5 Functionalism and structural-functionalism

The terms 'functionalist' and 'structural-functionalist' and their corresponding 'isms' are now quite stable in their meanings. However, this was not always the case. Before looking at the theories, a brief tour of the changing nuances of the terms is in order.

'Functionalism' is a broad term. In its widest sense, it includes both functionalism (narrowly defined) and structural-functionalism. I use it mainly in the narrower sense, that is, to refer to ideas associated with Bronislaw Malinowski and his followers, notably Sir Raymond Firth. It is the perspective concerned with actions among individuals, the constraints imposed by social institutions on individuals, and relations between the needs of an individual and the satisfaction of those needs through cultural and social frameworks. 'Structural-functionalism' tends to be concerned less with individual action or needs, and more with the place of individuals in the social order, or indeed with the construction of the social order itself. Typically, the latter term identifies the work of A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and his followers. In Britain these included E. E. Evans-Pritchard (in his early work), Isaac Schapera, Meyer Fortes, and Jack Goody, among many others.

Yet the boundary between structural-functionalism and functionalism was never rigid. Some of Radcliffe-Brown's followers did not mind the term 'functionalist'; others took to the labels 'structural-functionalist' or 'structuralist' (to distinguish their work from that of Malinowski). Furthermore, the term 'British structuralist' was heard in the 1950s to distinguish Radcliffe-Brownianism from Lévi-Straussianism or 'French structuralism' (described in chapter 8). Confusingly, when in the early 1960s a new generation of British anthropologists turned to Lévi-Strauss, they assumed the label 'British structuralist' for themselves. In broader terms, the latter 'British structuralism' was actually a British version of 'French structuralism'!

As if all that is not bad enough, both Radcliffe-Brown and Lévi-Strauss drew inspiration from the sociology of Emile Durkheim. And although he

did not like being called a 'functionalist', Radcliffe-Brown was happy to call his discipline 'comparative sociology'.

Evolutionist precursors and the organic analogy

Radcliffe-Brown recalled more than once that anthropology has two points of origin. He dated one to 'around 1870', the heyday of evolutionist thinking. The other he dated to Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* (published in French in 1748). This sociological tradition respected the idea that society is systematically structured, and that its structures are the proper study of the disciplines we now call the social sciences. It also, at least from Comte onwards, held to the view that its object of study may be likened to a biological organism, made up of functioning systems. Evolutionists, especially Herbert Spencer (an English member of this otherwise mainly French tradition) saw the transformation of societal types as the focal point for research. He also made the most explicit statements on the organic analogy (see, e.g., Andreski 1971 [Spencer 1876]: 108–20). Spencer argued the case for a science of society based on the science of life (biology), then decidedly evolutionist and Darwinian in outlook. Spencer saw societies as passing through stages analogous to infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, middle life, and old age. He, and Durkheim as well, saw them as made up of parts, each with its own function. And they saw the parts as increasing in heterogeneity with evolution. Even the diffusionist Leo Frobenius joined the organic-analogy bandwagon. The idea was amenable to synchronic and diachronic, evolutionist and diffusionist approaches alike.

This early functionalist perspective was itself transformed in the early twentieth century, partly by Durkheim in his more synchronic work, but decidedly by Radcliffe-Brown. While neither Durkheim nor Radcliffe-Brown denied the importance of evolution, they became known for their emphasis on contemporaneous societies. We can imagine a society functioning smoothly like a healthy organism, made of many parts put together in larger systems; and these systems, each with its own special purpose of function, working together with the others. Societies have structures similar to those of organisms. Social institutions, like the parts of the body, function together within larger systems. The social systems, such as kinship, religion, politics, and economics, together make up society, just as the various biological systems together form the organism. A simple representation of this, essentially Radcliffe-Brownian, analogy is shown in figure 5.1.

To take the analogy further, look at, say French or British society. The systems which make up each society are composed of parts which Rad-

Reproductive system	Circulatory system
Digestive system	Nervous system

Systems of an organism

Kinship	Religion
Economics	Politics

Systems of a society

Figure 5.1 The organic analogy: society is like an organism

cliffe-Brown called 'social institutions'. How do we understand the relation between these and the systems they form? 'Marriage' in France or Britain might be designated an institution within the kinship system, but it can also have religious, political, and economic aspects. Therefore 'marriage' is not just part of kinship, because it functions within other systems too. This does not make the analogy useless or wrong, but it does make it problematic. It also shows that it is simplistic. Any institution can have a function in fitting together with some other institution. Everything is, therefore, in some sense 'functional'.

To my mind, the reason the organic analogy succeeded is that it was such a simple model, and one capable of being put to use in either diachronic or synchronic analyses. Yet this was also to be its failing, as successive post-functionalist generations have all clamoured for something more sophisticated.

