

# STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONALISM A.R.R. BROWN

Functionalism can be traced to the discipline of sociology, particularly in the work of August Comte, Spencer etc. However full development of idea of function in French tradition came to light by the work of Emile Durkheim, from him the idea of functionalism taken by British Anthropologist, A.R.R. Brown. we can say functionalism in anthropology came mainly because of inputs of French tradition in British culture. It was developed by both Brown and Malinowski came to be known as anthropological functionalism. Apart from this, functionalism in anthropology emerged as a strong reaction against classical evolutionism and diffusionism.

Functionalists say that evolution has surely taken place and diffusion occurred, but the study of evolution and diffusion in terms of time and space demands authentic historical facts for substantiating all of them. Unfortunately, we have great scarcity of facts. When we have no knowledge about past, we should shift from diachronic to synchronic study. Brown said that we should study the society as it exists “here and now” such study can be of great value because this study would help us in changing the society by restructuring it. It can also be useful in the administration because before initiating programs of change we should know characters of the society.

## Premises of functionalism:

Functionalism is the study of how human society functions based on the study of simple societies. At the theoretical level both Brown and Malinowski shared certain propositions as follows:

1. Society or culture whatsoever is the unit of study is a system like any other system such as solar system, mechanical system, atomic system, biological system etc.
2. As a system society or culture consists of parts. These parts may be groups, institutions, organizations, associations etc. These parts are interconnected interrelated and integrated.
3. Each part functions on its own as well as in relation with other parts e.g. Economic organization is concerned with production, distribution & consumption. It also functions in relation with political system, religion etc.
4. A change in part brings about a subsequent change in other parts or at least functioning of other parts which considerably be affected because parts are interconnected like boots strap.
5. Society and culture cannot be reduced to anyone part because whole society or culture is greater than mere summation of parts. That's why functionalist rejected Marx's approach to the study of society. Since he reduced entire society to economic system.
6. We should assign equal importance to all parts of the society and all should be studied in a system of relationship.

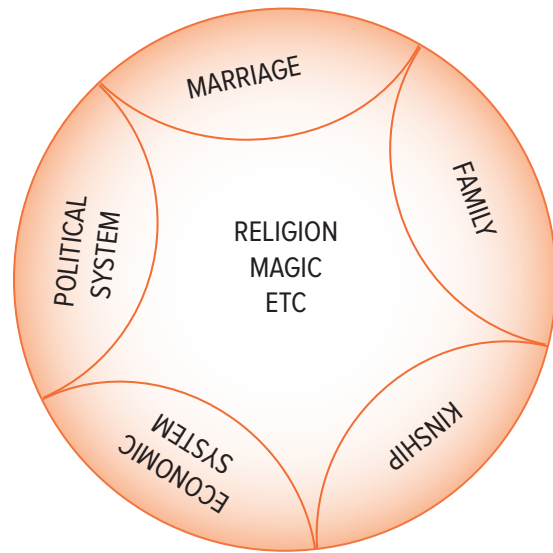


Fig: ▲ Showing society with parts.

- Since it is here and now study of how society functions, field work became the central method of functional inquiry.

