
UNIT 1 RADCLIFFE-BROWN: STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONALISM*

Structure

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this Unit, you should be able to:

- Mention the major intellectual influences which helped shape Radcliffe-Brown's brand of social anthropology;
- Describe the concept of social structure and related concepts elaborated by Radcliffe-Brown
- See how these abstract concepts assume concrete shape through a case study presented by Radcliffe-Brown.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Block one of our course on Sociological Thinkers II looks at some of the early sociologist who have contributed significantly in conceptualising and theorising on the concepts of structure, function and their interrelations in studying society.

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In this unit we discuss in detail the work of Radcliffe-Brown and his exposition of structural functionalism. Radcliffe-Brown according to Adam Kuper (1973:51) “..... brought a more rigorous battery of concepts to the aid of the new fieldworkers.” It is precisely one of these rigorous concepts that we will study in this unit, namely, the concept of social structure.

To make our task easier, we will first briefly trace the intellectual climate influences, which contributed to shaping Radcliffe Brown’s brand of social anthropology. This will be the first section. In the second section, the major theme of this unit will be described, namely, Radcliffe-Brown’s understanding of social structure. The third and final section will focus on a case study. We will briefly describe some structural features of tribes in Western Australia which were studied by Radcliffe-Brown. This will help clarify abstract ideas through concrete examples.

1.2 INTELLECTUAL CLIMATE AND INFLUENCES

Modern social anthropology, as Jain (1989: 1) puts it, is woven from the twin strands of the fact-finding, empirical ethnographic tradition, on the one hand and the ‘holistic’, analytical tradition on the other. The former is represented by British and American anthropology, the latter by French social anthropology which was profoundly influenced by Emile Durkheim. Let’s look briefly at the intellectual climate of British Social Anthropology where fieldwork tradition began to inform the study of societies.

In the early twentieth century, detailed studies of particular societies resulted in the publication of several ethnographic monographs (A detailed Elective course BSOE 144 is dedicated to the Ethnographic Tradition in Sociology and Social Anthropology, you may want to check the course on Egyankosh if you have not opted for it). These studies created the space for a new discipline - Social Anthropology - in Britain. Social anthropology and sociology are closely related subjects. The findings of social anthropology, largely derived from the studies of non-Western societies, are of general relevance to the study of all types of societies. This is the reason why the growth of social anthropology in the 1920s and 1930s contributed to significant advances in sociological thought. Social anthropology’s emphasis, under the leadership of Bronislaw Malinowski, on studying societies on the basis of first hand observation became a turning point in the development of sociological theory. It was so because social anthropologists insisted that ethnographic account must be based on the study of a chosen society through personal visits, lasting a year or more. In addition, they claimed that societies ought to be studied for their own sake and they criticised those who studied primitive cultures only to reconstruct the history of humankind.

Dominant among the ethnographers during the early twentieth century were those who followed the Malinowskian tradition of collecting first-hand information about primitive societies. Malinowski, as their leader, opposed both the evolutionists and the diffusionists and went ahead with the task of establishing

social anthropology as an alternative way of studying human societies. Let us now discuss how the new found interest in collecting data based on first-hand observation paved the way for the development of new ways of studying human societies. Later the method of data collection came to be known as participant observation by living among the people to be studied. Early practitioners of this method chose to study primitive societies by focussing on all aspects of a particular tribe.

Social anthropology as practised by Radcliffe-Brown bears the stamp of both these traditions. Let us first consider the impact of the fieldwork tradition on Radcliffe-Brown's work.

1.2.1 The Field-work Tradition

Cambridge University, England, where Radcliffe-Brown studied, was going through, during his time, an extremely creative and productive intellectual phase. Teachers and students freely shared and challenged each other's views. Radcliffe-Brown became the first student of Anthropology under the mentorship of W.H.R. Rivers in 1904. Rivers and Haddon had participated in the famous 'Torres Straits' expedition. Under the guidance of Rivers and Haddon, Radcliffe-Brown was initiated into fieldwork. His first field studies (1906-08) dealt with the Andaman Islanders. He thus became a part of the new, empiricist tradition of British scientific anthropology. This was a major formative influence, which was to persist throughout his career.

