

ARE INDIVIDUALS A PROBLEM FOR BRITISH STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONALIST ANTHROPOLOGY?

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Abstract.

In this paper, I consider the objection to British structural-functionalism that it is unable to deal with the significance of individuals. There are various ways in which individuals may pose a problem for it. I identify four ways, one of which is novel. This way is when someone does not appear to meet the official role requirements in an organization, which gives rise to the question of whether the anthropologist should posit an alternative structure of roles for the organization.

Keywords: *individuals, structural-functionalism, biological needs, role occupants, identity.*

Introduction

From the 1930s, if not slightly before, to the 1960s British social anthropology was dominated by a theory known as structural-functionalism. The theory in a simple form involves the following commitments:

- The different institutions of a society form a structure.
- Each institution functions to maintain that structure.

For example, a feudal society has its institutions of royalty, church, and army, and these institutions fit together in a certain way and function to sustain those complementary relationships. A number of objections have been made against structural-functionalism, one objection being that it does not take into account individuals.¹ I say “one,” but when the objection is examined in detail it is probably better to speak of several objections. Below, I present four of these, the third of which is novel, to the best of my knowledge.

Biological needs. Structural-functionalism is associated especially with A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and is sometimes contrasted with another kind of functionalism, associated especially with Bronislaw Malinowski. This other kind asserts that each human society has the same biological needs to fulfil and different societies fulfil these needs in different ways. One society has one set of institutions for meeting such needs as the need for food, for shelter, and more; while another society has another set of institutions. If you need another shelter soon, you might go to an agency which advertises rooms for rent. No such institutions are present in some of the societies which anthropologists study. But a society which did not meet these common needs would be unstable. This objection to structural-functionalism is that it ignores the individual as a person with biological needs, owing to their human nature, and instead focuses entirely on a collective structure and how it is maintained.

Malinowski actually directs this criticism at the French sociologist Émile Durkheim:

...who developed one of the fullest and most inspiring systems of sociology. It, however, was marred by certain metaphysical preconceptions and, above all, by the complete rejection not merely of introspective speculation, but also of any reference to the biological basis of human behaviour. (1960: 19)

But Durkheim was a major influence on British structural-functionalist anthropology, which sought to be a conceptually clearer and more empirically-grounded counterpart, and the words quoted would have been interpreted as critical of it. Below is Radcliffe-Brown trying to separate off the biological individual from the subject of anthropological study:

Human beings as individuals are objects of study for physiologists and psychologists. The human being as a person is a complex of social relationships. He is a citizen of England, a husband and a father, a bricklayer, a member of a particular Methodist congregation, a voter in a certain constituency, a member of his trade union, an adherent of the Labour Party, and so on. (1952: 194)

Change. The second objection is actually part of the more well-known objection that structural-functionalism cannot account for change. An objector has a list of things which need to be referred to in order to adequately account for change and which structural-functionalism cannot refer to and individuals is one of them, or some aspect of individuals is.

Structural-functionalism aspires to treat an individual in a role as replaceable. The anthropologist specifies structures of institutions and of roles within an institution, but in a structural-functionalist explanation, if one individual in a certain role performed an action, it is assumed that another individual in that role would do the same. The psychological differences between one occupant of a role and another and their consequences for a society are ignored. So the objection, more fully, is that in order to adequately account for change, one has to refer to individuals in such a way that they are not replaceable in the explanation and structural-functionalism does not allow for this.

