
UNIT 25 CONCEPT OF FUNCTION — RADCLIFFE-BROWN

Concept of Function-
Radcliffe-Brown

Structure

- 25.0 Objectives
- 25.1 Introduction
- 25.2 The Concept of Function
 - 25.2.0 Structure and Function
 - 25.2.1 Functional Unity
 - 25.2.2 'Eunomia' and 'Dysnomia'
 - 25.2.3 The Historical Method and the Functional Method
- 25.3 Some Examples of Radcliffe-Brown's Structural-Functionalism
 - 25.3.0 Ceremonial Weeping in the Andaman Islands
 - 25.3.1 The Study of Totemism
 - 25.3.2 Kinship in Primitive Societies
 - 25.3.3 The Mother's Brother
- 25.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 25.5 Keywords
- 25.6 Further Reading
- 25.7 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

25.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit, you should be able to

- describe the concept of 'function' put forward by Radcliffe-Brown
- give examples from Radcliffe-Brown's work to show how he used the concept of structural-functionalism.

25.1 INTRODUCTION

The earlier unit (unit 24) familiarised you with the concept of structure as elaborated by Radcliffe-Brown. In this unit, we move on to a related concept, namely, that of function. These two concepts, i.e. 'structure' and 'function' are really inseparable from each other. The study of structure makes sense only in terms of function and function may be observed within the format of structure. Together, these two concepts help build up the 'structural-functional' mode of sociological investigation. As you have read in Units 22 and 23, Malinowski made use of the concept of function to understand society. The concept was further developed by Radcliffe-Brown as we shall see in this unit. By linking function with social structure, Radcliffe-Brown made a theoretical leap that Malinowski failed to achieve.

This unit consists of two sections. The first section will systematically bring out the various facets of the concept of 'function' as described by Radcliffe-Brown.

In the second section, we will focus on examples from Radcliffe-Brown's work, which highlight the concept of structural-functionalism.

25.2 THE CONCEPT OF FUNCTION

As you have studied earlier in this course, the concept of function is an important one in the science of biology. The various parts or components that make up the structure of a living organism have a definite role to play in maintaining it, in keeping it alive and healthy.

Emile Durkheim systematically applied this concept in the study of social institutions. He spoke of function in terms of the needs of the social organism. Radcliffe-Brown substitutes the idea of 'needs' with necessary conditions of existence. In other words, he assumes that human societies must fulfil certain basic conditions so that they may exist. Just as the animal must breathe, eat, excrete and reproduce, so must the social organism carry out certain activities. These 'necessary conditions for existence' can, according to Radcliffe-Brown, be discovered by the proper kind of scientific enquiry. Let us now elaborate the connection between structure and function as described by Radcliffe-Brown

25.2.0 Structure and Function

How do structure and function interact in the case of living organisms? The process by which the structure of the organism is maintained, is called 'life'. The life-process involves the activities and interactions of the various cells and organs that make up the organism. In other words, it is the functioning of the various constituent parts of the organism that help maintain the structure. If our lungs or stomachs or hearts were to suddenly stop functioning, what would happen to the structure of our bodies? It would collapse and we would die. As Radcliffe-Brown (1971: 179) puts it, "...the life of an organism is conceived as the functioning of its structure. It is through and by the continuity of the functioning that the continuity of the structure is preserved"

Let us turn now from organic to social life. The continuity of the social structure is maintained by the process of social life. Social life consists of the activities and interaction of various human beings and of the groups of which they are a part. Social life, in other words refers to the way in which the social structure functions. The function of any recurrent social activity is the part it plays in maintaining the continuity of the social structure. For example, marriage is a recurrent social activity. Through marriage, individuals of the opposite sex are brought together and society legitimises their sexual relationship. Children may be born and new members are added to society. Thus, by providing a socially acceptable outlet for sexual relations and providing a legitimate way through which society obtains new members, marriage contributes or performs a function in maintaining social structure. In Radcliffe-Brown's (1971: 180) own words, "the concept of functionthus involves the notion of a structure consisting of a set of relations amongst unit entities, the continuity of the structure being maintained by a life process made up of the activities of the constituent units"

Let us further emphasise the interconnections between social structure and function. Radcliffe-Brown points out that in the case of an animal organism, structure can to some extent be observed independent of function e.g., we can study the human skeleton in terms of the way in which the bones are arranged, their differing shapes and sizes etc, without considering their function. But in studying human society 'structure' and 'function' cannot be separated.

