Functionalists seek to describe the different parts of a society and their relationship by means of an organic analogy. The organic analogy compares the different parts of a society to the organs of a living organism. The organism is able to live, reproduce and function through the organized system of its several parts and organs. Like a biological organism, a society is able to maintain its essential processes through the way that the different parts interact. Institutions such as religion, kinship and the economy were the organs and individuals were the cells in this social organism. Functionalist analyses examine the social significance of phenomena, that is, the function they serve a particular society in maintaining the whole (Jarvie 1973). Functionalism, as a school of thought in anthropology, emerged in the early twentieth century. Bronislaw Malinowski and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown had the greatest influence on the development of functionalism from their posts in Great Britain and elsewhere. Functionalism was a reaction to the perceived excesses and deficiencies of the evolutionary and diffusionist theories of the nineteenth century and the historicism of the early twentieth (Goldschmidt 1996:510). Two versions of functionalism developed between 1910 and 1930: Malinowski’s biocultural (or psychological) functionalism; and structural-functionalism, the approach advanced by Radcliffe-Brown.

Malinowski suggested that individuals have physiological needs (reproduction, food, shelter) and that social institutions exist to meet these needs. There are also culturally derived needs and four basic “instrumental needs” (economics, social control, education, and political organization), that require institutional devices. Each institution has personnel, a charter, a set of norms or rules, activities, material apparatus (technology), and a function. Malinowski argued that uniform psychological responses are correlates of physiological needs. He argued that satisfaction of these needs transformed the cultural instrumental activity into an acquired drive through psychological reinforcement (Goldschmidt 1996:510; Voget 1996:573).

Radcliffe-Brown focused on social structure rather than biological needs. He suggested that a society is a system of relationships maintaining itself through cybernetic feedback, while institutions are orderly sets of relationships whose function is to maintain the society as a system. Radcliffe-Brown, inspired by Augustus Comte, stated that the social constituted a separate “level” of reality distinct from those of biological forms and inorganic matter. Radcliffe-Brown argued that explanations of social phenomena had to be constructed within the social level. Thus, individuals were replaceable, transient occupants of social roles. Unlike Malinowski’s emphasis on individuals, Radcliffe-Brown considered individuals irrelevant (Goldschmidt 1996:510).

POUNTS OF REACTION

As a new paradigm, functionalism was presented as a reaction against what was believed to be outdated ideologies. It was an attempt to move away from the evolutionism and diffusionism that dominated American and British anthropology at the turn of the century (Lesser 1935, Langness 1987). There was a shift in focus from the speculatively historical or diachronic study of customs and cultural traits as “survivals” to the ahistorical, synchronic study of social “institutions” within bounded, functioning societies (Young 1991:445).

Functionalists presented their theoretical and methodological approaches as an attempt to expand sociocultural inquiry beyond the bounds of the evolutionary conception of social history. The evolutionary approach viewed customs or cultural traits as residual artifacts of cultural history. That is, the evolutionist school postulated that “an observed cultural fact was seen not in terms of what it was at the time of observation but in terms of what it must stand for in reference to what had formerly been the case” (Lesser 1935:55). From the functionalist standpoint these earlier approaches privileged speculative theorizing over the discovery of facts. Functionalists believed the motive force of events was to be found in their manifestations in the present. Hence, if events were to be understood, it was their contemporary functioning that should be observed and recorded (Lesser 1935:55-56).

Consequently, this led some to interpret functionalism as being opposed to the study of history altogether. Radcliffe-Brown responded to this critique by stating that functionalists did not believe that useful historical information could be obtained with respect to primitive societies; it was not history, but “pseudo-history” to which functionalists objected (Harris 1968:524).

In the “primitive” societies that were assigned to social anthropology for study, there are few written historic records. For example, we have no written record of the development of social institutions among the Native Australians. Anthropologists, thinking of their study as a kind of historical study, fall back on conjecture and imagination; they invent “pseudo-historical” or “pseudo-casual” explanations. We have had innumerable and sometimes conflicting pseudo-historical accounts of the origin
and development of the totemic institutions of the Native Australians. Such speculations have little place in serious anthropological discussion about institutions. This does not imply the rejection of historical explanation, but quite the contrary (Radcliffe-Brown 1952:3).

However, it is equally important to point out the criticisms of this “pseudo-history” reasoning for synchronic analysis. In light of readily available and abundant historical sources encountered in subsequent studies, it was suggested that this reasoning was a rationalization for avoiding a confrontation with the past. Such criticism may have led to efforts to combine diachronic and synchronic interests among later functionalist studies.

LEADING FIGURES

E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973) studied history at Oxford and anthropology at the University of London. He was considered one of the most notable British anthropologists after the Second World War. While Evans-Pritchard’s research includes numerous ethnic groups, he is best remembered for his work with the Nuer, Azande, Anuak and Shilluk in Africa. His publication Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande (1937) was the first ethnography of an African people published by a professionally trained anthropologist. Equally influential was his work among the Nuer, who presented him with the opportunity to study the organization of a society without chiefs. In addition to his work on political organization, his work on kinship aided in the shaping political theory. Later in his career, Evans-Pritchard emphasized the need for the inclusion of history in the study of social anthropology. In opposition to Radcliffe-Brown, Evans-Pritchard rejected the idea of social anthropology as a science and viewed it, rather, as a comparative history. Though he contributed greatly to the study of African societies, his work neglects to treat women as a significant part of the social whole. Although he began as a functionalist, Evans-Pritchard later shifted to a humanist approach (Beidelman 1991).

Sir Raymond Firth (1901-2002) was a social and economic anthropologist. He became interested in anthropology while doing his post-graduate work at the London School of Economics. Firth conducted research in most areas of social anthropology, in addition to intensive fieldwork in Tikopia. Perhaps his greatest contribution to the functionalist paradigm is his distinction between social structure and social organization (see Principal Concepts for a definition of the distinction between the two) (Silverman 1981, Watson-Gegeo 1991:198). “Firth’s most significant contribution to anthropology is his development of a theoretical framework emphasizing choice, decision, organization and process in social and institutional behavior” (Watson-Gegeo 1991:198).

Meyer Fortes (1906-1983) was originally trained in psychology and was working in London as a clinical psychologist when he met Seligman and Malinowski at the London School of Economics in 1933. They persuaded him to undertake psychological and anthropological fieldwork in West Africa. His writing is heavy with theoretical assertions as he argued that empirical observation and analysis must be linked if social anthropology was to call itself a science (Barnes 1991).

Sir Edmund Leach (1910-1989) was very influential in social anthropology. He demonstrated the complex interrelationship of ideal models and political action within a historical context. His most influential ethnographic works were based on fieldwork in Burma, Sarawak and North Borneo (Sabah), and Sri Lanka. Although his initial theoretical approach was functionalist, Leach then shifted to processual analysis. Leach was later influenced by Claude Levi-Strass and adopted a structuralist approach. His 1962 publication Rethinking Anthropology offered a challenge to structural-functionalism (Seymour-Smith 1986:165).

Lucy Mair (1901-1986) received her degree in Classics in 1923. In 1927 she joined the London School of Economics in the Department of International Relations. Mair’s fieldwork was in Uganda and her first studies focused on social change. She was an advocate of applied anthropology and argued that it was not a separate branch of the anthropological discipline. Mair was very concerned with public affairs, including the contemporary processes of colonization and land tenure (Davis 1991).

Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) was one of the founding fathers of British social anthropology. He received his doctorate with highest honors in mathematics, physics and philosophy from the Jagiellonian University in Krakow. However, Malinowski’s interests turned to anthropology after reading Frazier’s The Golden Bough. In 1910 he enrolled in the London School of Economics to study anthropology. With Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski pushed for a paradigm shift in British anthropology; a change from the speculative and historical to the ahistorical study of social institutions. This theoretical shift gave rise to functionalism and established fieldwork as the constitutive experience of social anthropology (Kuper 1973,
Young 1991). Malinowski’s functionalism was highly influential in the 1920s and 1930s. As applied methodology, this approach worked, except for situations of social or cultural change. While elements of Malinowski’s theory remain intact in current anthropological theory, it has changed from its original form with new and shifting paradigms (Young 1991:445).