Durkheimian sociology

Perhaps the most important source for structural-functionalist ideas is the sociology of Emile Durkheim. After an undistinguished student career and a spell of philosophy teaching, Durkheim gained a university post (the first in the social sciences in France) at Bordeaux in 1887. He moved to the Sorbonne in 1902 and taught there until his death in 1917. He gathered around him a devoted group of philosophers, economists,

historians, and jurists, who shared his vision of an integrated science of society. In 1898, Durkheim and his band of young scholars founded the *Année sociologique*, an interdisciplinary journal which quickly achieved great influence. Several of this band contributed to anthropological ideas, and especially to the anthropology of religion. Marcel Mauss, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Robert Hertz, Marcel Granet, and Henri Hubert, in particular, influenced our discipline, though in some cases their influence was slow, only culminating years after death when later generations read their works in posthumous translations.

It has been said that anthropologists and sociologists agree that Durkheim wrote one great book, but that they disagree about which book this might be. The empirical tradition alive today in sociology is derived from Durkheim's early works. In *Suicide* (1966 [1897]), Durkheim reports from archival sources that statistics differ for suicide rates among Catholics and Protestants, rural people and city dwellers, married and unmarried, young adults and older people, and so on. There are also differences for different countries, and these remain constant through time. Thus even that apparently most individual of acts, the taking of one's own life, has at its heart a social basis.

As *their* choice of Durkheim's one great book, most anthropologists would cite *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (Durkheim 1915 [1912]), or perhaps *Primitive Classification* (Durkheim and Mauss 1963 [1903]), which foreshadows it. *The Elementary Forms* deals with religion in 'early' societies. Durkheim first defines 'religion' and asserts its social basis: religions distinguish the 'sacred' from the 'profane' and take the sacred as their special concern. He traces theories of the origin of religion, notably Tylor's animism, Müller's naturism, and McLennan's totemism. Durkheim himself favours totemism, and he puts forward his ideas on the specifics of its evolution. He makes good use of the growing ethnographic literature on Aboriginal Australia, as well as Native North America. Although still couched in evolutionist terms, towards the end of the book, Durkheim's explanations take on a more strongly functionalist flavour as he moves from belief to ritual. In ritual, he argues, people venerate society itself, as the cosmological order is constructed upon the social order. Ritual helps to validate that order in the minds of its participants.

Durkheim co-authored *Primitive Classification* with his nephew and student, Marcel Mauss. In this short work (first published as an article in the *Année sociologique*), they tackle the question of how the human mind classifies. The authors review ethnographic evidence from Aboriginal Australia, from the Zuñi and Sioux of North America, and from Taoist China, and they conclude that there exists a close relation between society and the classification of nature. Furthermore, they see a continuity between primitive and scientific thinking. The advanced culture of

China possesses elements of classification which reflect those of 'primitive' Aboriginal Australian cosmology, and in turn the structural divisions of Australian Aboriginal society. There are cross-cultural similarities in the classification of time, place, animals, and things – all built up from divisions into twos, fours, sixes, eights, and so on. Australia, North America, China, and ancient Greece provide Durkheim and Mauss' examples. The theory they put forward has elements not only of structural-functionalism, but also of evolutionism and structuralism – all theories which rest on an explicit recognition of the psychic unity of humankind.

Mauss' work proved seminal in several areas of anthropology. His writings, mainly in the *Année sociologique*, include essays on aspects of cultural ecology, sacrifice, magic, the concept of the person, and the exchange of gifts (see Lévi-Strauss 1988 [1950]). Probably the most important of these, and certainly the most functionalist, was his 'essay on the gift' (Mauss 1990 [1923]). He argues that though gifts are in theory voluntary, they nevertheless stem from expectation on the part of the recipient. Moreover, though they may be free from expectation of direct return, there is always an element of repayment, either in the form of a later gift or in the form of deference or some other recognition of social status between giver and recipient. The gift, in other words, is not free; and it is embedded in a system of rights and obligations which in any society make up part of the social structure, and in some societies form a system of 'total services'. Mauss' examples include ceremonial exchanges among Polynesians and Melanesians (including Malinowski's Trobrianders) and among North West Coast peoples (including Boas' Kwakiutl). He also records survivals of 'archaic' exchange in Roman, Hindu, Germanic, and Chinese law, thereby enabling his conclusion that the spirit of the gift is a widespread if not universal institution.

Durkheim and especially Mauss remain inspirational for anthropologists of various theoretical perspectives. Sociology has since gone its own way, though with cross-influences and parallel developments (see Swingewood 1984: 227–329). This is not the place to recount that story, though it is perhaps worth keeping in mind the fact that sociology and anthropology once had the potential to become one discipline.

The functionalism of Malinowski

Malinowski's position in British anthropology is analogous to that of Boas in American anthropology (see chapter 7). Like Boas, Malinowski was a Central European natural scientist brought by peculiar circumstances to anthropology and to the English-speaking world. Like Boas, he objected to armchair evolutionism and invented a fieldwork tradition based on the

use of the native language in 'participant observation'. Furthermore, both Boas and Malinowski were pompous but liberal intellectuals who built up very strong followings through their postgraduate teaching.

