

Social Structure

Structural-Functionalism

A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, a British social anthropologist, gave the concept of social structure a central place in his approach and connected it to the concept of function. In his view, the components of the social structure have indispensable functions for each other--the continued existence of the one component is dependent on that of the others—and for the society as a whole, which is seen as an integrated, organic entity.

Radcliffe-Brown defined the social structure empirically as patterned, or "normal," social relations (those aspects of social activities that conform to accepted social rules or norms). These rules bind society's members to socially useful activities.

Structural functionalism was elaborated further by Talcott Parsons, a U.S. sociologist, who, like Radcliffe-Brown, was strongly influenced by the French social scientist Émile Durkheim. While Radcliffe-Brown focused on so-called primitive societies, Parsons attempted to formulate a theory that was valid for large and complex societies as well.

Several theorists, in what came to be known as “structural-functionalist” anthropology, also known as “British social anthropology,” addressed the question of social structure as a part of their larger interest in the interconnectedness of individuals and societies. They include E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Meyer Fortes, and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown. Each regarded kinship as one of the chief entrées into social structure. Their approach was strongly comparative. They sought to identify the “rules” of descent that governed the composition of kin groups such as patrilineages, clans, and tribes, units they portrayed as integral to political organization. The structural-functionalists were later criticized by Harris for drawing universalistic conclusions from historically situated data, for example by

not assigning enough weight to colonialism, the slave trade, and other encroachments on local political organization.