However, Malinowski made his greatest contribution as an ethnographer. He emphasized the importance of studying social behavior and social relations in their concrete cultural contexts through participant-observation. He considered it crucial to consider the observable differences between norms and action; between what people say they do and what they actually do. His detailed descriptions of Trobriand social life and thought are among the most comprehensive in world ethnography and his Argonauts of the Western Pacific (1922) is one of the most widely read works of anthropology. Malinowski’s enduring conceptual contributions lay in the areas of: kinship and marriage (e.g., the concept of “sociological paternity”); in magic, ritual language and myth (e.g., the idea of “myth as social charter”); and in economic anthropology (notably the concept of “reciprocity”) (Young 1991:445).

Robert K. Merton (1910-2003) attempted to clarify the concept of function by distinguishing latent and manifest functions. Latent functions are those objective consequences of a cultural item which are neither intended nor recognized by the members of a society. Manifest functions are those objective consequences contributing to the adjustment or adaptation of the system which are intended and recognized by participants in the system (Kaplan and Manners 1972:58).

Talcott Parsons (1902-1979), a sociologist who contributed to the structural-functionalist school conceptualized the social universe in terms of four types and levels of “action systems,” (culture, society, personality, and organismic/behavioral) with each system having to meet four functional needs (adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency). He analyzed the operation and interchanges of structures and processes within and between system levels taking into consideration these basic requisites (Turner and Maryanski 1991).

A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955) was a founding father of functionalism associated with the branch known as structural-functionalism. He attended Cambridge where he studied moral science, which incorporated philosophy, economics and psychology. It was during this time that he earned the nick-name “Anarchy Brown” because of his political interests and affiliations. After completing his degree in 1904, he conducted fieldwork in the Andaman Islands and Western Australia. Radcliffe-Brown’s emphasis on examining the contribution of phenomena to the maintenance of the social structure reflects the influence of French sociologist Emile Durkheim (Winthrop 1991:129). He particularly focused on the institutions of kinship and descent and suggested that, at least in tribal societies, they determined the character of family organization, politics, economy, and inter-group relations (Winthrop 1991:130).

Audrey Richards (1899-1984) conducted her ethnographic research among the Bemba and in Northern Rhodesia. Her major theoretical interests included economic and political systems, the study of colonial rule, and anthropological participation, social change and the study of ritual (Seymour-Smith 1986:248).

KEY WORKS

- Firth, Raymond. 1951. Elements of Social Organization. London. Notable for the distinction between social structure and social organization
PRINCIPAL CONCEPTS

The primary starting points of Malinowski’s theorizing included: 1) understanding behavior in terms of the motivation of individuals, including both rational, ‘scientifically’ validated behavior and ‘irrational’, ritual, magical, or religious behavior; 2) recognizing the interconnectedness of the different items which constituted a ‘culture’ to form some kind of system; and 3) understanding a particular item by identifying its function in the current contemporary operation of that culture (Firth 1957:55).

The inclusiveness of Malinowski’s concept of culture is apparent in his statement:

“It obviously is the integral whole consisting of implements and consumers’ goods, of constitutional charters for the various social groupings, of human ideas and crafts, beliefs and customs. Whether we consider a very simple or primitive culture or an extremely complex and developed one, we are confronted by a vast apparatus, partly material, partly human and partly spiritual by which man is able to cope with the concrete specific problems that face him” (Malinowski 1944:36).

Essentially, he treated culture as everything pertaining to human life and action that cannot be regarded as a property of the human organism considered as a physiological system. In other words, he treated it as a direct manifestation of biologically inherited patterns of behavior. Culture is that aspect of behavior that is learned by the individual and which may be shared by pluralities of individuals. It is transmitted to other individuals along with the physical objects associated with learned patterns and activities (Firth 1957:58).

Malinowski clearly states his view of a functionalist approach to understanding culture in his posthumously published text, *The Scientific Theory of Culture and Other Essays*:

1. Culture is essentially an instrumental apparatus by which man is put in a position to better cope with the concrete, specific problems that face him in his environment in the course of the satisfaction of his needs.
2. It is a system of objects, activities, and attitudes in which every part exists as a means to an end.
3. It is an integral in which the various elements are interdependent.
4. Such activities, attitudes and objects are organized around important and vital tasks into institutions such as family, the clan, the local community, the tribe, and the organized teams of economic cooperation, political, legal, and educational activity.
5. From the dynamic point of view, that is, as regards the type of activity, culture can be analyzed into a number of aspects such as education, social control, economics, systems of knowledge, belief, and morality, and also modes of creative and artistic expression” (1944:150).

Malinowski considered institutions to be examples of isolated (in the sense of ‘bounded’) organized behaviors. Since such behavior always involves a plurality of persons, an institution in this sense is therefore a social system, which is a subsystem of society. Though functionally differentiated from other institutions, an institution is a segmentary cross-section of culture that involves all the components included in Malinowski’s definition of culture (Firth 1957:59). Malinowski believed that the central feature of the charter of an institution is “the system of values for the pursuit of which human beings organize, or enter organizations already existing” (Malinowski 1944:52). As for the concept of function, Malinowski believed it is the primary basis of differentiation of institutions within the same culture. In other words, institutions differ because they are organized to serve different functions. He argued that institutions function for continuing life and “normality” of an organism, or an aggregate of organisms as a species (Firth 1957:60). Indeed, for Malinowski, the primary reference of the concept of function was to a theory of the biological needs of the individual organism:

“It is clear, I think, that any theory of culture has to start from the organic needs of man, and if it succeeds in relating (to them) the more complex, indirect, but perhaps fully imperative needs of the type which we call spiritual or economic or social, it will supply us with a set of general laws such as we need in sound scientific theory” (Malinowski 1944:72-73).

Malinowski’s basic theoretical attempt was to derive the main characteristics of the society and its social systems from a theory of the causally pre-cultural needs of the organism. He believed that culture is always instrumental to the satisfaction of organic needs. Therefore, he had to bridge the gap between the concept of biologically basic needs of the organism and the facts of culturally organized behavior. His first major step was to set up the classification of basic needs which could be directly related to a classification of cultural responses which could then in turn be brought into relation to institutions. Next, he developed a second category of needs (derived needs) which he inserted between his basic needs and the institutional integrates of collective behavior (Firth 1957:63).

SYNOPTIC SURVEY OF BIOLOGICAL AND DERIVED NEEDS AND THEIR SATISFACTION IN CULTURE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic Needs (Individual)</th>
<th>Direct Responses (Organized, i.e., Collective)</th>
<th>Instrumental Needs</th>
<th>Responses to Instrumental Needs</th>
<th>Symbolic and Integrative Needs</th>
<th>Systems of Thought and Faith</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nutrition (metabolism)</td>
<td>Commissariat</td>
<td>Renewal of cultural apparatus</td>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>Transmission of experience by means of precise, consistent principles</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reproduction</td>
<td>Marriage and family</td>
<td>Characters of behavior and their sanctions</td>
<td>Social control</td>
<td>Means of intellectual, emotional, and pragmatic control of destiny and chance</td>
<td>Magic Religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bodily comforts</td>
<td>Domicile and dress</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>Protection and defense</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sports Games Ceremonial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxation</td>
<td>Systems of play and repose</td>
<td>Renewal of personnel</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movement</td>
<td>Set activities and systems of communication</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth</td>
<td>Training and Apprenticeship</td>
<td>Organization of force and compulsion</td>
<td>Political organization</td>
<td>Communal rhythm of recreation, exercise and rest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(SOURCE: Malinowski’s Basic Human Needs as presented in Langness 1987:80)
Radcliffe-Brown’s emphasis on social function is derived from the influence of the French sociological school. This school developed in the 1890s around the work of Emile Durkheim who argued that “social phenomena constitute a domain, or order, of reality that is independent of psychological and biological facts. Social phenomena, therefore, must be explained in terms of other social phenomena, and not by reference to psychobiological needs, drives, impulses, and so forth” (Broce 1973:39-40).

Emile Durkheim argued that ethnographers should study the function of social institutions and how they function together to maintain the social whole (Broce 1973:39-40). Radcliffe-Brown shared this emphasis of studying the conditions under which social structures are maintained. He also believed that the functioning of societies, like that of other natural systems, is governed by laws that can be discovered though systematic comparison (Broce 1873:40). It is important to note here that Firth postulated the necessity of distinguishing between social structure and social organization. Social structure “is the principle(s) on which the forms of social relations depend. Social organization refers to the directional activity, to the working out of social relations in everyday life” (Watson-Gegeo 1991:198).