According to Radcliffe-Brown (1971: 181), "Some of the features of social structure, such as the geographical distribution of individuals and groups can be directly observed, but most of the social relations which, in their totality constitute the structure, such as relations of father and son, buyer and seller, ruler and subject, cannot be observed except in the social activities in which the relations are functioning". In other words, 'social morphology' (i.e. the study of the kinds of social structure, their similarities, differences and classification) and 'social physiology' (the study of the way social structures function) are interdependent for Radcliffe-Brown

Let us now first complete Check Your Progress 1 and then discuss an important idea expressed by Radcliffe-Brown, namely, the 'functional unity' of the social system.

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Complete the following sentences.
 - a) Whilst Durkheim spoke of 'needs', Radcliffe-Brown used the term
 - b) According to Radcliffe-Brown, the life of an organism is the
- ii) State whether the following are 'True' (T) or 'False' (F)
 - a) Marriage is a private affair, having nothing to do with social structure. (T/F)
 - b) It is not possible to observe the structure of a biological organism independent of function. (T/F)
 - c) The study of social morphology and social physiology is interconnected, according to Radcliffe-Brown. (T/F)

25.2.1 Functional Unity

As we have studied above, the function of social usage or activity refers to the contribution it makes to the functioning of the total social system. This implies that the social system has a certain kind of unity, which Radcliffe-Brown terms as 'functional unity'. By this he means a condition in which all the parts of the social system work together in a harmonious, consistent fashion i.e. without producing persistent conflicts which cannot be resolved or regulated. For instance, if we take up the example of Indian society in Pre-British India, we may say that the various parts of the social system, e.g. village organisation, caste, joint family etc. worked together in a consistent fashion. They complemented each other and contributed to maintaining the existing social structure.

We have so far been restricting our discussion to the positive functions of social institutions, namely, their role in maintaining the social structure. Let us now turn to the possibility of dysfunction as described by Radcliffe-Brown.

25.2.2 ‘Eunomia’ and ‘Dysnomia’

The science of pathology deals with the problem of organic dysfunction, in other words, disease, when some part of the organism fails to perform its function adequately, disease results, which, if unchecked, may lead to death. In the case of organic structures, we can identify strictly objective criteria which can help us to distinguish disease from health, or pathological from normal. For instance, we can say that if the body temperature of an individual rises above 98° Fahrenheit, he/she is ill, or if the stomach secretes more than a certain amount of acid, the individual might suffer from ulcers. In other words, we can diagnose disease on the basis of certain standards or rules. Radcliffe-Brown points out that an attempt to apply the notion of health and disease to society and the state was made by the Greeks of the fifth century B.C. They distinguished ‘**eunomia**’ (good order, social health) from ‘**dysnomia**’ (disorder, social ill-health). In the nineteenth century, Durkheim tried to understand social pathology with the help of the concept of ‘**anomie**’. Radcliffe-Brown too adopts the terms ‘**eunomia**’ and ‘**dysnomia**’. He points out that societies’ do not fall ill and die in the same sense as animals do, and accepts that it is not possible to have definite, objective criteria to determine the ‘health’ of society, because the science of human society, according to him, is not mature enough to do so.

For Radcliffe-Brown, the eunomia of a society refers to the harmonious working together of its parts or, in other words, functional unity or inner consistency of the system. Dysnomia, on the other hand is a condition of functional disunity or inconsistency. A society thrown into a state of dysnomia rarely dies, but instead struggles towards a new state of eunomia or social health. In the process, it might even change its structural type.

These concepts in Radcliffe-Brown’s view are particularly relevant for social anthropologists who in the course of their investigations come across tribes whose social structures have been thrown into disarray with the onslaught of the outside world, particularly Western domination. Let us now see what Radcliffe Brown says about the use of the functional method in studying society, particularly primitive society.