Emile Durkheim's path-breaking work, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), had a profound impact on some British scholars. Radcliffe-Brown was one of them. Let us now go on to see why he was so attracted to the Durkheimian perspective.

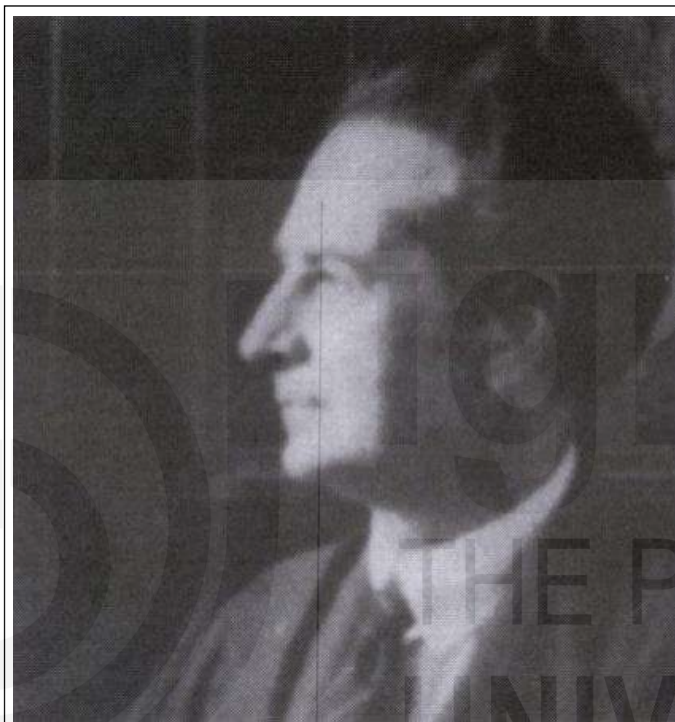
1.2.2 The Durkheimian Tradition: Radcliffe-Brown's 'Conversion'

The contributions of Emile Durkheim have been systematically described to you in our Sociological Thinkers 1 course. The Durkheimian tradition, in the words of Adam Kuper (1975: 54), offered "...scientific method, the conviction that social life was orderly and susceptible to rigorous analysis, a certain detachment from individual passions..." Durkheim was optimistic that human beings would be able to lead a life that was both individual and social, in a properly organised society, i.e. a society based on 'organic solidarity' (see Glossary).

As you know, Durkheim advocated the study of 'social facts' in a sociological manner. He spoke of studying these facts objectively, without preconceived notions. In his view, society was basically a moral order. The concept of the 'collective conscience' was an important part of his work. Durkheim wanted to develop sociology on the lines of the natural sciences i.e. as an 'objective', rigorous science. All these ideas attracted Radcliffe-Brown. Durkheimian sociology combined with Radcliffe-Brown's admiration for the natural sciences resulted in his ideas about the ideal society of the future.

In a nutshell, the impact of the Durkheimian tradition marked a shift in emphasis in Radcliffe-Brown’s work. The ‘ethnographer’ became a ‘sociologist’. From mere gathering of descriptive, ethnographic information, an attempt was made by Radcliffe-Brown to analyse this information using sociological concepts. He tried to organise his data on comprehensive, theoretical lines. We will now go on to examine an important concept developed by Radcliffe- Brown, namely, the concept of social structure. In the meanwhile, let’s have a brief look at his biographical sketch, following which we will attempt the check your progress exercise.

Box 1.1 Radcliffe Brown



(pic credit: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=4303425>)

Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown (17 January 1881 – 24 October 1955) was an English social anthropologist who developed the theory of structural functionalism. He was educated at King Edward's School, Birmingham, and Trinity College, Cambridge (B.A., 1905; M.A., 1909) He studied psychology under W. H. R. Rivers who, with A. C. Haddon, led him toward social

anthropology. Under the latter's influence, he travelled to the Andaman Islands (1906–1908) and Western Australia (1910–1912, with biologist and writer E. L. Grant Watson and Australian writer Daisy Bates) to conduct fieldwork into the workings of the societies there.

His time in the Andaman Islands and Western Australia were the basis of his later books *The Andaman Islanders* (1922) and *The Social Organization of Australian Tribes* (1930).

Check Your Progress 1

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answers.

ii) Check your progress with those answers given at the end of the unit.