Radcliffe-Brown established an analogy between social life and organic life to explain the concept of function. He emphasized the contribution of phenomena to maintaining social order. However, Radcliffe-Brown’s disregard for individual needs was apparent in this analogy. He argued that as long as a biological organism lives, it preserves the continuity of structure, but not preserve the unity of its constituent parts. That is, over a period of time, while the constituent cells do not remain the same, the structural arrangement of the constituent units remains similar. He suggested that human beings, as essential units, are connected by a set of social relations into an integrated whole. Like the biological organism, the continuity of the social structure is not destroyed by changes in the units. Although individuals may leave the society by death or other means, other individuals may enter it. Therefore, the continuity is maintained by the process of social life, which consists of the activities and interactions of individual human beings and of organized groups into which they are united. The social life of a community is the functioning of the social structure. The function of any recurrent activity is the part it plays in the social life as a whole and thereby, the contribution it makes to structural continuity (Radcliffe-Brown 1952:178).

METHODOLOGIES

Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski formulated distinct versions of functionalism, yet the emphasis on the differences between them obscures their fundamental similarities and complementarily. Both viewed society as structured into a working unity in which the parts accommodate one another in a way that maintains the whole. Thus, the function of a custom or institution is the contribution it makes to the maintenance of the entire system of which it is a part. On the whole, sociocultural systems function to provide their members with adaptations to environmental circumstances and to connect them in a network of stable social relationships. This is not to say that functionalists failed to recognize internal social conflict or other forms of disequilibrium. However, they did believe that societies strongly tend to maintain their stability and internal cohesion as if societies had homeostatic qualities (Broce 1973:38-39).

The functionalists also shared an emphasis on intensive fieldwork, involving participant-observation. This methodological emphasis has resulted in a series of excellent monographs on native societies. In large part, the quality of these monographs may be attributed to their theoretical framework, since the investigation of functional interrelationships of customs and institutions provides an especially fruitful perspective for the collection of information.

In their analysis, the functionalists attempted to interpret societies as they operated in a single point in time, or as they operate over a relatively short period of time. This was not because the functionalists opposed, in principle, the study of history. Instead, it was a consequence of their belief that very little reliable information could be secured about the long-term histories of primitive peoples. Their rejection of the conjectural reconstructions of the evolutionists and the diffusionists was based largely on this conviction (Broce 1973:39).

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

By the 1970’s functionalism was declining, but its contributions continue to influence anthropologists today. Functional analysis gave value to social institutions by considering them not as mere custom (as proposed by early American ethnologists), but as active and integrated parts of a social system (Langness 1987). Though Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown
differed in their approaches to functional interpretation, they both contributed to the push for a “shift in the assumptions of ethnology, from a concern with isolated traits to the interpretation of social life” (Winthrop 1991:130).

This school of thought has contributed to the concept of culture that traditional usages, whatever their origin, have been shaped by the requirement that human beings must live together in harmony. Therefore the demands of interpersonal relationships are a causative force in culture (Goldschmidt 1967:17-18).

Despite its theoretical limitations, functionalism has made important methodological contributions. With its emphasis on intensive fieldwork, functionalism has provided in-depth studies of societies. Additionally, the investigation of functional interrelationships of customs and institutions provides a ready-made framework for the collection of information.

Its theoretical difficulties notwithstanding, functionalism can yet be fruitful. Such statements as, “all societies are functionally cohesive,” are too vague to be refuted easily. However, these statements can be refuted if they suggest that societies do not change or disintegrate. Therefore, such theories can be considered uncontroversial tautologies. It could be said that functionalism is the integration of false theory and trivially true tautology into a blueprint for fieldwork. Accordingly, such fieldwork can be thought of as empirical attempts to refute such ideas that savages are simple-minded, that savage customs are superstitious, and that savage societies are chaotic, in essence, that savage societies are “savage.”

CRITICISMS

Functionalism became an important paradigm in American theory in the 1950s and 1960s. With time, criticism of this approach has escalated, resulting in its decline in the early 1970s. Interactionist theorists criticized functionalism for failing to conceptualize adequately the complex nature of actors and the process of interaction. Marxist theory argued against functionalism’s conservativism and the static nature of analysis that emphasized the contribution of social phenomena to the maintenance of the status-quo. Advocates of theory construction questioned the utility of excessively classificatory or typological theories that pigeonholed phenomena in terms of their functions (Turner and Maryanski 1991). Functional theory also has been criticized for its disregard of the historical process and for its presupposition that societies are in a state of equilibrium (Goldschmidt 1996:511).

Logical problems of functional explanations also have been pointed out, namely that they are teleological and tautological. It has been argued that the presence of an institution cannot precede the institution’s existence. Otherwise, such a teleological argument would suggest that the institution’s development anticipated its function. This criticism can be countered by recognizing an evolutionary or a historical process at work; however, functionalism specifically rejected such ideas. Functional analysis has also been criticized for being circular: needs are postulated on the basis of existing institutions which are, in turn, used to explain their existence. This criticism can be countered by establishing a set of universal requisite needs, or functional prerequisites. It has been argued that to account for phenomena by showing what social needs they satisfy does not explain how it originated or why it is what it is (Kucklick 1996:250). Furthermore, functionalism’s ahistorical approach made it impossible to examine social processes, rejection of psychology made it impossible to understand attitudes and sentiments and the rejection of culture led to a lack of recognition of the ecological context (Goldschmidt 1996:511).

In light of such criticisms, some anthropologists attempted functional explanations that were not constrained by such narrow approaches. In Clyde Kluckhohn’s functional explanation of Navaho witchcraft, he avoided tautology by positing a social need (to manage hostility), thereby bringing a psychological assumption into the analysis. He demonstrated that more overt means of managing hostility had not been available due to governmental controls, thereby bringing in historical and ecological factors (Goldschmidt 1996:511).

Comparative functionalism attends to the difficulties posed by Malinowski’s argument that every culture can be understood in its own terms; every institution can be seen as a product of the culture within which it developed. Following this, a cross-cultural comparison of institutions is a false enterprise in that it would be comparing phenomena that could not be compared. This is problematic since the internal mode of analysis cannot provide either a basis for true generalization or a means of extrapolation beyond the local time and place (Goldschmidt 1966:8). Recognizing this “Malinskian dilemma,” Walter Goldschmidt argued for a “comparative functionalism.” This approach recognizes the universality of functions to which institutions are a response. Goldschmidt suggested that problems are consistent from culture to culture, but institutional solutions vary. He suggested starting with what is problematical in order to discover how institutional devices provide
Neofunctionalism is a revision of British structural-functionalism that experienced renewed activity during the 1980s. Some neo-functionalists, influenced by Parsons, analyze phenomena in terms of specific functional requisites. Others, although they place less emphasis on functional requisites and examine a variety of phenomena, also share similarities with functionalism by focusing on issues of social differentiation, integration, and social evolution. Finally, some neo-functionalists examine how cultural processes (including ritual, ideology, and values) integrate social structures. Generally, there is little emphasis on how phenomena meet or fail to meet system needs (Turner and Maryanski 1991).

Neofunctionalism differs from structural-functionalism by focusing on the modeling of systems-level interactions, particularly negative feedback. It also emphasizes techno-environmental forces, especially environment, ecology, and population, thereby reducing culture to adaptation (Bettinger 1996:851). Both neofunctionalism and structural-functionalism explain phenomena with reference to the needs they fulfill. They consider problematic cultural behaviors to result largely from benefits they generate that are essential to sustaining or improving the well-being of larger systems in which they are embedded, these systems being cultures in the case of structural-functionalism and ecosystems in the case of neo-functionalism (Bettinger 1996:851).

Structural-functionalists believe these benefits are generated by behaviors that reinforce group cohesion, particularly ritual, or that provide the individual with effective mechanisms for coping with psychological threatening situations by means such as religion or magic. Neofunctionalists, on the other hand, are concerned with issues that relate directly to fitness similar to that in evolutionary biology (Bettinger 1996:852).