**RADCLIFFE BROWN:**

**Brief history:**

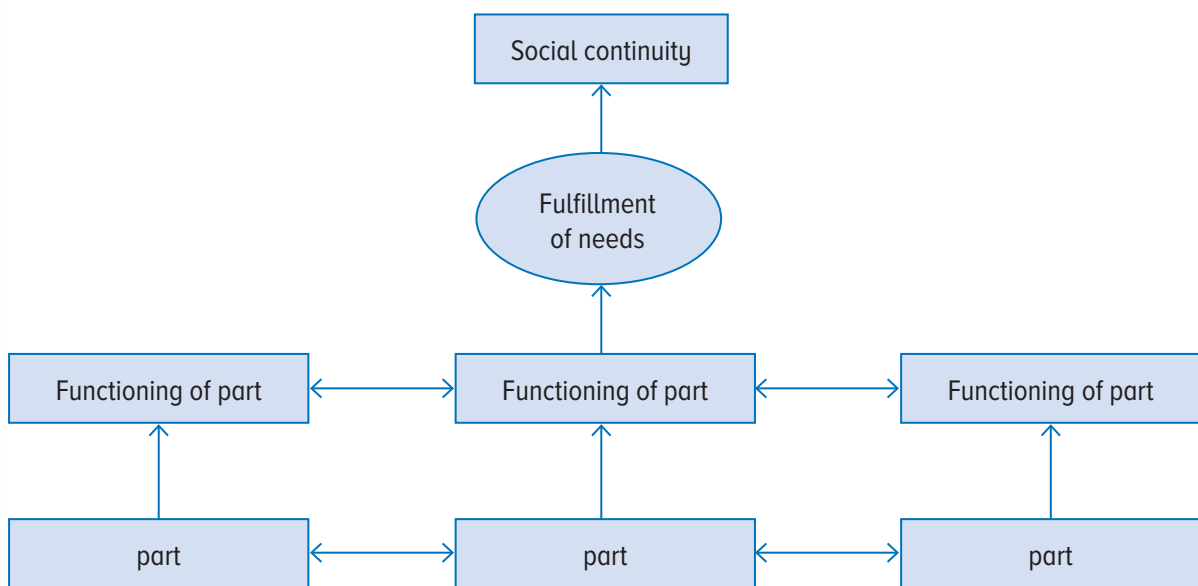
Radcliffe Brown was a student of W.H. Rivers who was initially an evolutionist and later he became diffusionist. As a student of Rivers, he studied Andamanese. He saw them practicing nuclear family and monogamy despite being savage. According to Morgan, an American classical evolutionist monogamy and nuclear family are the characteristics of civilization. As a result, he quit evolutionism. Moreover, he also came to know that the explanation of diffusionist at some places was based on conjecturalism. At the same time, he was influenced by functionalist school of sociology. Consequently, he started studying society as it is existing “here and now”. The knowledge of such study can be used in administration and socio-economic development. Thus, he became the founding father of functionalism in Britain. The “Andamanese Islander” first work of Brown published in 1922 which was functionalist in orientation and this is regarded as beginning of anthropological functionalism in Britain.

**Premises of Brown’s functionalism:**

Brown was heavily influenced by Emile Durkheim, a functionalist in sociology. But he did not follow all the ideas of Durkheim. At places he brought about certain modification. However, his structural functional approach is really an extension of some Emile Durkheim’s ideas. A complete sociological explanation about society and culture consist of 2 parts **firstly, casual historical explanation and secondly, functional explanation.** The first part includes evolutionism and diffusionism which are historical if data regarding evolution and diffusion of society and culture are not available one should continue with functional explanation.

Durkheim defined functionalism as a **contribution a part makes to the whole for maintenance and welfare of society.** The contribution is for the continuation of society. But why does the part work? Durkheim said that every society has needs and unless these needs are met, the society will not be able to continue. Hence, each part of the society carries out activities so that needs are fulfilled, and societies can continue and survive.

Brown broadly agreed the idea, but he did not prefer the use of term **need.** He said that



**Fig: ▲ Showing social functioning**

this term is too biological. Here we are talking of social needs. So, Brown changed the word need and called it necessary condition of existence. Every society has certain **necessary conditions of existence** and when they are met, society continues. Thus, the function of different parts of society is to satisfy the necessary conditions of existence and one of the major necessary conditions of existence is integration in society, i.e. cementing or solidarity in the society. The job of anthropologists is to study parts from the point of view of the contribution they make in social integration.

#### Methodology or approach:

Emile Durkheim said that for the study of the way how society is integrated and for that we need certain concepts. The concept of society can be analyzed with organism analogy. Durkheim said that every society has parts and they are interlinked and integrated. He called these parts **social morphology** which carry out activities. He called functioning of parts **social physiology**. Brown did not approve of these terms, rather he said that these terminologies are too biological. Consequently, he called social morphology social structure and social physiology as social functions. Both these concepts are developed on the analogy of organism. But Brown says that an organism can be seen even when it does not function. But in case of society the study of parts can only be done when it is functioning. We study inter-personnel relationships. This is only possible when

people behave i.e. to say activities are carried out. Brown said that social study cannot be observed when people are not functioning. Thus, parts and functioning of parts are inseparable. That's why his approach is known as **structural-functional approach or structural functionalism**.

#### Criticism against Brown's functionalism:

Although, Brown's functionalism was based on ethnographic evidences, there was no conjecturalism, yet this theory has been criticized on several accounts as follows:

Brown's functionalism was concerned with social continuity not with change. It is mainly because his theory was based on tribal societies which are very slow to change. When this theory was applied to modern societies changing very fast, it got exposed.

Brown did not emphasize on social conflicts which is an agent of change. According to functionalists, conflict is functional, for functionalists whatever exists is functional therefore they become dogmatic or teleological.

Apart from these, he could not develop any theory since his work is not applicable to modern societies.

Although, functionalism advocated by Brown got criticized on several grounds despite it gave the idea of social functioning in anthropology, moreover, this theory could be used in administration and social welfare as well.