- 1)and had participated in the famous ‘Torres Straits’ expedition.
- 2) Radcliffe-Brown’s first field study was in
- 3) Radcliffe-Brown was attracted to the rigorous conceptual contribution of

1.3 THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN RADCLIFFE-BROWN'S WORK

According to Radcliffe-Brown, the basic requirement of any science is a body of coherent concepts. These concepts are to be denoted by technical terms that are accepted and used in the same sense by all the students of the subject. For instance, physicists use terms like 'atom', 'molecule', 'combustion' etc.

The meanings and usages of these terms do not change from student to student. Can the same thing be said about sociology and social anthropology? Radcliffe-Brown points out that in anthropological literature, the same word is used in the same sense by different writers and many terms are used without precise definition. This shows the immaturity of the science.

He says that confused, unscientific thinking may be avoided by constantly keeping in mind a clear picture of the nature of the empirical reality to be studied. All concepts and theories must be linked to this reality. According to Radcliffe-Brown (1958: 167), "the empirical reality with which social anthropology has to deal, by description, by analysis and in comparative studies is the process of social life of a certain limited region during a certain period of time". What does this "process of social life" consist of? Well, it involves the various actions of human beings, particularly joint actions and interactions. For example, in rural Indian society, we could speak of agricultural activities as 'joint actions'. The activities of youth clubs, women's organisations, co-operative societies etc. also imply joint actions.

To provide a description of social life, the social anthropologist must identify certain general features. For example, when a sociologist studies agricultural activities in rural India, he/she will try to derive its general features. How, when and by whom are these activities performed? How do various persons co-operate and interact during the processes of sowing, transplanting, harvesting, threshing and marketing the produce? Some general features that the sociologist could identify could include the composition of agricultural labour, the role played by women and so on. It is these generalised descriptions which constitute the data of the science. These may be obtained through various methods – participant observation, historical records etc.

Do these general features remain the same over time? Well, different features may change at different rates. Taking the example given above, we can see that agricultural activities have exhibited a number of changes over the years. The availability of agricultural labour has declined to some extent. Unlike in the past, they resist brutal exploitation. Increasingly, machines, fertilizers, pesticides etc. are being used. Despite these changes, we can still say that in most parts of the country, women continue to do backbreaking work on the field without getting due recognition for it. Any anthropological description, which accounts for changes over a period of time, is termed a 'diachronic' description. A 'synchronic' description, on the other hand, refers to the features of social life at a particular period of time.

Rigorous, clear concepts will, according to Radcliffe-Brown, help social anthropology to develop as a distinctive science; it enables generalisations based on synchronic and diachronic explanations of social life. In this context, the concept of social structure becomes an important one, helping us to see the entire web of social relationships in a systematic way. Thus, we can gain insights into the way society works and stays integrated.

1.3.1 Social Structure and Social Organisation

As Radcliffe-Brown (1958: 168) puts it, “the concept of structure refers to an arrangement of parts or components related to one another in some sort of larger unity.” Thus, the structure of the human body at first appears as an arrangement of various tissues and organs. If we go deeper, it is ultimately an arrangement of cells and fluids.

In social structure, the basic elements are human beings or persons involved in social life. The arrangement of persons in relation to each other is the social structure. For instance, persons in our country are arranged into castes. This caste is a structural feature of Indian social life. The structure of a family is the relation of parents, children, grandparents etc. with each other. Hence, for Radcliffe-Brown, structure is not an abstraction but empirical reality itself. It must be noted that Radcliffe-Brown’s conception of social structure differs from that of other social anthropologists. You may read more about the diverse uses of this concept in Box 1.2.

How does one seek out the structural features of social life? Radcliffe-Brown says we must look out for social groups of all kinds, and examine their structure. Within groups, people are arranged in terms of classes, categories, castes etc. A most important structural feature, in Radcliffe-Brown’s opinion, is the arrangement of people into dyadic relationships or person-to-person relationships, e.g. master-servant or mother’s brother or sister’s son. A social structure is fully apparent during inter-group interactions, and interpersonal interactions. Having had a preliminary look at the concept of social structure, let us see what Radcliffe-Brown meant by social organisation. Structure, as we have seen, refers to arrangements of persons. Organisation refers to arrangements of activities. For instance, whilst studying this Block you have organised your activities, i.e. reading a particular section, attempting the exercises, referring to Glossary whenever necessary etc. This is organisation at the individual level. Social organisation is for Radcliffe-Brown (1958: 169) “the arrangement of activities of two or more persons adjusted to give a united combined activity”. For instance, a cricket team consists of bowlers, bat-persons, field persons and a wicket-keeper whose combined activities make the game possible.