Malinowski was born in Cracow in 1884, the son of a professor of Slavic philology. He graduated from the Jagiellonian University in Cracow in 1908, in mathematics, physics, and philosophy, and with the highest honours in the Austrian Empire. He studied anthropology at the London School of Economics (LSE), under C. G. Seligman and Edward Westermarck, then set off for Australia in 1914. Although technically an enemy alien, Malinowski (unlike Graebner) was treated well in Australia during the First World War; he was permitted to carry out fieldwork in areas of New Guinea which were administered by Australia. Between September 1914 and October 1918 Malinowski spent some thirty months, in three separate trips from Australia, conducting his work in New Guinea. All except the first six-month stint was spent in the Trobriand Islands. After the War Malinowski turned down a chair at the Jagiellonian University and returned to the LSE, where he taught from 1922 to 1938. It was in this period that his influence was greatest. At the outbreak of the Second World War he was in the United States. He chose to remain there for the duration, but died in 1942, shortly after accepting a permanent post at Yale.

Functionalism and fieldwork

The phrase 'Malinowskian anthropology' evokes two rather different images today. One is an image of the fieldwork method and its implicit theoretical assumptions and ethnographic style reminiscent of Malinowski's monographs on the Trobriand Islanders. The other is a more explicit theory of culture and cultural universals based on assumptions in Malinowski's late writings, especially his posthumous collection, *A Scientific Theory of Culture* (1944).

The functionalism of Malinowski's fieldwork style was not dissimilar to that of Radcliffe-Brown, but Malinowski was the better researcher. Many of Malinowski's students picked up theoretical ideas from Radcliffe-Brown, especially the emphasis on social institutions functioning within larger social systems. Yet the methods of Malinowski's well-known students, such as Raymond Firth, Phyllis Kaberry, Isaac Schapera, Eileen Krige, Monica Wilson, and Hilda Kuper, are best characterized as 'Malinowskian'. Malinowski encouraged long stints of fieldwork, with close contact with informants over a long period of time.

The most famous of Malinowski's works is *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922). *Argonauts* begins with a statement on subject, method, and

scope, then describes the geography of the Trobriands and his arrival in the islands. He moves on to the rules of *kula* exchange, facts about canoes, sailing, and canoe magic and ceremony. He then gives more detailed and specific accounts of aspects touched on earlier, including canoe journeys, the *kula* and magic. He ends with a 'reflective' (we would now say 'reflexive') chapter on 'the meaning of the *kula*'. Here he explicitly declines to venture into theoretical speculations, but rather comments on the importance of ethnology for encouraging tolerance of alien customs and enlightening readers on the purpose of customs very different from their own. This is the Malinowski most passionately admired by his students.

For me, the most striking case of Malinowski's insights came a few years after *Argonauts*. This is in his work on parent–child relations, which tested the central tenets of Freudian psychology (Malinowski 1927a; 1927b). For the Trobrianders, the father is a figure of supreme indulgence, not the authority figure postulated as a cultural universal by Freud. Rather, a boy's mother's brother is in the position of authority. This is because the mother's brother's power is derived from his place as a senior member of the boy's matrilineal kin group. According to Malinowski, the Trobrianders were ignorant of physiological paternity; thus the role of the father would be quite different from that in patrilineal societies, where the biological relationship between father and son is considered the basis of their social relationship. Much later, Radcliffe-Brown (1952 [1924]: 15–31) and Lévi-Strauss (1963 [1945]: 31–54) were to debate this classic set of relations between a boy and his father and a boy and his mother's brother. What makes Malinowski's contribution to the 'avunculate' problem of special interest is that his argument is from deep ethnographic insight and not simply from cross-cultural comparison. This is perhaps what gave him the edge, at least against Freud.

In more general terms, Kaberry (1957: 81–2) describes three levels of abstraction in Malinowski's theory of function. At the first, 'function' denotes the effects of an institution on other institutions, that is, the relation between social institutions. This level is similar to that in Radcliffe-Brown's work. The second involves the understanding of an institution in terms defined by members of the community. The third defines the way in which the institution promotes social cohesion in general. Malinowski himself was not very explicit in print about these levels, and it is likely that Kaberry has inferred them from isolated comments in Malinowski's ethnographic writings. However, in a rare venture into theoretical comment cited by Kaberry as an example of the first level, Malinowski argued that custom is 'organically connected' with the rest of culture and that the fieldworker needs to search for the 'invisible facts'

which govern the interconnection of the different facets of social organization. These, he said (Malinowski 1935: I, 317), are discovered by 'inductive computation'.

A scientific theory of culture?

When, late in his life, Malinowski sat down to summarize his perspective he explained things in a rather different, and indeed quite peculiar way. This marks the second of the perspectives Malinowski is known for.