These emphases correspond to the kinds of groups that preoccupy structural-functional and neofunctional explanation. Structural-functional groups are culturally constituted, as cultures, by group-reinforcing cultural behaviors. Rather than separating humans from other animals, neofunctionalists focus on groups as biologically constituted populations aggregated in cooperative social alliances, by which self-interested individuals obtain fitness benefits as a consequence of group membership (Bettinger 1996:852).

Since obviously rational, beneficial behaviors require no special explanation, structural-functionalism and neofunctionalism focus on finding rationality in seemingly irrational behaviors. Neofunctionalism, with economic rationality as its basic frame of reference, believes that what is irrational for the individual in the short run may be rational for the group in the long run. Therefore, neofunctionalist explanation seemed to provide a bridge between human behavior, which frequently involves cooperation, and natural selection, where individual interaction involves competition more than cooperation. Additionally, this type of argument was traditional in that it emphasized cultural behaviors whose stated purpose (manifest function) concealed a more important latent function. However, evolutionary theorists suggest that group selection occurs only under rare circumstances, thereby revealing the insufficiency of fitness-related self-interest to sustain among groups of unrelated individuals over any extended period (Bettinger 1996:853).

Anthropology / Anthropological Theories / Historicism

Historicism
By Deanna Smith, Joseph Scruggs, Jonathan Berry and C. Thomas Lewis, III

BASIC PREMISES

Historicism is an approach to the study of anthropology and culture that dates back to the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It encompasses two distinct forms of historicism: diffusionism and historical particularism. This approach is most often associated with Franz Boas and his many students, but it was actually developed much earlier by diffusionists who sought to offer alternative explanations for culture change to those argued for by social evolutionists. The evolutionists posited that humans share a set of characteristics and modes of thinking that transcend individual cultures (psychic unity of mankind) and therefore, the cultural development of individual societies will reflect this transcendent commonality through a similar series of developmental stages. This implied that the relative “progress” of individual societies could be assessed in
comparison with other societies and their “measured” level of sociocultural attainment determined. Low levels of development were attributed to relatively lower mental developments than in more developed societies. Historicism, on the other hand, placed great importance on cautious and contextualized interpretation of data, as well as a relativistic point of view, and rejected the universalistic, hierarchical and over-generalized interpretations of the social evolutionists. The focus in the historicist perspective was on tracing the historical development of specific cultures rather than on the construction of a grand evolutionary account of the progress march of Culture.

While socio-cultural evolution explained what happened and where, it was unable to describe the specific influences producing cultural change and development. To accomplish this end, an historical approach was needed for the study of culture change and development to explain not only what happened and where but also why and how. Diffusionism was the first approach devised to accomplish this type of historical approach to cultural investigation and was represented by two distinct schools of thought: the German school and the British school.

The British school of diffusionism was led by G. E. Smith and included other figures such as W. J. Perry and, for a while, W. H. R. Rivers. These individuals argued that all of culture and civilization was developed only once in ancient Egypt and diffused throughout the rest of the world through migration and colonization. Therefore, all cultures were tied together by this thread of common origin (inferring the psychic unity of mankind) and, as a result, worldwide cultural development could be viewed as a reaction of native cultures to this diffusion of culture from Egypt and could only be understood as such. This school of thought did not hold up long due to its inability to account for independent invention.

The German school of diffusionism, led by Fritz Graebner, developed a more sophisticated historical approach to socio-cultural development. To account for the independent invention of culture elements, the theory of culture circles was utilized. This theory argued that culture traits developed in a few areas of the world and diffused outwards in to other societies. Thus, worldwide socio-cultural development could be viewed as a function of the interaction of expanding culture circles with native cultures and other culture circles.

Historical particularism was an approach popularized by Franz Boas as an alternative to the worldwide theories of socio-cultural development as promoted by both evolutionists and extreme diffusionists, which he believed were simply improvable. Boas argued that in order to overcome this, one had to carry out detailed regional studies of individual cultures to discover the distribution of culture traits and to understand the individual processes of culture change at work. In short, Boas sought to reconstruct the histories of specific cultures. He stressed the meticulous collection and organization of ethnographic data on all aspects of many different human societies. Only after information on the particulars of many different cultures had been gathered could generalizations about cultural development be made with any expectation of accuracy.

Boas’s theories were carried on and further developed by scholars who were contemporaries with or studied under him at Columbia University. The more influential of these students include Alfred L. Kroeber, Ruth Benedict, Robert Lowie, Paul Radin and Edward Sapir. The contributions of these and others are detailed in the Leading Figures section below.

POINTS OF REACTION

Historicism developed out of dissatisfaction with the theories of unilineal socio-cultural evolution. Proponents of these theories included Charles Darwin, E. B. Tylor, J. McLennan, and Sir John Lubbock. Some writers, such as Lewis Henry Morgan, Herbert Spencer, Daniel Brinton and J. W. Powell, took the concept of socio-cultural evolution and added racial overtones to previously developed theories as a way of explaining different rates of social and cultural development. Their theories concerning the development of human societies were rooted in the still earlier works of the late eighteenth century, which claimed humanity rose to civilization through a series of gradually developing lineal stages towards the alleged perfection (or ‘near’ perfection) of civilized society. These thinkers posited that each move up the evolutionary ladder was accompanied by an increase in mental ability and capacity. Each level of development was preceded by an increase in mental capacity. This mode of thinking depicted primitive man as operating on a base level of mental functioning, which was akin to instinct. If a society was found to be in a state of savagery or barbarism, it was because its members had not yet developed the mental functions needed to create and sustain a civilized society.
A fundamental problem with these unilineal models of cultural development was their inherent assumption that Western European society was the end product of this sequence and its highest attainable level of development. This posed a major problem for historicists, and particularly for Boas, who did not believe one could understand and interpret cultural change, and therefore reconstruct the history of a particular society, unless the investigator conducted observations based on the perspective of those being studying. Therefore, Boas held that it was necessary for the investigator to examine all available evidence for a society, including information collected first-hand by a trained researcher. Boas’s belief in the importance of intensive fieldwork was passed on to his many students (and their students) and is evident in their myriad works and methodologies.

**Diffusionist historicism** developed into two related but different schools of thought: the British diffusionists and the German diffusionists. The **British school**, led by G. Elliot Smith and W. H. R. Rivers, argued that components of civilization developed in a few areas of the world. When transportation reached a level of development that allowed large movements of people, civilization diffused outward from the culture area. Smith, who developed the theory that all aspects of civilization developed in ancient Egypt and diffused to all other parts of the world, carried this school of thought to its extreme. Rivers was somewhat more conservative in his application of diffusionist beliefs, but he maintained that only very few areas developed civilization and that migrations from these centers were responsible for carrying civilization to remote parts of the world.

The **German diffusionists** argued that civilization was developed in only a few isolated regions and that independent invention of cultural elements and complexes was not a common event. However, people did move around and develop contacts with their neighbors and civilization was passed on through these contacts. Over time, these few isolated regions would have passed on their civilization to their neighbors and developed culture areas that diffused in concentric circles called culture circles. The German diffusionists worked to identify the centers of culture circles and trace the spread of ideas and technology from the centers through contact with surrounding cultures. These culture circles would spread through additional contacts with neighboring culture areas. As a result, the aspects of civilization that formerly characterized only a few isolated regions would be diffused to all parts of the world and the originality of these isolated regions of independent invention would be lost to history. This school of thought focused on the localized tracing of traits over time and space.

Boas and his contemporaries disagreed both with the universal models and theories of cultural development that were advocated by evolutionists and with the methods and findings of the British and German diffusionists. The Boasians believed that so many different stimuli acted on the development of a culture that its historical trajectory could only be understood by first examining the particulars of a specific culture so that the sources of stimuli could be identified. Only then may theories of cultural development be constructed after being firmly based on a multitude of synchronic studies pieced together to form a pattern of development. Theories derived from this type of historically grounded investigation were more accurate and exhaustive than the older models of evolutionism and diffusionist historicism, but they did not identify cross-cultural patterns.

