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Anthropology short notes

Functionalism (Malinowski)

UPSC Civil Services (Main) Examination · Anthropology GS 1 · Anthropology GS 1 (Paper I)

(c) Functionalism (Malinowski); Structural-Functionalism (Radcliffe-Brown)

Short notes by official syllabus heading.

Revision notes for the Anthropology optional. Confirm thinkers and examples against standard texts and recent papers.

<https://wrapexams.com/upsc/mains-answers/anthropology-gs-1/functionalism-structural-functionalism/>

Functionalism**Definition**

The discipline has evolved from a "**Science of Man**" focused on the "primitive" to a global, reflexive discipline that addresses contemporary issues like Digital Anthropology, Medical Anthropology, and AI technology. As society changes, anthropology continues to adapt, fulfilling its role as a holistic framework for understanding human diversity and survival.

Thinkers

S.C. Roy (1871-1942) - First Indian Ethnographer Historical Particularism: Franz Boas (the "**Father of American Anthropology**") rejected universal laws, arguing that each culture has a unique history. He introduced the Four-Field Approach (Biological, Archaeological, Linguistic, and Cultural) to gather comprehensive empirical data.: The Golden Age of Fieldwork: Functionalism. Bio-cultural Functionalism: Bronislaw Malinowski pioneered Participant Observation, arguing that culture exists solely to satisfy biological and psychological needs. Structural Functionalism: A.R. Radcliffe-Brown applied an "**Organic Analogy**," viewing society as a system where institutions function like organs to maintain the stability of the social structure.: Structural and Psychological Turns. Structuralism: Claude Lévi-Strauss argued that human thought is patterned through binary oppositions (e.g., **Nature vs. Culture**) and that culture, like language, is a mental construct.

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Definition

Correction of Evolutionary Timelines: Molecular studies by Vincent Sarich and Allan Wilson demonstrated that the human-chimpanzee split occurred much later (approx. 5-8 mya) than previously thought. This placed Miocene fossils like Ramapithecus (12 mya) outside the human lineage.

Example / case study

A study of a local tribe that ignores the impact of global capitalism or state-led industrialization (such as the mining in the DRC or phosphate excavation on Banaba Island) fails to capture the true reality of that culture's survival.

Thinkers

Clifford Geertz (Interpretive Anthropology): Geertz focused on cognition and meaning. Heavily influenced by Max Weber's Verstehen and hermeneutics, he argued that humans are suspended in "webs of significance" they have spun themselves. Victor Turner (Symbolic Anthropology): Turner focused on social processes and action. Influenced by Max Gluckman and Arnold van Gennep, he examined how symbols move and work dynamically during crises and transitions.: Symbols as Vehicles vs. Operators. Geertz (Vehicles): Symbols are viewed as vehicles of culture that convey established ideas and orientations to decode what a society "tells itself about itself". Turner (Operators): Symbols are operators in social processes. They act as tools to prompt social action, resolve conflict, and guide individuals through status changes. Turner identified specific properties of symbols: Multivocality (many meanings), Condensation (packed meanings), and Polarization (sensory vs. ideological poles).: Thick Description vs. Social Drama. Geertz (Methodology): He championed "Thick Description," which involves providing a detailed account of behavior within its cultural context to explain not just what happened, but its deep intent and meaning (e.g., distinguishing a blink from a conspiratorial wink).

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Thinkers

A.R. Radcliffe-Brown - structural-functionalism: institutions function like organs to maintain social structure. Historical Particularism: Franz Boas (the "Father of American Anthropology") rejected universal laws, arguing that each culture has a unique history. He introduced the Four-Field Approach (Biological, Archaeological, Linguistic, and Cultural) to gather comprehensive empirical data.: The Golden Age of Fieldwork: Functionalism. Bio-cultural Functionalism: Bronislaw Malinowski pioneered Participant Observation, arguing that culture exists solely to satisfy biological and psychological needs. Structural Functionalism: A.R. Radcliffe-Brown applied an "Organic Analogy," viewing society as a system where institutions function like organs to maintain the stability of the social structure.: Structural and Psychological Turns. Structuralism: Claude Lévi-Strauss argued that human thought is patterned through binary oppositions (e.g., Nature vs. Culture) and that culture, like language, is a mental construct.

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