Malinowski claimed that the basis of his approach was a set of seven biological needs and their respective cultural responses (table 5.1). After defining 'culture', Malinowski (1944: 75–84) proposes a theory of 'vital sequences', which he says are biological foundations incorporated into all cultures. There are eleven of these sequences, each composed of an 'impulse', an associated physiological 'act', and a 'satisfaction' which results from that act. For example, the impulse of somnolence is associated with the act of sleep, resulting in satisfaction by 'awakening with restored energy' (1944: 77). He follows this eleven-fold paradigm with a slightly simpler one. This is the one built on the relationship between seven 'basic needs' and their respective 'cultural responses' (1944: 91–119). He then goes on to a four-fold one, relating what he sees as four, rather complex, 'instrumental imperatives' with their respective 'cultural responses'. The latter comprise economics, social control, education, and political organization (1944: 120–31). Finally, he tackles 'integrative imperatives' and the 'instrumentally implemented vital sequence' (1944: 132–44).

None of the ideas of Malinowski's *Scientific Theory of Culture* found favour with his contemporaries, though in a collection of commemorative essays published fifteen years after his death (Firth 1957) some of his students tried to find worth in them. As Malinowski's final statement, and as the most theoretical of all his writings, it does deserve study. However, the fact is that his students were embarrassed by it. The biological assertions seem to have little to do with culture, and much of what he said is either self-evident (e.g., sleep relieves tiredness) or impenetrable (e.g., integrative imperatives and the instrumentally implemented vital sequence). Phyllis Kaberry (1957: 83), a favourite among Malinowski's students, points out that Malinowski's late concerns with biological needs were of little interest to any, whereas his earlier work on social institutions was of great interest. The problem was that Malinowski's work on social institutions remained submerged within his erudite and ethnographic prose and, unlike his statement on biological needs, was never the subject of theoretical generalization.

Table 5.1. *Malinowski's seven basic needs and their cultural responses*

Basic needs	Cultural responses
1. metabolism	1. commissariat
2. reproduction	2. kinship
3. bodily comforts	3. shelter
4. safety	4. protection
5. movement	5. activities
6. growth	6. training
7. health	7. hygiene

Sadly, in a way, the relation between the two Malinowskian perspectives is hinted at in Malinowski's introduction to a volume by one of his other students: 'The most important thing for the student, in my opinion, is never to forget the living, palpitating flesh and blood organism of man which remains somewhere in the heart of every institution' (Malinowski 1934: xxxi). S. F. Nadel commented:

> Putting it somewhat crudely, Malinowski's thought moved on two levels only – on the level of the particular society, the Trobriands, where he did his fundamental and exemplary field research; and on the level of primitive man and society at large, and indeed Man and Society at large. In his more general writings Malinowski did refer also to other primitive societies; but he did so in the main only for the sake of supporting evidence, of secondary importance. He never thought strictly in comparative terms. His generalizations jump straight from the Trobrianders to Humanity, as undoubtedly he saw the Trobrianders as a particularly instructive species of Humanity. (Nadel 1957: 190)

What comes out in the final assessment of Malinowski by virtually all his students (i.e., in Firth 1957) is Malinowski's failure to grasp the significance of kinship terminology, the intricacies of economic exchange, the precision required for writing on law, or the meaning of anthropological comparison. Yet we still remember him as the founder of the greatest fieldwork tradition of anthropology. If his own analysis did not live up to expectation, his exemplary fieldwork methods and his inspiring teaching at the LSE seminars in the 1920s and 1930s have left a legacy that is the essence of the British tradition.

Malinowski and Boas both died, not far from each other, in 1942. Yet the year of their passing somehow holds less symbolic significance than that of Rivers, twenty years before, which marked the end of a pre-Malinowskian fieldwork tradition as well as that of diffusionism's most respected British proponent. Perhaps in 1942 the anthropological world was too preoccupied with the horrors of war, but the Boasian spirit stayed with American anthropology, while Malinowskian methodology and (for

a time) Radcliffe-Brownian theory remained the backbone of the British tradition.

The structural-functionalism of Radcliffe-Brown

Alfred Reginald Brown was born in Birmingham in 1881. Following his older brother's lead, he adopted the style A. Radcliffe Brown (adding their mother's maiden name) around 1920, and became A. R. Radcliffe-Brown by deed poll in 1926. He was known to his friends as Rex, R-B, or in his university days, Anarchy Brown, because of his political inclinations. In fact, he knew the anarchist writer Peter Kropotkin, whose vision of society as a self-regulating system, functioning by mutual aid in the absence of the state, anticipated Radcliffe-Brown's interest in the functions of social institutions (see, e.g., Kropotkin 1987 [1902]: 74–128).

After completing his bachelor's degree at Cambridge in 1904, Radcliffe-Brown did postgraduate work there and subsequently conducted fieldwork in the Andaman Islands (1906–8) and Western Australia (1910–11). During the First World War he served as Director of Education in the Kingdom of Tonga. Then he travelled around the world, establishing chairs of anthropology as he went, at Cape Town (1920–5), Sydney (1926–31), Chicago (1931–7), and Oxford (1937–46). He also taught for shorter periods at other universities in England, South Africa, China, Brazil, and Egypt.