**LEADING FIGURES**

**Grafton Elliot Smith** (1871-1937) – Smith is credited with founding and leading the British school of diffusionism. Through a comparative study of different peoples from around the world who have practiced mummification, Smith formulated a theory that all the people he studied originally derived their mummification practices from Egypt. He concluded that civilization was created only once in Egypt and spread throughout the world, just as mummification had, through colonization, migration, and diffusion. Other proponents of the British school of diffusionism included W.J. Perry and, for a while, W. H. R. Rivers. Smith’s important works include *The Migrations of Early Culture* (1915) and *The Ancient Egyptians and the Origin of Civilization* (1923) (Lupton 1991:644-5).

**R. Fritz Graeber** (1877-1934) – Graeber is remembered for being the founder of the German School of diffusionism. Graeber adopted the concepts of culture area and the psychic unity of mankind as developed by Adolf Bastian and used them to develop his theory of *Kulturekreistheorie* (culture circles), which was primarily concerned with the description of patterns of culture distribution (Winthrop 1991:222). His theory of culture circles or centers posits that culture traits are invented once and combine with other culture traits to create culture patterns, both of which radiate outwards in, all other things being equal, concentric circles. By examining these various culture traits, one can create a world culture history (Winthrop 1991:61–62). Graeber insisted on a critical examination of sources and emphasized the relevance of historical and cultural connections to
the development of sequences and data analysis. The most complete exposition of his views is contained in his major work, *Die Methode der Ethnologie* (Putzstuck 1991:247-8).

**Franz Boas** (1858-1942) – Boas was born in Minden, Westphalia (now part of Germany). At the age of twenty he enrolled in college at Heidelberg. He studied physics and geography both in Heidelberg and in Bonn. He received his Ph.D. in 1881 from the University of Kiel. His dissertation was entitled “Contributions to the Understanding of the Color of Water.” In 1883 Boas undertook his first ethnographic-geographic field research among the Eskimo (Inuit) of Baffin Island in Canada, which resulted in his classic anthropological monograph, *The Central Eskimo*. After a brief teaching stint at the University of Berlin, Boas returned to North America where he conducted fieldwork in 1886 among the Kwakiutl, which further stimulated his interest in “primitive” culture. He became an American citizen the following year and took a position as Instructor at Clark University. In 1896, he left Clark and became Instructor at Columbia University and Curator of Ethnology for the American Museum of Natural History, both in New York City. In 1899, he became the first Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University, a position that allowed him to instruct a number of important anthropologists who collectively influenced anthropological thought in many ways. In 1910, he assisted in the founding of the International School of American Archaeology and Ethnology, and was its resident director during the 1911-1912 season (Tax 1991:68, see also Bohannan 1973:81).

Boas is the name most often associated with the historicist approach to anthropology. He did not believe that the grand theories of socio-political evolution or diffusion were provable. To him, the view that all societies are part of one single human culture evolving towards a cultural pinnacle is flawed, especially when proposing a western model of civilization as the cultural pinnacle. Boas also depicted the theories regarding independent invention within human culture as inherently incorrect. He argued that many cultures developed independently, each based on its own unique set of circumstances such as geography, climate, resources and particular cultural borrowing. Based on this argument, reconstructing the history of individual cultures requires an in-depth investigation that compares groups of culture traits in specific geographical areas.

Then the distribution of these culture traits must be plotted. Once the distribution of many sets of culture traits is plotted for a general geographic area, patterns of cultural borrowing may be determined. This allows the reconstruction of individual histories of specific cultures by informing the investigator which of the cultural elements were borrowed and which were developed individually (Bock 1996:299). Perhaps the most important and lasting of Boas’ contributions to the field of anthropology is his influence on the generation of anthropologists that followed him and developed and improved on his own work. He was an important figure in encouraging women to enter and thrive in the field. Some of the better known of his students include Kroeber, Mead, Benedict, Lowie, Radin, Wissler, Spier, Bunzel, Hallowell and Montagu (Barfield 1997:44).

**Alfred Louis Kroeber** (1876-1960) – In 1901, Kroeber received the first Ph.D. awarded by Columbia University in the field of Anthropology. At Columbia he studied under Boas where he developed his interest in ethnology and linguistics. He had a great impact on these two sub-fields through a series of highly influential articles and books published throughout his career. Influenced heavily by Boas, Kroeber was concerned with reconstructing history through a descriptive analysis of concrete cultural phenomena that were grouped into complexes, configurations, and patterns which were themselves grouped into culture types whose comparative relationships could be analyzed to reveal their histories. Kroeber is further noted for his use and development of the idea of culture as a superorganic entity that must be analyzed by methods specific to its nature. In other words, one cannot examine and analyze a culture in the same manner that one would analyze the individual; the two are entirely different phenomena and must be treated as such (Willey 1988:171-92). Although the influence of Boas on his work is clear, Kroeber disagreed with his mentor in several important respects. Kroeber grew to believe that Boas placed too much emphasis on the gathering and organizing of data and was too concerned with causal processes (abstract phenomena) and their description. Kroeber was concerned with concrete phenomena and their development over time and concluded that Boas did not emphasize these aspects enough in his own investigations (Buckley 1991:364-6).

**Ruth Benedict** (1887-1948) – Benedict studied under Boas at Columbia and received her Ph.D. in 1923. She stayed in New York, the city of her birth, and worked at Columbia for the rest of her life. She began at the University as a part-time teacher in the 1920s and, in 1948, she was appointed, finally, the first female full professor in the Anthropology department at Columbia University. Throughout her career she conducted extensive fieldwork, gathering data on such groups as the Serrano in California, the Zuni, Cochitii and Pima in the Southwest, the Mescalero Apache in Arizona and the Blackfoot and Blood of
the Northwest Plains (Caffrey 1991:44). Benedict is most noted for her development of the concepts of culture configurations and culture and personality, both developed in Patterns of Culture (1934), one of the most influential books in the anthropological canon. Benedict elaborated the concept of culture configuration as a way of characterizing individual cultures as an historical elaboration of those cultures’ personalities or temperaments (Voget 1996:575). Cultural configurations such as Apollonian and Dionysian are products of this relationship and are psychological types that can characterize both individuals and cultures (Seymour-Smith 1986:66).

Robert H. Lowie (1883-1957) – Lowie was born and raised in Vienna but attended college in the United States. He was granted a bachelor’s degree in 1901 from City College of New York and a Ph.D. from Columbia in 1908 where he studied under Boas. His primary interest was kinship and social institutions. He followed Boas’ example by insisting on the collection and analysis of as much data as possible, relying heavily on historical documents in his studies of the Plains Indians. His most lasting contribution to Anthropology was his 1920 publication of Primitive Society, which examined and critiqued Lewis Henry Morgan’s theories about social evolution. The ideas Lowie developed from this critique held sway over the field until the late 1940s with the work of Murdock and Levi-Strauss (Matthey 1991:426-7).

Edward Sapir (1884-1939) – Sapir was born in Laenburg, Germany, but grew up in New York City and eventually attended Columbia University, where he was attracted to Boas’ work in Native American linguistics. His study under Boas led to fieldwork among the Chinook, Takelma, and Yana Indians of the Northwest. He received his Ph.D. in 1909, writing his dissertation on Takelma grammar. Although he joined Boas, Kroeber, Benedict and others in defining goals in theoretical terms, he disagreed with Boas and Kroeber’s reconciliation of the individual within society. He specifically disagreed with Kroeber’s idea that culture was separate from the individual, His views on this subject more closely resemble those of his friend, Ruth Benedict (Golla 1991:603-5).

Paul Radin (1883-1959) – Radin was born in the city of Lodz (then part of Poland) but moved to the United States with his family when he was only one year old. Although he was interested in history, he worked with Boas at Columbia, receiving a Ph.D. in anthropology in 1910. Radin proved to be a critic of Boas’ methods and concept of culture as well as a critic of two of his other friends, Edward Sapir and Leslie Spier. Radin argued for a less quantitative, more historical approach to ethnology similar to Lowie’s work in the Plains. Radin criticized Kroeber’s superorganic concept of culture and he argued that it is the individual who introduces change or innovation into a culture, and therefore it is the individual who shapes culture and not, as Kroeber argued, culture that shapes the individual (Sacharoff-Fast Wolf 1991:565).