In order to fully understand the terms ‘eunomia’ and ‘dysnomia’, let us now complete Activity 1.

Activity 1

Is Indian society in a state of ‘eunomia’ or ‘dysnomia’? Substantiate your views with the help of an essay, of 500 words. Compare your views if possible, with that of other students at your -Study Centre.

25.2.3 The Historical Method and the Functional Method

Radcliffe-Brown mentions two methods for the interpretation of cultural materials, namely, the historical and functional methods. The historical

method concentrates on the process of historical development of a culture, in other words, on how the culture has come to be what it is.

This method is useful only when the society to be studied has historical records. In the case of primitive societies with no historical records, this method proves deficient. The result may be conjectural or speculative history in other words, guesswork. This is not a particularly useful exercise.

The functional method of interpretation, says Radcliffe- Brown, rests on the assumption that culture is an integrated system. Each element of the culture has specific function to perform in the life of the community. This method assumes that there are certain general laws of function, which are valid for all human societies and tries to discover and verify these laws with the help of logical, scientific methods.

It must be noted that Radcliffe-Brown sees both these methods as complementary in sociological investigations. He does not discard the historical method but points out its limitations in studying primitive societies.

We have just seen how Radcliffe-Brown conceptualises social functions as the contribution made by the constituents of the social structure to maintaining the life and health of the society. We have studied the notion of ‘functional unity’, ‘eunomia’, ‘dysnomia’ and the use of the functional method in social-anthropological investigation. Let us now take a look at how Radcliffe-Brown uses the concept of function in studying actual social realities. We will focus upon the function of ‘ceremonial weeping’ amongst the Andaman Islanders, the study of totemism, kinship in primitive societies and on the relationship between the mother’s brother and sister’s son in certain primitive communities.

But before turning to the next section (25.3), let us complete Check Your Progress 2.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Answer the following questions in three sentences.
 - a) What does Radcliffe-Brown mean by the ‘functional unity’ of society?
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.....
.....
 - b) How does a society respond to ‘dysnomia’, according to Radcliffe-Brown?
.....
.....
.....
- ii) State whether the following are ‘True’ (T) or ‘False’ (F)
 - a) The historical method is especially effective in the study of primitive society. (T/F)

- b) The functional method studies culture as an integrated whole with the help of speculation and conjecture. (T/F)
- c) According to Radcliffe-Brown, the historical and functional methods are in complete opposition to one another. (T/F)

25.3 SOME EXAMPLES OF RADCLIFFE-BROWN'S STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONALISM

Radcliffe-Brown is more than just a 'functionalist', he is a 'structural functionalist'. By this we mean that he is concerned not just with the way customs and social institutions fulfil certain needs or conditions of existence. He is also concerned with the connection between social relationships of various kinds. His method of structural-functionalism is best understood through some examples. Note how he combines in the following examples the use of the concepts of social structure and function in arriving at explanation.

In his work, *The Andaman Islanders*, Radcliffe-Brown (1933: 230) writes: "Every custom and belief plays some determinate part in the social life of the community, just as every organ of a living body plays some part in the general life of the organism". It is against this background that you will be able to understand how he explains ceremonial weeping amongst the Andaman Islanders. For more details about, the Andaman Islanders listen to the audio-programme on Radcliffe-Brown.

25.3.0 Ceremonial Weeping in the Andaman Islands

Andamanese ceremonies are marked by formal weeping. Andamanese weep, ceremonially on a number of occasions, e.g. when friends and relatives are reunited after a long separation, after a death, during marriage and initiation ceremonies, peace making ceremonies and so on.

Radcliffe-Brown holds that the purpose underlying all ceremonials is the expression and transmission of sentiments, which help to regulate individual, behaviour in conformity with the needs of society. Hence, Radcliffe-Brown emphasises the importance of probing the meaning of the custom. How is this to be done? Well, in the first place, one can take account of the explanations of the various members of society. Further, one can compare the different contexts or situations in which the custom appears, and abstract its real significance.