A natural science of society?

In his Australian ethnography, Radcliffe-Brown (e.g., 1931) advocated a comparative perspective and explained the diversity in Aboriginal kinship systems in terms of the full complex of Aboriginal social structure found at the time. An inductivist, he believed that anthropology would one day discover through comparison the 'natural laws of society' (though he himself did not get very far in the effort). As an empiricist, he opposed speculation about the origins of the systems or institutions which make up society and argued that anthropologists should study just what they find. He wanted facts, and the simplest facts to come by were facts about the present, not the past; and the simplest way to connect them was through the study of society as a unit composed of living, interacting parts (see, e.g., Radcliffe-Brown 1952 [1935]: 178–87).

My favourite among Radcliffe-Brown's works is *A Natural Science of Society*, originally presented as a series of lectures at the University of Chicago in 1937 and transcribed for eventual, posthumous publication by his students (as Radcliffe-Brown 1957). These lectures were designed to

propose the idea of a single, unified social science. He explicitly rejected the claims of the dominant social sciences at Chicago at that time – psychology, economics, and so on – that *they* might be that unified social science (1957: 45–50, 112–17). He also rejected the idea of a 'science of culture' (1957: 106–9; cf. 1957: 117–23) and implicitly attacked the Boasian emphasis on this. What really mattered to him was that in Boasian anthropology, the dominant version in America at the time, 'society' (as relations between people) was lost to the vagaries of 'culture', which could not be analysed scientifically. In fairness to Boas and his followers though, Radcliffe-Brown's notion of 'culture' was essentially synonymous with *enculturation* or (more accurately) *socialization*: a way of learning to live in a society. Radcliffe-Brown simply could not comprehend Boas' desires to extol differences between peoples and place the highest value on the richness of the human experience.

Radcliffe-Brown summarized his 'natural science of society' lectures as follows:

> I HAVE ADVANCED several theses. The first of these was that a theoretical natural science of human society is possible. My second thesis was that there can only be one such science; the third, that such a science does not yet exist except in its most elementary beginnings. The fourth thesis, which seems to me important, was that a solution of any of the fundamental problems of such a science must depend on the systematic comparison of a sufficient number of societies of sufficiently diverse types. The last was that the development of the science therefore depends at this time on the gradual improvement of the comparative method and its refinement as an instrument of analysis . . . (Radcliffe-Brown 1957: 141)

The emphasis on comparison as an objective was crucial. Indeed, he praised his evolutionist predecessors for their comparative objectives, though he rejected their conjectural methods. He rejected the relativist objectives of his American contemporaries, though he found nothing wrong in their methods of observation and description. This contradiction was at the crux of his vision of the discipline (see Leach 1976a; Barnard 1992).

Function, structure, and structural form

In his work on the Andaman Islanders, Radcliffe-Brown (1922) explained rituals in terms of their social functions – their value for the society as a whole, rather than their value for any particular individual member of society. This emphasis on society over the individual was to remain strong in his own work and to influence both the theoretical interests and the ethnographic approaches of the next generation. His clearest statement on *function* is in a paper in which he takes up both diachronic and

synchronic implications of the 'organic analogy' he inherited from Spencer and Durkheim (Radcliffe-Brown 1952 [1935]: 178–87). More specifically, he attacks an American critic's assertion that there is a conflict between 'historical' and 'functional' interests. For Radcliffe-Brown, the opposition is rather between the historical and the sociological, and to him they are not in conflict, but rather, represent different kinds of study. He places the emphasis on synchronic (sociological) aspects: the way given institutions 'function' within a social system, rather than how they change through time.

In another famous analogy, Radcliffe-Brown likened the study of society to the study of sea shells (Kuper 1977 [Radcliffe-Brown 1953]: 42). Each sea shell has its own 'structure', but the structure of one may resemble the structure of another. In this case, the two are said, in Radcliffe-Brown's terms, to share a common 'structural form'. The analogy is that *social structure* is about actual observations, that is, what the anthropologist actually sees and hears about individual people, whereas *structural form* is about generalization, that is, what an anthropologist infers about a particular society on the basis of his or her observations of individuals. Suppose Edward is a chief. Suppose George is another chief among the same people. Perhaps George has succeeded Edward after Edward's death. The anthropologist observes the two chiefs in action, and the relation between each chief and his people constitutes an example of social structure. When the anthropologist generalizes about the role of 'the chief' (rather than the role of Edward or George), he or she is now describing the structural form. To Radcliffe-Brown, the concern of an anthropologist should be not with describing individual chiefs and individual subjects (as Boas might have done), but with understanding among a particular people the relationship between the typical chief and his typical subjects, between the typical father and his typical children, a typical lecturer and her typical students, and so on. Then, at a later stage of analysis, an anthropologist can compare the structural form of one society to that of another, and might even (Radcliffe-Brown hoped) come up with general laws about the way in which societies work.