Box 1.2 The Concept of Social Structure

In the decade following World War II, the concept of social structure became very fashionable in social anthropology. The concept has a long history, though, and has been used by scholars in different senses.

- i) The original English meaning of the word structure refers to building constructions. The concept of structure in the sense of building or construction can be discerned in early Marxist literature. Marx spoke of the relations of production as constituting the economic 'structure'. Marx and Engels were profoundly influenced by the evolutionist Morgan whose book *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity* (1871) may be described as the first anthropological study of social structure.
- ii) By the 16th century the word structure came to be used in anatomy. Herbert Spencer, who had an anatomical image of society in mind, brought the terms 'structure' and 'function' into sociology. This image is also to be found in the work of Durkheim from whom Radcliffe-Brown drew many of his ideas. Following Radcliffe-Brown a number of British scholars like Evans-Pritchard, Fortes and Forde concentrated on certain formal aspects of, society like the political structure and kinship structure.
- iii) Another dimension of the concept of structure can be seen in the work of the French structuralist Levi-Strauss. His view of structure has been drawn from linguistics and denotes an abstract, analytical model against which empirical systems are compared. Certain patterns or regularities are then discerned and explained.

Radcliffe-Brown illustrates the concepts of structure and organisation with reference to a modern army. To begin with, the structure consists of arrangement of persons into groups: divisions, regiments, companies etc. These groups have an internal arrangement of their own, namely ranks. Thus we have corporals, majors, colonels, brigadiers etc.

The organisation of the army or arrangement of activities can be seen in the allocation of various activities to various persons and groups. Manning the borders of the land, helping the Government during times of national calamity etc. are some of the activities of an army.

Complete Activity 1 and try to inter relate the concept of social structure.

Activity 1

Study any one of the following in terms of their social structure and social organization, (i) hospital, (ii) a village panchayat, (iii) a municipal corporation. Write a note of about two pages and compare it, if possible, with the notes of other students in your Study Centre.

1.3.2 Social Structure and Institutions

One of the basic premises underlying a social relationship (which, as we have seen, is the building block of social structure) is the expectation that persons will conform to certain norms or rules. An institution refers to an established, socially recognised system of norms and behaviour patterns concerned with some aspect of social life. A society's family-related institutions, for example, set down acceptable patterns of behaviour to which family members are expected to conform. In our society, a child is expected to show respect to the parents; the parents are expected to support and care for the child as well as aged members of the family and so on.

Institutions, in Radcliffe-Brown's (1958:175) words, "define for a person how he is expected to behave, and also how he may expect others to behave". Of course, individuals do violate these rules from time to time and various sanctions exist to cope with deviations. According to Radcliffe- Brown, social structure has to be described in terms of the institutions, which regulate the relationships between persons or groups. As he puts it, "the structural features of social life of a particular region consist of all those continuing arrangements of persons in institutional relationships, which are exhibited in the actions, and interactions that in their totality make up the social life." (1958: 175).

1.3.3 Structural Continuity and Structural Form

If, as Radcliffe-Brown describes it, social structure refers to an arrangement of persons, we could conclude that once the persons die or disappear, structure must also disappear. This, however, is not the case. Individuals may come and go, but structure persists or continues. For example, social groups, classes, castes, have an ever-changing membership. They lose members by death and gain new ones by birth. For example, the Lok Sabha may lose members who may die, resign, or lose the next election, but they will soon be replaced by new ones. A tribal chief may die, but soon a successor takes his place. At this stage, we must highlight the distinction made by Radcliffe-Brown between social structure and structural form.