Formal weeping, Radcliffe-Brown concludes, takes place in situations in which social relations which have been disturbed or interrupted are about to be resumed. For instance, when long-lost friends meet, ceremonial weeping marks the fact that the long separation is over, and the friendship will resume once more. Similarly, ceremonial weeping at funerals marks the final departure of the deceased. Soon, life will have to go on as usual; the normal relations and activities will be resumed in this manner, ceremonial weeping has definite role or function to play in the life of that society. We shall now discuss how Radcliffe-Brown views totemism as a way of expressing the structure of relationships.

Activity 2

Observe and list down the various ceremonies performed in a marriage in your community. Select any two. What do these signify? What function do they play? Write down your findings in about a page, and compare them, if possible, with those of other students at your Study Centre.

25.3.1 The Study of Totemism

As you have studied in Block 3 (unit 12) and Block 5 (unit 19) of this course, totemism refers to the way in which human beings relate themselves to some natural object from which they claim descent. In the words of Kuper (1975: 74), “In totemism a specific group within a society adopts a ritual attitude towards a natural species or object”. Durkheim argues that totemism is a way in which collective sentiments are expressed and ritualised through symbolism, and this symbolisation helps to maintain group solidarity. But Durkheim does not touch upon a crucial question, namely, why are natural objects selected as totems?

This is precisely what Radcliffe-Brown tries to explore. He observes in his Australian field-studies that some tribes in New South Wales are divided into two exogamous **moieties**. These are named after two birds, the eaglehawk and crow. Eaglehawk men marry crow women and vice-versa. Other such dual divisions have been found in Australia which are also named after pairs of birds or animals. These pairs of birds or animals are represented in myths as being opponents in a conflict. Despite this opposition, there is also some kind of fundamental similarity or resemblance. In the case of eaglehawk and crow, both are meat-eating birds. Interestingly enough, the relationship between moieties too is one of alliance and competition; they are paired and opposed at one and the same time.

Thus, Radcliffe-Brown sees totemism as more than just a technique of maintaining group solidarity, (i.e., its function) but also as a way in which the social opposition between groups is expressed (i.e., the structure of relationships). He has thus laid the foundation for much of the future work undertaken by structuralists who use the notion of ‘opposition’ to provide interesting interpretations of social usages. The work of Levi-Strauss may be cited in this context.

Let us move now to a brief appraisal of Radcliffe-Brown’s work on kinship.

25.3.2 Kinship in Primitive Societies

The study of kinship is Radcliffe-Brown’s specialisation. His work in this area is path breaking for two reasons:

- a) Earlier studies of kinship were basically exercises in speculation and conjectural history, e.g. the theories of ‘primitive promiscuity’ (see unit 22). Radcliffe-Brown tries to make sense of kinship systems in terms their contemporary relevance for the concerned societies.
- b) Since the kinship system provided the major organisational principle for most primitive communities, it is imperative to understand its

principles. By focussing on this topic, Radcliffe- Brown contributes a great deal in helping students of social anthropology understand the peoples they studied.

Radcliffe-Brown is not merely interested in the usages, which shape the relationships between kin, but also in the terms used to denote kin, i.e., kinship terminology. Further, he concentrates on ‘classificatory’ systems of kinship terminology, wherein kin outside the circle of family are also classified along with members of the family. For example, mother’s sister, though outside the circle of the patrilineal family, is nonetheless classified as ‘mother’, Radcliffe-Brown identifies three basic principles of the classificatory system of kinship terminology. These are,

- a) **The unity of the sibling group** — Here, brothers and sisters share a feeling of solidarity and were treated as a unit by outsiders. My mother’s sister is also addressed as ‘mother’, my mother’s brother is like a ‘male mother’ (see sub-section 25.3.4).
- b) **The unity of the lineage group** — A lineage refers to the descendants in a line (traced either through male or female) of a single ancestor. Like siblings, lineage members show solidarity and are treated as a single unit by outsiders.
- c) **The ‘generation principle’** — It is observed that in all kinship systems, there is a certain distance or tension between members of succeeding generations. For example, my mother has to socialise me, hence she will try to discipline or control me. However, as Radcliffe-Brown points out, members of alternating generations (grandparents and grandchildren) tend to share easy and friendly relationships. In many societies it is believed that the grandchild replaces the grandparent in the social system. Kinship terminology in some cases (e.g. **the Hawaiian systems** - see Keywords for details) use generational combinations and oppositions to classify kin.