There are two common criticisms of this line in Radcliffe-Brown's thinking. First, confusingly, Radcliffe-Brown used the phrase 'structural form' to mean what others have usually called 'social structure', and the phrase 'social structure' to mean what others call just 'data'. Secondly, and more seriously, he appeared to be going about things backwards. One cannot get at universal, general laws by counting up instances of anything. One can only get there by reasoning from logical premises, a point made repeatedly through structuralist studies such as those of Claude Lévi-Strauss.

Hardly anyone in social anthropology today claims to be a follower of Radcliffe-Brown. Nevertheless, he was right about the basis of the subject. Virtually all anthropological enquiry is in some sense about relationships between things. Evolutionists, structuralists, interpretivists, and even anti-theorists at their best (when relations of interconnectedness lie implicitly in their descriptions) have this in common. Where they differ is in the ways in which they seek such connections, in the kinds of connections they regard as significant, and in the analogies they use in order to explain them.

Let us turn now to a couple of examples from Radcliffe-Brown's work: kinship terminology and totemism. I choose these because they show, in the case of kinship terminology, a facet of structural-functionalism which has won the argument against earlier approaches; and, in the case of totemism, the transformation from structural-functionalist to structuralist thinking.

Semantic structure or social structure?

What are kinship terms for? Are they simply aspects of language, independent of social implications, or are they more closely tied to the society which possesses them? The answer has wide implications, not just for kinship, but for any domain of classification. Essentially there are three viewpoints: the classical formulations of these are attributed respectively to A. L. Kroeber, W. H. R. Rivers, and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (figure 5.2).

Kroeber's (1909) view was that kinship terminology reflects *not* society, as Morgan and other nineteenth-century theorists had supposed, but what he called 'psychology'. His notion of 'psychology' was not the university subject which is today called by that term. Rather, Kroeber's 'psychology' concerned specifically the formal properties of human thought, and he anticipated Lévi-Strauss in seeing these mainly in terms of binary oppositions. Kroeber suggested that these formal properties, or principles of classification, may have social implications, but he explicitly denied that there is any direct connection between the terminology itself (also ultimately derived from these principles) and the social implications of the underlying 'psychological' principles. 'Psychology' determines kinship terminology through language, of which the terminology is a part; it determines social behaviour independently and only indirectly. The formal properties he defined were: generation, lineal versus collateral, relative age within a generation, sex of the relative, sex of the speaker, sex of the person through whom the relationship is traced, blood relative versus relative by marriage, and 'condition of life' of the person through whom

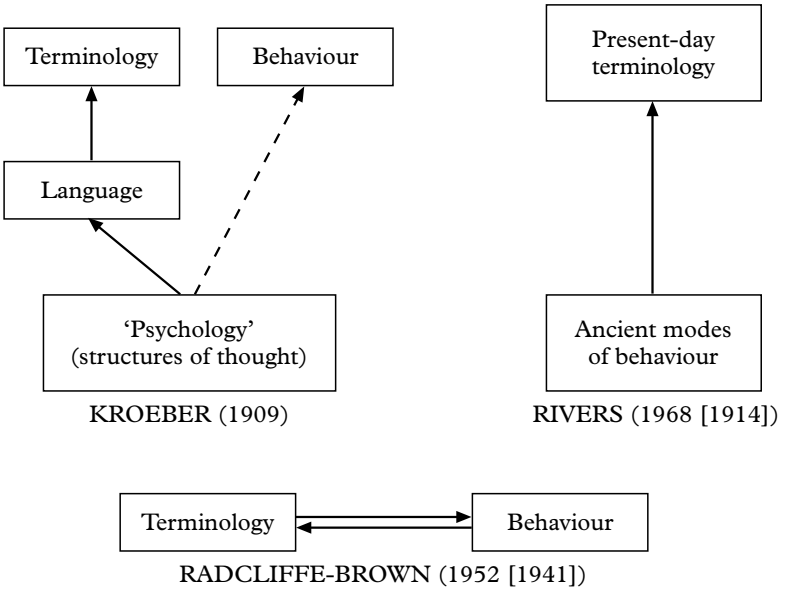

Figure 5.2 Relations between kinship terminology and social facts

the relationship is traced (e.g., living or dead, married or unmarried).

Rivers (1968 [1914]: 37–96) reacted against Kroeber's paper by re-articulating the earlier view which Kroeber was attacking. Rivers' formulation became the best representation of the traditional view that kinship terminology did directly stem from social facts, which was the prevailing theory in the late nineteenth century. Being conservative, he argued, terminology tends to reflect ancient, and often extinct, social facts. Thus it could be used as a kind of linguistic archaeology in order to understand historical changes in social organization. This is precisely what Morgan (1877) had done. Rivers here represented the last of the classic evolutionists, though he had in fact already announced his conversion to diffusionism; and his student, Radcliffe-Brown, was on the verge of a new approach based on a denial of the importance of conjectural history.