The objection has been pressed most forcefully by philosopher of anthropology I.C. Jarvie. He considers a hypothetical case in which a change in religious beliefs affects where couples settle after marriage, from with the groom’s family (virilocal) to with the bride’s (uxorilocal). He writes:

Nonetheless, to explain the change of residence pattern we still have to account for the decisions of certain leaders of opinion to accept the new religion. And this cannot be done structurally. For, this kind of change is essentially an individual matter, the best approximation to an explanation of which we can so far hope is for one stated with situational logic. We might show how people were using the religion as a means to something (say, to strengthening ties with the white men)... (1967: 155)

It seems to me that in some circumstances, the structural-functionalist can account for this kind of change. The anthropologist specifies what is involved in the role of a religious leader in a certain society and the decision follows from that role specification and the assumption of its being met. For example, when two interpretations of a newly unearthed sacred text are plausible, it is a duty of that role to choose the interpretation of the text which generates the greatest economic benefits for the society and the evidence available clearly points in favour of one particular interpretation. One would expect any person selected for that role to favour that interpretation, but that interpretation requires a change in where couples settle. Where the structural-functionalist theory will clearly have problems, amongst other things, is when

¹ Marilyn Strathern alludes to the objection when, of structural-functionalist models of a society, she writes, “The resultant models were an attempt to discover what could be said about organization and regularity in social life, not an attempt to deny that people were individuals or events improvised.” (1990: 311-312; see also Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 86.)

important decisions for a society involve an individual in a role where the role specification provides much room for their own approach or when a person breaks from the norms associated with a role.²

Bizarre role occupants. One of the main tasks of the structural-functionalist is to describe the structure of a society under study. Another main task is to explain how that structure is sustained. Now structural-functionalist anthropology was developed for exotic societies, by mainstream Western standards, but it can also be applied “at home.” And here, if not elsewhere, the anthropologist can run into a problem. An anthropologist is conducting fieldwork within a certain organization, as if it were a little society. It comes with an official description of its structure, as many organizations do: its roles and its hierarchy. But the anthropologist finds that a certain individual seems out of place. What are they doing in that role? They seem too skilled for it or else they seem to lack the appropriate skills for it. (To capture the latter situation dramatically, they can’t jump through this hoop and they can’t jump through that, etc.: how did they get this far in the circus?) Structural-functionalism treats the individual in a role as a replaceable figure, but the surprising qualities of that individual give rise to a puzzle for the anthropologist, and that puzzle matters, even given the aims of structural-functionalism. It might well lead the anthropologist to consider the hypothesis that the structure of this society is actually something different to the official structure presented by the organization, and develop an alternative model of the structure.³ The real head of this organization does not necessarily have an office which says “Head of organization” or such a title!

Identity. A common concern about structural-functionalism is that it does not regard the individual as someone who forms their own identity in response to a series of local and wider pressures and trends.⁴ That individual identity is manifested in certain styles of behaviour, such as of dressing, walking, and writing. A structural-functionalist approach to style seems to require correlating such stylistic qualities with a position within a social structure. So, for example, analytic philosophers might write in a way which makes it difficult to access their main points because then a browser could take those, adapt them slightly, not refer to them, and still avoid plagiarism charges – the structure of relationships they are part of does not provide sufficient protection against this. Thus one makes it harder for a browser, without a deeper commitment to this tradition, to access these insights. This provides an explanation for difficult writing in a number of cases; but the thought that an analytic philosopher’s peculiar style is their unique identity in response to, say, parents who loved literature, learning philosophy at the height of Wittgenstein’s influence, and meeting Wilfrid Sellars is overlooked.

References

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² A.R. Radcliffe-Brown writes, “The effect of the impact of European culture, including the teaching of the Christian missionaries, is to weaken in some individuals the sentiments that attach them to their lineage. The disintegration of the social structure and the decay of the ancestral cult proceed together.” (1952: 164) Some individuals: he finds himself forced to refer to individual differences when addressing social change.

³ Of course, there is nothing novel about observations of a skill mismatch, in conversation, but I have not seen this point related to the project of describing social structure and how it might lead to alternative models.

⁴ Sally Haslanger tells us that there were three basic complaints directed at functionalism, helpfully flagging the issue of individual identity; but she bizarrely omits the charge that it was the handmaiden of colonialism. (She also does not register the contrast between Malinowskian functionalism, focused on the meeting individual needs, and structural-functionalism which takes the ultimate function of institutions to be the maintenance of a structure!)