Although studying kinship terminology certainly provided interesting insights into the way kinship worked, Radcliffe-Brown did not neglect the social relationships that were the building-blocks of the kinship system. These relationships were shaped by solidarity and opposition. A reflection of this can be clearly seen in ‘joking relationships’ in which Radcliffe-Brown was very much interested. What is a ‘joking relationship’? It is a relaxed and friendly relationship between kin marked by an exchange of jokes (often with sexual overtones) and friendly insults. Junod (1912-13), in his report on the Thonga of Mozambique, describes the joking relationship between a man and his mother’s father.

Radcliffe-Brown, dismissing Junod’s conjectural explanation of the phenomenon, focussed on the relationship between mother’s brother and sister’s son (see Radcliffe-Brown’s *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, 1971). He chose to locate the problem of joking relationships in the context of alliance between members of socially separated groups. Joking relationships serve to protect the delicate relationships between persons who are bound together in one set of ties and yet separated by other ties for example, members of different lineages are socially separated

from each other. But if they marry each other, they are also allied. Joking thus is one way of defusing the tensions of certain delicate relationships. Another response is avoidance or extreme respect. In Radcliffe-Brown's own words, "I once asked an Australian native why he had to avoid his mother-in-law, and his reply was because she is my best friend in the world; she has given me my wife. The mutual respect between son-in-law and parents-in-law is a mode of friendship. It prevents conflict that might arise through divergence of interest".

Activity 3

Make a list of all the joking and avoidance relationships among kinspersons that exist in your own society.

In a nutshell, Radcliffe-Brown gave a new impetus to kinship studies by firmly rejecting speculative hypothesis and focussing upon the structure of social relationships in the kinship network and the way these operated in balancing tensions and integrating society. We will now briefly discuss Radcliffe-Brown's special interest in the relationship between mother's brother and sister's son in some primitive communities.

25.3.3 The Mother's Brother

Let us now examine his treatment of the role of the mother's brother (referred to as '*mama*' in many Indian languages) in some primitive communities. This is an excellent example of Radcliffe-Brown's structural functional method. In a number of primitive communities, like the Bathonga group of Eastern Africa, the Nama Hottentots of South Africa and the Friendly Islanders of Tonga, the mother's brother and the sister's son are observed to share a particularly warm and affectionate relationship. The nephew is permitted to take many liberties with his maternal uncle who in turn takes special care of him, makes sacrifices on behalf of the nephew when the latter is ill, and leaves a share of his property and sometimes even one of his wives for the nephew to claim. Radcliffe-Brown says (1971:17), "It is a mistake to suppose that we can understand the institutions of society by studying them in isolation, without regard to other institutions with which they seems to be correlated". He identifies another affectionate relationship that seems correlated to the one between maternal uncle and nephew. He points out (1971: 17) that "the custom of allowing the sister's son to take liberties with his mother's brother seems to be generally accompanied with an obligation of particular respect and obedience to the father's sister... His father's sister is sacred to him; her word is his law; and one of the greatest offences of which he could be guilty would be to show himself lacking in respect to her".

Radcliffe-Brown points out that in most primitive societies, kinship regulates the social relationships of individuals. Various patterns of behaviour are associated with these relationships, and these follow stable and definite patterns. But if we display different kinds of behaviour towards every single relative, things could get very complicated, especially if the number of relatives is very large. This difficulty, says Radcliffe-Brown, is avoided in primitive societies by a system of classification. Different kinds of relatives are clubbed together into a limited number of categories. The most

commonly used principle of classification is that of the equivalence of brothers. In other words, if an individual stands in a particular relationship to a man, the same kind of relationship exists with the man's brother, the same is the case with a woman and her sister. Hence, the father's brother is regarded as a sort of father and his sons are like the individual's brothers. Similarly, mother's sisters are like other mothers and their children are like brothers and sisters.

