SUMMARY

Three famous Anthropologists have contributed immensely to our understanding of the concepts of 'function' and 'structure'. Malinowski is associated with 'functionalism' where as Radcliffe-Brown with 'structural-functional approach'. The French scholar, Lévi-Strauss is associated with 'structuralism'. Malinowski explained his functional theory of culture with his theory of needs and how these needs are sub-served by cultural arrangements in the form of institutions. Radcliffe-Brown views structure as a network of actually existing relations and explained function as the contribution a partial activity makes to the total activity of which it is a part. Both these British scholars tried to present a synchronic view of societies amenable for comparison. For Radcliffe-Brown these comparisons should give rise to universal sociological principles. Lévi-Strauss agrees with Radcliffe-Brown that structure is an ordered arrangement of parts or components but Radcliffe-Brown examines social structure to discover social functions taking inter-personal relationships as his starting point. Lévi-Strauss is not concerned with social functions and considers them self understood. Function is to produce the consequences, which it does not

produce. He is concerned with 'structure' not from the inter-personal point of view but to discover the structure of human thought process. Drawing heavily upon the similarities between structural linguistics and structural anthropology, Lévi-Strauss arguments of structure are not concerned with the structure of the mind and how it conceives society. In that direction he contends that our task of understanding societies is through models because 'social structure' has nothing to do with empirical reality but with models that are built after it.

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Sample Questions

- 1) Discuss functionalism.
- 2) What is the structural-functional approach?
- 3) Discuss structuralism.