As we have seen above, the social structure is always in a state of flux. Individuals are born and die, the composition of society is ever-changing. Radcliffe-Brown argues that although social structures are in flux, the structural form is comparatively stable. This structural form is reflected in the 'social usages' or norms widely observed. These social usages persist, even though persons come and go. The stability of this structural form depends on how well integrated its parts are (e.g. family, educational system, political system etc.) and the performance by these parts of the special tasks necessary to maintain it. For instance, the special task of the family is the rearing and socialisation of children. Educational institutions impart training, the political system is concerned with governance. These tasks refer to 'functions' of the parts of the system. As a word of caution it may be said that Radcliffe-Brown's distinction between social structure and social form is not made absolutely clear even in his own writings, where the latter comes out as synonymous with social organisation.

In a nutshell, ‘social structure’, an important social anthropological concept developed by Radcliffe-Brown, refers to empirically observable phenomena, namely, arrangements or relationships of the members of a society. There is an organisational aspect as well, which refers to a pattern of arranging the activities people engage in. Social structure involves institutions, which define socially acceptable rules and modes of inter personal behaviour. Social structure is constantly in a state of flux, but the structural form an abstract concept taking into account social usages is relatively stable. Its stability depends on how effectively its component parts carry out their ‘functions’.

Thus far, we have been talking about social structure in a rather abstract way. The best way to make these ideas crystal clear is through an example. Radcliffe-Brown’s field studies took him to various parts of the world from the Andaman Islands to Africa and to Australia. We will now focus upon the structural system of the tribes of the Western Australia as studied by Radcliffe-Brown. This will clearly demonstrate to you how social relationships help to build up the social structure.

Before going to the next section complete Check Your Progress 2.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Answer the following questions in two sentences each.

ii) Check your progress with those answers given at the end of the unit.

1) What did Radcliffe-brown mean by ‘Social Structure’ and ‘Social Organisation’?

.....
.....
.....

2) What are social ‘institutions’? Give an example.

.....
.....
.....

3) Mark whether the following statements are True (T) or False (F).

a) People never violate institutions. (T/F)

b) The social structure is extremely stable whilst structural form is in a permanent state of flux. (T/F)

c) According to Radcliffe-Brown, social anthropology can become a science only when it develops rigorous concepts. (T/F)

1.4 THE STRUCTURAL SYSTEM IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Let us look some of bases of the social structure of these tribes as systematically set down by Radcliffe-Brown.

1.4.1 The Territorial Basis

The essential basis of the structure of Western Australian tribal society, says Radcliffe-Brown, was the division of the country into numerous distinct territories. Each male belonged to his distinct territory from birth to death. His sons and their sons inherited this territorial identity. The men connected to a particular territory formed a “clan”, which was of basic importance in the social structure. Where did women fit in? Well, girls belonged to their fathers’ clans. Clan exogamy being a strict rule, they married men from other clans to which they then belonged.

The men of a clan, along with their wives and children formed a ‘horde’, which was identified by its distinct territory. The horde was an economically self-sufficient and politically autonomous unit. Elders held authority. Its total population was small, usually not more than 50 persons.

The horde was sub-divided into families, of the nuclear type. Each family had its own home, hearth and food supply and was dominated by the male. It dissolved upon his death. Even though the family was temporary, the clan was a permanent group. The horde, however, was in a state of flux. The male members were its nucleus, but females married out and new ones married into the horde. Briefly, the ‘clan’ consists of the men identified with a particular territory. The ‘horde’ refers to the men of a clan along with their wives and children, the wives having earlier been members of their fathers’ clans.

1.4.2 The Tribe

A number of clans having similar customs and language formed a linguistic community or tribe. Radcliffe-Brown points out that unlike some other regions, these tribes were not politically united, nor did they come together for collective action. Different hordes and tribes had an important link, namely, the kinship structure. As Radcliffe-Brown puts it, the kinship structure was “...a complex arrangement of dyadic, person-to-person, relationships. A particular man was closely connected through his mother with her clan and its members. He could always visit their territory and live with the horde though he was not and could not become a member of the clan. Different members of a single clan were connected in this way with different other clans”. Similarly, a man had relations with his grandmother’s clan, his wife’s clan and would probably keep in touch with the clans his sisters had married into. Thus, the kinship structure involved a large number and range of social relationships.