Radcliffe-Brown (1952 [1941]: 49–89) rejected Kroeber's claim that terminology was divorced from social behaviour and reflected merely language or 'psychology'. He also rejected Rivers' claim that it reflected only ancient social facts. For Radcliffe-Brown, its importance was its relation to existing social facts: the terminology, no matter what its history, would bear a connection to contemporary society. If one called one's father and father's brother by the same term, then one must treat

them in a similar way. The origin of the custom is, in his view, lost in prehistory and can never be recovered. The meaning of the custom, however, is embedded in contemporary society. With few exceptions, Radcliffe-Brown's emphasis on contemporary classification over historical speculation remains with anthropology to this day.

Two theories of totemism

Radcliffe-Brown held not just one, but two theories of totemism. The contrast between them is of significance for understanding the relation between his structural-functionalism and the incipient structuralism which pervades his second theory, devised very late in his life.

Radcliffe-Brown's first paper on the subject is called 'The sociological theory of totemism'. It was delivered at a conference on the island of Java in 1929 and is reprinted in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 117–32). There Radcliffe-Brown tries to explain how Australian Aborigines classify the world, and especially how Aborigines classify people as members of social groups. He builds on Durkheim's ideas of totemism, as he agrees with Durkheim that totems have the function of expressing clan solidarity.

However, he disagrees with Durkheim about the relationship between species and ritual. Durkheim argues that because given species represent social groups, these species are made the objects of ritual activity. Radcliffe-Brown argues the opposite. A species is chosen to represent a group because that species is already of ritual importance. But once a species is selected, the interrelationship between ritual, the symbolism of the species, and the solidarity of the group is what is important. For Radcliffe-Brown, totemism is a special development of the symbolism of nature. Totemistic ideas are found in many societies, though only some come to identify local groups specifically with truly totemic species.

Australian totemism, as Radcliffe-Brown points out, is characterized by the relations between four things: (1) the patrilineal local group (or 'horde' as Radcliffe-Brown called it); (2) the totems (certain animals, plants, the rain, the sun, hot and cold weather, and so on); (3) certain sacred spots within the local territories; and (4) certain mythical beings who, in the Dreamtime, made the sacred sites sacred. What Radcliffe-Brown does not quite do is put these relations together into a single framework. He concentrates instead on his disagreement with Durkheim, the relations between one group and another, and the relation between a group and its totemic species.

In his second essay on totemism, 'The comparative method in social anthropology', Radcliffe-Brown goes further. This theory was first

presented as a public lecture in 1951 and published in 1952, and is reprinted in the compilations of Radcliffe-Brown's writings by Srinivas (Radcliffe-Brown 1958: 108–29) and Kuper (1988: 53–69). The second theory is not just about how the Aborigines classify people as members of social groups, but also about how they classify animals as members of species. And it concerns the relation between these systems of classification. Radcliffe-Brown anticipates Lévi-Strauss in comparing diverse societies (Australian Aborigines and the Indians of the North West Coast of North America) and expressing a 'general law' based on the notion of structural opposition.

This scheme also goes beyond the social structure into the cosmological structure. Radcliffe-Brown, and following him Lévi-Strauss, have come to ask: Why this particular species? For example, the eaglehawk and the crow represent moieties in parts of Western Australia; and similar birds, the eagle and the raven, represent moieties among the Haida of the North West Coast of North America. The question is not just 'Why have moieties and associate them with species?' It is also 'Why the eagle? Why the crow?' and further, 'What is the symbolic relation between the eagle and the crow?' The last question is answered by appeal to the respective myths of the peoples who revere such species, because myths explain (among other things) the 'kin' relations which connect the species. For example, in Western Australia the mythical Eaglehawk is the mythical Crow's mother's brother.

But for Lévi-Strauss, and I think also Radcliffe-Brown, the question is even deeper. Why do such birds represent exogamous moieties in both Australia and North America? Is it because there is something alike about the indigenous inhabitants of these two continents? Or is there some general principle, or pattern, imprinted on the human mind which is found everywhere, and of which this particular configuration of species and moiety is a trace? Is this, perhaps, a conscious example of an unconscious universal? If this is what Radcliffe-Brown was thinking in 1951, then he had indeed gone beyond his own structural-functionalist paradigm into the realms of Lévi-Straussian structuralism.

The influence of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown

Both Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown demanded loyalty from their students. Between them they persuaded virtually every anthropologist in the British Commonwealth that the old interests of anthropology – in evolution and diffusion – were no longer appropriate areas for major research. Most anthropologists in Britain and many in America followed Radcliffe-Brown's line. They conceived of anthropology as being about filling in the

details of ethnography: generalizing about particular societies and comparing them to other societies, working out how the social system functions without conjecturing about the past, de-emphasizing individual action and seeking the broader pattern, and above all, fitting the pieces together to see how elements of the social structure functioned in relation to each other.