Clark Wissler (1870-1947) – Wissler grew up in Indiana and attended the University of Indiana, earning his A.B and A.M. in psychology. He continued his education at Columbia to work on his Ph.D. in psychology but, because the Anthropology and Psychology departments were merged, he did limited work with Boas. Wissler, unlike Boas and most of his other students, was concerned with broad theoretical statements about culture and anthropology. He paid particular attention to the timing of the diffusion of specific ideas or technologies. He was noted for his use of culture areas in cross-cultural analysis and in building theories. Wissler helped to push anthropology far beyond evolutionism, in addition to pulling it away from Boas’s particularistic style of anthropology (Freed and Freed 1991:763-4).

Arjun Appadurai (born 1949) – Appadurai was born in Mumbai (Bombay), India. He was educated in India, receiving his Intermediate Arts degree from Elphinstone College, before moving to the United States to further his education. He earned his B.A. from Brandeis University (1970) and his M.A. (1973) and PhD (1976) from the University of Chicago, where he became a professor shortly thereafter. Appadurai advocates a view of cultural activity known as social imaginary. The imaginary in this point of view is composed of five different scapes (ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, finanscapes, and ideoscapes) and was deemed a social practice. This moved the imagination into the realm of global cultural processes, and it soon became central to all forms of agency.

KEY WORKS

• Sapir, Edward. 1915. Time Perspectives in Aboriginal American Culture. Ottawa: Department of Mines.

PRINCIPAL CONCEPTS

**Evolutionist School**

**Evolution and Social Evolution**: Evolution is a theory most closely identified with Charles Darwin. This concept was applied to the problem of cultural development and used to develop stage theories of socio-cultural development. These theories tended to argue that all cultures develop at different speeds along a set of predetermined tracks. Therefore, the level of development can be determined according to the place a particular culture occupies on this scale. Once a society has been placed on the scale, its past development could be reconstructed and its possible future predicted. Some advocates of the Evolutionist School extended this argument to include the idea that the reason some societies have developed more quickly than others is that the mental capacities of its members are more developed than those whose progress along this scale has been slower. This approach has been greatly criticized for oversimplifying and overgeneralizing culture change, along with promoting ethnocentric, and sometimes racist, beliefs in explicit favor of Western Europeans. Historicism rose largely out of dissatisfaction with the problems of the evolutionist school.

**Diffusionist School**

**Diffusion**: Diffusion is a concept that refers to the spread of a cultural trait from one geographical area to another through such processes as migration, colonization, trade, and cultural borrowings. The concept of diffusion has been used to create two different diffusionist schools: the British and German. The British school, led by G. E. Smith, held that all aspects of culture and civilization were invented once and diffused outwards to spread throughout the world. The German school, led by Graebner, used the principles of culture areas and culture circles to account for independent invention. This theory argued that different aspects of culture and civilization were invented in several different areas and diffused outwards in radiating circles, culture circles. Independent Invention: The principle of independent invention was developed to account for the fact that similar aspects of civilization developed by different peoples in different areas at different times. Most diffusionists did not emphasize the concept of independent invention. While some used the “psychic unity of mankind” concept to explain independent invention, other diffusionists argued that independent invention occurred extremely rarely because humans are inherently uninventive. Culture Area: Adolf Bastian first developed the culture area concept. It was further developed by later scholars from a number of different theoretical schools and used as a tool for cross-cultural analysis as a means of determining the spread of culture traits. The term is used to characterize any region of relative cultural and environmental uniformity, a region containing a common pattern of culture traits (Winthrop 1991:61). The German diffusionists used culture areas to identify where particular cultural elements developed. The spread of a particular cultural element occurs in concentric circles.
from the point of origin. By identifying culture circles and tracing their spread, the German diffusionists argued that one could reconstruct the entire history of world cultural development (Barfield 1997:103).

**Culture Circle**: Culture Circle is a term created by the German diffusionists to serve as a methodological tool for tracing the spread of cultural elements from a culture center as a means of reconstructing the history of culture development.

**Psychic Unity of Mankind**: The concept of psychic unity is used to refer to a common set of modes of thinking and characteristics that transcend specific individuals or cultures. Evolutionists depended heavily upon the concept. It was in fact the foundation of their comparative method because it made it possible to determine a society’s particular state of development relative to the rest of the world. The British diffusionists used the concept to confirm their belief that civilization developed once in ancient Egypt and then spread through migration and colonization. That all humans share this common set of characteristics and modes of thinking was used as evidence for a single origin of civilization and human culture.

The German diffusionists used the term to refer to sets of folk ideals and elementary ideals. For example, the elementary idea of deity is represented as a set of different folk ideals in individual cultures such as the Christian God, Allah, Buddha, Ra, Odin, etc. (Winthrop 1991:222–3).

**Historical Particularist Approach**

**Culture**: There is no single definitive construal of culture and more than likely never will be. Rather than adding yet another definition to the mix, the approaches to “culture” advanced by key figures in the historicist approach are depicted below:

- **Boas**: Franz Boas viewed culture as a set of customs, social institutions and beliefs that characterize any specific society. He argued that cultural differences were not due to race, but rather to differing environmental conditions and other “accidents of history” (Goodenough 1996:292). Further, cultures had to be viewed as fusions of differing culture traits that developed in different space and time (Durrenberger 1996:417).
- **Kroeber**: Kroeber’s view of culture is best described by the term superorganic, that is, culture is sui generis and as such can only be explained in terms of itself. Culture is an entity that exists separate from the psychology and biology of the individual and obeys its own set of laws (Winthrop 1991:280–281).
- **Benedict**: Ruth Benedict defined culture as basic ways of living and defined the culture of a specific group of people in terms of a unique culture configuration or psychological type. The collective psychologies of a certain people make up their cultural configuration, which is determined by the collective relationship, and nature of a culture’s parts (Goodenough 1996:139).
- **Lowie**: Lowie’s view of culture is very much like that of Boas. He considered culture to be disparate histories, Boas’ the product of combination of geographical conditions, resources, and accidents of history (Bernard and Spencer 1996: 139).
- **Sapir**: Sapir placed more emphasis on the individual than either Boas or Kroeber. He argued that culture is not contained within a society itself. Culture consists of the many interactions between the individuals of the society (Barnard and Spencer 1996:139).
- **Radin**: Radin differed from both Boas and Kroeber, particularly the later, in his approach and conceptualization of culture. He stressed the importance of the individual as an agent of cultural change. In contrast to Kroeber who claimed culture was an entity of its own and shaped the individual, Radin argued that the individual molds culture through innovation of new techniques and beliefs (Sacharoff-Fast Wolf 1991:565).
- **Wissler**: Wissler defined culture in his writings as a learned behavior or a complex of ideas (Freed and Freed 1991:763). He argued that individual elements of culture are expressed as many culture traits that may be grouped into culture complexes. The whole of culture complexes was the expression of culture (Barnard and Spencer 1996:139).

**Superorganic**: This is a term coined by Herbert Spencer in 1867 and utilized by Kroeber to help explain his view of culture and culture change. He viewed culture as an entity in-and-of itself and separate from the individual. To accurately understand culture, a separate body of theory and methodology specific to culture must be utilized (Winthrop 1991:280).
**Cultural Relativism:** This tenant holds that the beliefs, customs, practices and rituals of an individual culture must be observed and evaluated from the perspective in which they originate and are manifested. This is the only way to truly understand the meaning of observations and place them in historical context (Barfield 1997:98).

**Culture and Personality:** This concept is associated with Ruth Benedict. The basic tenants of it are explained in Patterns of Culture (1934). The argument holds that culture is like an individual in that it is a more-or-less consistent pattern of thoughts and behavior. These consistent patterns take on the emotional and intellectual characteristics of the individuals within the society. These characteristics may be studied to gain insight into the people under investigation. This has been criticized as being psychological reductivism (Seymore-Smith 1986:66).

**Culture Configuration:** This is a concept developed by Ruth Benedict to assist in explaining the nature of culture. A culture configuration is the expression of the personality of a specific society. A culture configuration is the sum of all the individual personalities of the society, a sort of societal psychological average. Differences in cultural configurations are not representative of a higher or lower capacity for cultural development but are instead simply alternative means of organizing society and experience (Caffrey 1991:44).