1.4.3 The Moieties

Read this sub-section very slowly and carefully because it may be unfamiliar and confusing. The society Radcliffe-Brown was speaking of, namely, western Australian tribes society was divided into two 'moieties'. Moieties are the two broad divisions into which society is divided. Each clan belongs to either one of them. These moieties may be referred to as I and II. Further, society is divided into two alternating generation divisions. Let us call them 'x' and 'y'. If your father belongs to generation 'x', then you will be part of 'y' and your children will be 'x' and so on. Therefore, a clan always consists of persons of both divisions. Society is thus divided into four "sections", namely, Ix, Iy, IIx and IIy. Radcliffe-Brown mentions some of the names given to these sections, e.g. Banaka, Burong, Karimera and Paldjeri.

In accordance with the tribal laws, a man must find a wife in the opposite moiety in the same generation division, thus a man of Iy must find a wife from IIy. For example, in the Kareira tribe, a man from Banaka section can only marry a Burong woman.

Activity 2

Select any five of your married relatives (e.g., mother, brother, sister, mother's brother's son/daughter, father's brother's son/daughter etc.) How were their mates selected? Is there any relationship between the families concerned? Write down your findings, and compare them, if possible, with the notes of other students at your Study Centre.

1.4.4 The Totemic Group

Another basis of social structure is the totem. The totemic object is regarded as the common ancestor of clan members.

Each clan has its own sacred totem-centres, myths, rites and ceremonies. The totem lends solidarity and persistence. Radcliffe-Brown shows how some totemic ceremonies (e.g. those for the initiation of boys) in fact lead to the co-operation of a number of clans. These meetings of friendly clans mark out the religious structure of society. Co-operation during ceremonies also implies some amount of political unity, as these clans have forgotten any existing differences and have co-operated on the basis of mutual trust and friendship.

What can we conclude from the above section? We can say that the structural description provided by Radcliffe-Brown reveals a number of important things. Structural description must take into consideration not just social groups (e.g. family, clan, horde) but also the entire gamut of socially fixed dyadic relationships, as has been done by Radcliffe-Brown in the description of the kinship system of the Australian aborigines which you have just read about.

Radcliffe-Brown's concept of social structure, though sometimes criticized as being too general has been ably used by him in his studies. By focusing on the formal aspects of social life, i.e., the way social life is built up or constructed, he provides a valuable corrective to the extremely personal kind of description given by Malinowski.

Indeed, the work of these two men who disliked each other intensely is in fact complementary. As Adam Kuper puts (1973: 51) it, “some saw Radcliffe-Brown as the classic to Malinowski’s romantic”.

It is now time to complete Check Your Progress 3.

Check Your Progress 3

Match the following items.

- | | |
|-----------|---|
| a) Burong | i) Linguistic community |
| b) Tribe | ii) Economic and political self-sufficiency |
| c) Clan | iii) Territorial identity |
| d) Horde | iv) Kaieira tribe |

1.5 LET US SUM UP

The theme of this unit was the concept of social structure, as described by A.R. Radcliffe-Brown. We began with a brief look at the intellectual influences, which helped shape his distinctive brand of social anthropology. We focused on the impact on Radcliffe-Brown of the fieldwork and Durkheimian traditions.

Moving to the main theme, i.e., social structure, we defined social structure and social organisation. We then spoke of social institutions, which are an important component of structural description. We then considered how social structure, though in a state of flux, has continuity. In this connection, we spoke of structural form as well.

In order to make these new ideas clear, we moved onto a structural description of some Western Australian tribes studied by Radcliffe-Brown. We saw some of the bases of structural arrangements like territory, tribes, moiety, and totem.

1.6 REFERENCES

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1.7 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Rivers and Haddon
- 2) Andaman Islands
- 3) Durkheim

Check Your Progress 2

Radcliffe Brown:
Structural
Functionalism

- 1) By 'social structure', Radcliffe-Brown referred to patterns of social relationships entered into by individuals or persons in a society. By 'social organisation', he referred to the arrangements of the activities undertaken by a group.
- 2) Social institutions are socially prescribed ways and rules of behaviour involving the expectations of persons entering into an interaction, e.g. in a classroom, teacher is expected to give a lesson; students are expected to pay attention.
- 3) a) F
b) F
c) T

Check Your Progress 3

- a) iv)
- b) i)
- c) iii)
- d) ii)



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