Malinowski's greatest influence was in Britain, especially in the establishment of his tradition of 'participant observation'. Radcliffe-Brown's influence was predominant in South Africa and Australia (several famous 'British' anthropologists were in fact South Africans by birth and education). In the United States he left his mark through the work of Sol Tax, Fred Eggan, and others, especially at Chicago. A. P. Elkin and his students at Sydney continued the tradition there, while 'English' South African anthropology through Isaac Schapera (who later emigrated to Britain and worked with Malinowski), Monica Wilson (another student of Malinowski), and others grew to be a major intellectual force, and ultimately a political force against apartheid (see Hammond-Tooke 1997). Radcliffe-Brown's spell also reached India. Indian anthropologist M. N. Srinivas did postgraduate work with Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Pritchard, then taught for three years at Oxford. In 1951 Srinivas returned to his own country and helped establish there an empirical but essentially structural-functionalist social science tradition.

It has often been said that Radcliffe-Brown's primary influence was as a teacher rather than a writer. He possessed a charismatic personality and was a brilliant lecturer, generally performing without any notes whatsoever. He published relatively little. What he did publish had a conversational style and very little jargon, as more often than not his writings were versions of his public lectures. His writings also exhibit a consistency in theoretical viewpoint through some four decades (see Radcliffe-Brown 1952; 1958; Kuper 1977).

Ironically, the substantive contribution most strongly associated with structural-functionalism is one he wrote little about (but see Radcliffe-Brown 1952 [1935]: 32–48). This is 'descent theory'. Evans-Pritchard (1940: 139–248), Fortes (1945), and others among his followers argued that localized patrilineal or matrilineal descent groups formed the basis of many societies, especially in Africa. Yet the idea was strongly contested, both through confrontation by its opposite, Lévi-Strauss' 'alliance theory' (discussed in chapter 8), and through empirical tests of its validity by close readings of the paradigm cases (see, e.g., Kuper 1988: 190–209).

Radcliffe-Brown intensely disliked being labelled with any 'ism'. The reason he would give (e.g., 1949, included in Kuper 1977: 49–52) is that 'sciences' do not have isms; only political philosophies (Communism,

Liberalism, Conservatism, etc.) have isms. One does not call a botanist interested in the structures and functions of plants a 'structural-functionalist', so why should one call an anthropologist with like interests by this label? He objected most strongly to being put in the 'functionalist' box with Malinowski, whose theory of biological needs and cultural responses he explicitly opposed. Yet outsiders, and some inside, gave the label 'functionalist' to Radcliffe-Brown's work too. And so for a time, this 'functionalist anthropology' did become a 'school' in spite of both its scientific trappings and the ambivalent relationship between its founders. While no one today claims to be a 'functionalist', there remains something 'functionalist' about both anthropological fieldwork and anthropological comparison – in spite of the challenges from processualist, Marxist, and more recent approaches.

Concluding summary

Functionalism had its beginnings in evolutionist thought. It came into its own as an anthropological perspective, partly through the influence of Durkheim (on the cusp of evolutionist-functionalist thinking), but more definitively through the writings of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. Also crucial was the institutional base these latter two and their immediate successors created for the discipline worldwide.

Although Malinowski succeeded in building up a great following, his major venture into grand theory failed. His theory of 'seven basic needs and their cultural responses' never caught on. Radcliffe-Brown's theoretical ventures fared better: especially his emphasis on social structure and his encouragement of comparison. However, his brave vision of 'a natural science of society', analogous to the biological sciences, never bore fruit.

FURTHER READING

Good histories of the sociological tradition are Swingewood's *Short History of Sociological Thought* (1984) and Levine's *Visions of the Sociological Tradition* (1995). The best treatment of functionalism and structural-functionalism (and the aftermath) in anthropology is Kuper's *Anthropologists and Anthropology* (1996 [1973]).

For an evaluation of Malinowski's work by his own students, see Firth's *Man and Culture* (1957). On the fieldwork methods of Malinowski and others, see Stocking's *Observers Observed* (1983). A useful evaluation of the work of Radcliffe-Brown is Firth's (1956) obituary of him.

There are three collections of Radcliffe-Brown's essays: *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (Radcliffe-Brown 1952), *Method in Social Anthropology* (Radcliffe-Brown 1958), and *The Social Anthropology of Radcliffe-Brown* (Kuper 1977). Some of the best examples of structural-functionalist ethnography are in the

edited volumes, *African Political Systems* (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940) and *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage* (Radcliffe-Brown and Forde 1950). A useful reader on kinship, which includes relevant selections from the Kroeber–Rivers debate, is Graburn's *Readings in Kinship and Social Structure* (1971).

Classic functionalist ethnographies include Evans-Pritchard's *Kinship and Marriage among the Nuer* (1951a), Firth's *We the Tikopia* (1936), and Fortes' *Dynamics of Clanship* (1945) and *Web of Kinship* (1949). Two with an ecological twist are Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer* (1940) and Richards' *Land, Labour and Diet* (1939). One dealing with social change is Schapera's *Migrant Labour and Tribal Life* (1947). A regional-comparative ethnography in the functionalist tradition is Eggan's *Social Organization of the Western Pueblos* (1950).