**Neo-Boasianism:** Neo-Boasianism is a return to, and re-thinking of, some of the principles of historical particularism and structural realism that had pervaded the ideas of Franz Boas and the original Historical Particularist School. It centered on the analysis of the relations between the mind and observable social structures. Neo-Boasianism is a return to realism and the critical science within an anthropological framework. It is not particularly entrenched in structural analysis, yet anthropologists that subscribe to this mode of thinking are concerned with the connections between sociocultural structures and biological structures. Neo-Boasianism highlights a type of agency, focusing on the actions of individuals within the cultural system as operations of structure. Social structures, according to this school of thought, only exist so long as there are relationships between agents. It is the analysis of the connection between external social structures and the structures of the brain by the means of a cultural neurohermeneutic system. This system allowed humans to connect antecedent reality with consequent reality. It is by this link between realities that social structure formation is made possible.

**METHODOLOGIES**

**Historical particularism** is an approach to understanding the nature of culture and cultural changes of specific populations of people. Boas argued that the history of a particular culture lay in the study of its individual traits unfolding in a limited geographical region. After many different cultures have been studied in the same way within a region, the history of individual cultures may be reconstructed. By having detailed data from many different cultures as a common frame of reference, individual culture traits may be singled out as being borrowed or invented. This is a crucial element of reconstructing the history of a particular culture. (Bock 1996:299).

To this end, Boas and his students stressed the importance of gathering as much data as possible about individual cultures before any assumptions or interpretations are made regarding a culture or culture change within a culture. He and his students took great pains to record all manner of information. This included the recording of oral history and tradition (salvage ethnology) and basic ethnographic methods such as participant observation. The emphasis on intensive participant observation largely paralleled Malinowski’s fieldwork methods being used by European anthropologists around the same time (see Functionalism for more on this topic). However, the people being studied and the overall theoretical aims of these two schools were quite different. Boas also stressed the importance of all sub-fields of anthropology in reconstructing history. Ethnographic evidence must be used with linguistic evidence, archaeological remains and physical and biological evidence. This approach became known as the four-field method of anthropology and was spread to anthropology departments all over the United States by Boas’ students and their students.

**Some Methodological Statements**

- Franz Boas: ”If we want to make progress on the desired line, we must insist upon critical methods, based not on generalities but on each individual case” (Boas, as quoted by Harris 260).
“Boas was aggressively atheoretical, rejecting as unsubstantiated assumptions the grand reconstructions of both evolutionists, such as Lewis Henry Morgan and Herbert Spencer, and diffusionists, such as G. E. Smith and Fritz Graebner” (Winthrop 83-84).

Marvin Harris records Boas’ “mission” as seeking “to rid anthropology of its amateurs and armchair specialists by making ethnographic research in the field the central experience and minimum attribute of professional status” (Harris 250)

Paul Radin argued that ethnography should only have “as much of the past and as much of the contacts with other cultures as is necessary for the elucidation of the particular period. No more” (Radin, as quoted by Hays 292).

Clark Wissler: “The future status of anthropology depends upon the establishment of a chronology for man and his culture based upon objective verifiable data” (Wissler, as quoted by Hays 290).

### ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Many of Boas’ conclusions, as well as those of his most noted students, have fallen out of favor as more anthropological work has been carried out. However, Boas and his students are responsible for taking anthropology away from grand theories of evolution and diffusion and refocusing its attention on the many different societies of the world and the great variety of cultural expression that characterizes them. Also, the interplay of countless factors that influence culture and culture change received more attention as a result of the work of Boas and his students.

The emphasis on the importance of data collection has paid dividends for modern scholars. The vast amount of information generated by their investigations has provided raw information for countless subsequent studies and investigations, much of which would have been lost to time had ‘oral cultures’ not been recorded. Though current fieldwork methods have changed since Boas set forth his ideas on participant observation, those ideas have formed the foundation for fieldwork methods among anthropologists in the U.S.

### CRITICISMS

Most of the criticism of historical particularism has arisen over the issue of data collection and fear of making overly broad theoretical pronouncements. Boas’ insistence on the tireless collection of data fell under attack by some of his own students, particularly Wissler. Some saw the vast amounts being collected as a body of knowledge that would never be synthesized by the investigator. Furthermore, if the investigator was reluctant to generate broad theories on cultural development and culture change, what was the point of gathering so much work in such detail?

Eventually, *salvage ethnography* was also abandoned in favor of ethnography dealing with modern processes such as colonization and globalization. Instead of asking people about their past, some anthropologists have found it more important to study the cultural processes of the present.

### BASIC PREMISES

Structuralism was predominately influenced by the schools of phenomenology and of Gestalt psychology, both of which were fostered in Germany between 1910 and the 1930s (Sturrock 2003: 47). *Phenomenology* was a school of philosophical thought that attempted to give philosophy a rational, scientific basis. Principally, it was concerned with accurately describing consciousness and abolishing the gulf that had traditionally existed between subject and object of human thought. Consciousness, as they perceived, was always conscious of something, and that picture, that whole, cannot be separated from the object or the subject but is the relationship between them (Sturrock 2003: 50-51). Phenomenology was made manifest in the works of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre among others.

*Gestalt psychology* maintained that all human conscious experience is patterned, emphasizing that the whole is always greater than the parts, making it a holistic view (Sturrock 2003: 52). It fosters the view that the human mind functions by recognizing or, if none are available, imposing structures.

Structuralism developed as a theoretical framework in linguistics by Ferdinand de Saussure in the late 1920s, early 1930s. De Saussure proposed that languages were constructed of hidden rules that practitioners ‘know’ but are unable to articulate. In other words, although we may all speak the same language, we are not all able to fully articulate the grammatical rules that govern why we arrange words in the order we do. However, we understand these rules at an implicit (as opposed to explicit)
level, and we are aware that we correctly use these rules when we are able to successfully decode what another person is saying to us (Johnson 2007: 91).

**Claude Levi-Strauss** (1908 – 2009) is widely regarded as the father of structural anthropology. In the 1940s, he proposed that the proper focus of anthropological investigations is on the underlying patterns of human thought that produce the cultural categories that organize worldviews hitherto studied (McGee and Warms, 2004: 345). He believed these processes did not determine culture, but instead, operated within culture. His work was heavily influenced by Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss as well as the Prague School of structural linguistics (organized in 1926) which include Roman Jakobson (1896 – 1982), and Nikolai Troubetzkoy (1890 – 1938). From the latter, he derived the concept of binary contrasts, later referred to in his work as **binary oppositions**, which became fundamental in his theory.

In 1972, his book *Structuralism and Ecology* detailed the tenets of what would become structural anthropology. In it, he proposed that culture, like language, is composed of **hidden rules** that govern the behavior of its practitioners. What makes cultures unique and different from one another are the hidden rules participants understand but are unable to articulate; thus, the goal of structural anthropology is to identify these rules. Levi-Strauss proposed a methodological means of discovering these rules—through the identification of binary oppositions. The structuralist paradigm in anthropology suggests that the structure of human thought processes is the same in all cultures, and that these mental processes exist in the form of binary oppositions (Winthrop 1991). Some of these oppositions include hot-cold, male-female, culture-nature, and raw-cooked. Structuralists argue that binary oppositions are reflected in various cultural institutions (Lett 1987:80). Anthropologists may discover underlying thought processes by examining such things as kinship, myth, and language. It is proposed, then, that a hidden reality exists beneath all cultural expressions. Structuralists aim to understand the underlying meaning involved in human thought as expressed in cultural expressions.

Further, the theoretical approach offered by structuralism emphasizes that elements of culture must be understood in terms of their relationship to the entire system (Rubel and Rosman 1996:1263). This notion, that the whole is greater than the parts, draws upon the Gestalt school of psychology. Essentially, elements of culture are not explanatory in and of themselves, but rather form part of a meaningful system. As an analytical model, structuralism assumes the universality of human thought processes in an effort to explain the “deep structure” or underlying meaning existing in cultural phenomena.

“...[S]tructuralism is a set of principles for studying the mental superstructure” (Harris 1979:166, from Lett 1987:101).