How do the father's sister and mother's brother fit in? The three communities earlier mentioned are patriarchal. The father is regarded with awe and fear, the mother with tenderness and affection. In keeping with this trend, the father's sister is given much respect and reverence and the mother's brother affection and tenderness. In a word, the paternal aunt is a sort of 'female father' whilst the maternal uncle is a 'male mother'. This explanation derives from the notion of 'extension of sentiments'. By this we mean that the sentiments expressed towards the mother extend to and include her brother, and the same is the case with the father's sister.

How does Radcliffe-Brown explain this sort of classification? In his own words, (1971: 25) "in primitive society there is a strongly marked tendency to merge the individual in the group to which he or she belongs. The result of this in relation to kinship is a tendency to extend to all the members of a group a certain type of behaviour which has its origin in a relationship to one particular member of the group"

In a nutshell, Radcliffe-Brown studies the role of the maternal uncle in primitive societies in terms of correlated institutionalised relationships. This is the essence of functionalist methodology.

It is now time to complete Check Your Progress 3.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) Match the items in Column 'A' with the appropriate ones in Column 'B'

A	B
a) formal weeping	i) equivalence of brothers
b) Bathonga	ii) Andaman Islands
c) paternal aunt	iii) Tonga
d) father's brother	iv) East Africa
	v) female father
	vi) affectionate, warm relationship

- ii) How does Radcliffe-Brown view the institution of totemism?

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.....

.....

iii) Fill up the blanks with suitable words.

- a) Radcliffe-Brown paid special attention to the system of kinship terminology.
- b) Tension existing in certain delicate relationships may be defused through and

25.4 LET US SUM UP

This unit dealt with the concept of ‘function’ elaborated by A.R. Radcliffe-Brown. The relationship between ‘structure’ and ‘function’, Radcliffe-Brown’s idea of the ‘functional unity of society’ and the twin concepts of ‘eunomia’ and ‘dysnomia’ were made clear to you. A comparison was drawn between the historical and functional modes of analysis with particular reference to primitive society.

The concept of function and the functional method were further clarified with the help of some examples. You saw how Radcliffe-Brown explained the custom of ‘ceremonial weeping’ amongst the Andaman Islanders and how he analysed totemism as an expression of structured relationships. Then you learnt about Radcliffe-Brown’s special interest in kinship studies and how he explained the institutionalised relationship between maternal uncle and nephew in certain primitive communities.

25.5 KEYWORDS

Eunomia	A state of societal health or well being
Extension of sentiments	In the context of Radcliffe-Brown’s understanding of close relations between mother’s brother and sister’s son, it implies extending to the mother’s brother the same kind of sentiments one does to the mother
Dysnomia	A state of societal ill-health, disease
The Hawaiian System	Anthropologists identify kinship systems of the world on the basis of the differences in kinship terminologies. Of the six types of kinship systems the Hawaiian system is also known as the ‘generation system’ of kinship. In this system, all persons in the same generation are classified in one group, with a distinction between the sexes. For example, in the first ascendant generation, a common term is used to designate father, father’s brother and mother’s brother. Similarly, a common term is used for mother, mother’s sister and father’s sister.
Moiety	One of two basic complementary tribal subdivisions

25.6 FURTHER READING

Radcliffe-Brown, A.R. 1971. *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*. Cohen and West Limited: London.

25.7 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) a) 'necessary conditions of existence'
c) functioning of its structure.
- ii) a) F
b) F
c) T

Check Your Progress 2

- i) a) By the 'functional unity' of society, Radcliffe-Brown refers to a condition wherein all the parts of society work together harmoniously. Thus, conflicts and tensions are very limited.
b) A society in a state of 'dysnomia' rarely dies. Rather, it once again tries to achieve a state of social health or eunomia. In the process, it may even change its structural type.
- ii) a) F
b) F
c) F

Check Your Progress 3

i)

A	B
a)	ii)
b)	iv)
c)	v)
d)	i)

- ii) Like Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown too sees totemism as a way of maintaining social solidarity. He also sees it as a way in which the social opposition between groups is maintained. In this way, he accounts for both, the function and the structure of relationships involved in totemism.
- iii) a) classificatory
b) joking, avoidance