**LEADING FIGURES**

**Claude Lévi-Strauss**: (1908 – 2009) is unquestionably the founding and most important figure in anthropological structuralism. He was born in Brussels in 1908, and obtained a law degree from the University of Paris. He became a professor of sociology at the University of Sao Paulo in Brazil in 1934. It was at this time that he began to think about human thought cross-culturally when he was exposed to various cultures in Brazil. His first publication in anthropology appeared in 1936 and covered the social organization of the Bororo (Bohannan and Glazer 1988:423). After WWII, he taught at the New School for Social Research in New York. There he met Roman Jakobson, from whom he took the structural linguistics model and applied its framework to culture (Bohannan and Glazer 1988:423). Lévi-Strauss has been noted as singly associated with the elaboration of the structuralist paradigm in anthropology (Winthrop 1991).

**Ferdinand de Saussure**: (1857 – 1913) was a Swiss linguist born in Geneva whose work in structural linguistics and semiology greatly influenced Lévi-Strauss (Winthrop 1991; Rubel and Rosman 1996). He is widely considered to be the father of 20th century linguistics.

**Roman Jakobson** (1896 to 1982) was a Russian structural linguist. who was greatly influenced by the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and who worked with Nikolai Trubetzkoy to develop techniques for the analysis of sound in language. His work influenced Lévi-Strauss while they were colleagues at the New School for Social Research in New York.

**Marcel Mauss** (1872 – 1952) was a French sociologist whose uncle was Emile Durkheim. He taught Lévi-Strauss and influenced his thought on the nature of reciprocity and structural relationships in culture (Winthrop 1991).
Jacques Derrida (1930 – 2004) was a French social philosopher, literary critic and founder of deconstructionism who may be labeled both a “structuralist” and a “poststructuralist”. Derrida wrote critiques of his contemporaries’ works, and of the notions underlying structuralism and poststructuralism (Culler 1981).

Michel Foucault (1926 – 1984) was a French social philosopher whose works also have been associated with both structuralist and poststructuralist thought, more often with the latter. When asked in an interview if he accepted being grouped with Lacan and Lévi-Strauss, he conveniently avoided a straight answer: “It’s for those who use the label [structuralism] to designate very diverse works to say what makes us ‘structuralists’” (Lotringer 1989:60). However, he has publicly scoffed at being labeled a structuralist because he did not wish to be permanently associated with one paradigm (Sturrock 1981). Foucault largely wrote about issues of power and domination in his works, arguing that there is no absolute truth, and thus the purpose of ideologies is to struggle against other ideologies for supremacy (think about competing news networks, arguing different points of view). For this reason, he is more closely associated with poststructuralist thought.

KEY WORKS


METHODOLOGIES

Folk stories, religious stories, and fairy tales were the principle subject matter for structuralists because they believed these made manifest the underlying universal human structures, the binary oppositions. For example, in the story of Cinderella, some of the binary oppositions include good versus evil, pretty versus ugly (Cinderella versus her two stepsisters), clean versus dirty, etc. Because of this focus, the principal methodology employed was hermeneutics. Hermeneutics originated as a study of the Gospels, and has since come to refer to the interpretation of the meaning of written works.
ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Though there are few anthropologists today who would declare themselves structuralists, structuralism was highly influential. Work of the poststructuralist Pierre Bourdieu, particularly his idea of the habitus, laid the groundwork for agency theory. Structuralism also continued the idea that there were universal structuring elements in the human mind that shaped culture. This concept is still pursued in cognitive anthropology which examines the way people think in order to identify these structures, instead of analyzing oral or written texts.

CRITICISMS

Some concerns have been expressed concerning the epistemological and theoretical assumptions of structuralism. The validity of structural explanations has been challenged on the grounds that structuralist methods are imprecise and dependent upon the observer (Lett 1987:103). Lett (1987) poses the question of how independent structural analyses of the same phenomena could arrive at the same conclusions.

The paradigm of structuralism is primarily concerned with the structure of the human psyche, and it does not address historical change in culture (Lett 1987, Rubel and Rosman 1996). This synchronic approach, which advocates a “psychic unity” of all human minds, has been criticized because it does not account for individual human action historically.

Maurice Godelier incorporated a dynamic element into his structural analysis of Australian marriage-class systems and their relationship to demographic factors (Rubel and Rosman 1996:1269). He did so by incorporating Marxist ideas of structures representing an organized reality and by emphasizing the importance of change in society. Godelier took structuralism a step further with his examination of infrastructural factors. In structuralist thought, inherently conflicting ideas exist in the form of binary oppositions, but these conflicts do not find resolution. In structural Marxistic thought, the importance of perpetual change in society is noted: “When internal contradictions between structures or within a structure cannot be overcome, the structure does not reproduce but is transformed or evolves” (Rubel and Rosman 1996:1269).

Further, others have criticized structuralism for its lack of concern with human individuality. Cultural relativists are especially critical of this because they believe structural “rationality” depicts human thought as uniform and invariable (Rubel and Rosman 1996).

In addition to those who modified the structuralist paradigm and its critics exists another reaction known as poststructuralism. Although poststructuralists are influenced by the structuralist ideas put forth by Lévi-Strauss, their work has more of a reflexive quality. Pierre Bourdieu is a poststructuralist who “…sees structure as a product of human creation, even though the participants may not be conscious of the structure” (Rubel and Rosman 1996:1270). Instead of the structuralist notion of the universality of human thought processes found in the structure of the human mind, Bourdieu proposes that dominant thought processes are a product of society and determine how people act (Rubel and Rosman 1996). However, in poststructuralist methods, the person describing the thought processes of people of another culture may be reduced to just that—description—as interpretation imposes the observer’s perceptions onto the analysis at hand (Rubel and Rosman 1996). Poststructuralism is much like postmodernism in this sense.

Materialists would also generally object to structural explanations in favor of more observable or practical explanations. As Lett (1987) points out, Lévi-Strauss’ analysis of the role of the coyote as trickster in many different Native American mythologies rationalizes that the coyote, because it preys on herbivores and carnivores alike, is associated with agriculture and hunting, and life and death (Lett 1987:104) is thus a deviation from natural order, or abnormal. Lett further shows that a materialist perspective is reflected in Marvin Harris’ explanation of the recurrent theme of the coyote as trickster: “The coyote enjoys the status of a trickster because it is an intelligent, opportunistic animal” (Lett 1987:104).

Another reaction to structuralism is grounded in scientific inquiry. In any form of responsible inquiry, theories must be falsifiable. Structural analyses do not allow for this or for external validation (Lett 1987). Although these analyses present “complexity of symbolic realms” and “insight about the human condition,” they simply cannot be subjected to scientific scrutiny (Lett 1987:108-9).

SOURCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY
Marcel Mauss (1872 - 1950) was a French Sociologist and Anthropologist and nephew of Emile Durkheim.

The Gift
In 'The Gift', Mauss (1924) explores gift-exchanges in various cultures and highlights the reciprocal nature of gifts and the obligation of the receiver to repay the debt. The object that is given carries the identity of the giver, and hence the recipient receives not only the gift but also the association of that object with the identity of the giver.

Mauss describes the Maori hau, which means the "spirit of the gift". The hau demands that the gift be returned to its owner. In Polynesia, failing to reciprocate means losing mana, the person's spiritual source of authority and wealth. Gift-giving is thus a critical mechanism for creating social bonds.

Mauss describes three obligations:
- Giving: the first step in building social relationships.
- Receiving: accepting the social bond.
- Reciprocating: demonstrating social integrity.

Prosocial Gifts
Critics of Mauss point to prosocial behavior where no immediate exchange is made. Derrida describes four criteria for a free gift:
- There is no reciprocal giving back of a return gift
- The recipient does not perceive the gift as a gift or him/herself as a recipient
- The donor must not consider the gift as a gift
- The gift does not appear as a gift

Body techniques
Mauss describes 'techniques of the body' as highly developed body actions that embody aspects of a given culture. Techniques may also be divided by such as gender and class (for example in the manner of walking or eating).

These include such as eating, washing, sitting, swimming, running, climbing, swimming, child-rearing, and so on.

The techniques are adapted to situations, such as aboriginal squatting where no seats are available. Techniques are thus a 'craft' (Latin: habilis) that is learned.

The teaching of these methods is what embeds the methods and the teaching is embedded within cultures and schools of teaching. A pupil who becomes a teacher will likely teach what they are taught.

Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu developed the ideas further in habitus, the non-discursive aspects of culture that bind people into groups, including unspoken habits and patterns of behavior as well as styles and skill in body techniques.

See also
Norbert Elias

