

Off the verandah? A puzzle from Malinowski and British social anthropology

Off the verandah. Bronislaw Malinowski initiated a revolution in British anthropology which requires every social anthropologist to do fieldwork by participating in the daily life of a society for an extended period, rather than just doing surveys. Below are notes identifying a puzzle.

A puzzling quotation. In *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Malinowski draws attention to a weakness of some earlier scientific fieldwork conducted by survey:

In certain results of scientific work—especially that which has been called “survey work”—we are given an excellent skeleton, so to speak, of the tribal constitution, but it lacks flesh and blood. We learn much about the framework of their society, but within it, we cannot perceive or imagine the realities of human life, the even flow of everyday events, the occasional ripples of excitement over a feast, or ceremony, or some singular occurrence. (1922: 17)

But British structural-functionalist anthropologists say social structure is their primary object of interest. That leaves a puzzle over why they should do fieldwork by participating.

The puzzle. The puzzle is composed of the following propositions, which look inconsistent:

- (i) It is a requirement that every anthropologist does fieldwork in which they participate in the way of life of a small society over a period of at least a year, rather than just doing surveys on the verandah of a colonial house – Malinowski introduced this.
- (ii) The anthropologist does not need to go beyond a survey on the verandah in order to learn about the structure of the society, says Malinowski.
- (iii) The British structural-functionalist social anthropology that emerged focused on types of social structure and problems to do with social structure.

Attempted solution 1: necessary for fools. There is some fieldwork advice not included in his founding text: “Finally, I asked Malinowski and was told not to be a bloody fool.” (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 240) A person can learn about the tribal social structure merely by doing a survey but only if they are not a fool and the likelihood is that they are.

Attempted solution 2: Radcliffe-Brown’s concept. British social anthropologists use a concept of social structure derived from A.R Radcliffe-Brown, which goes beyond what Malinowski means by “tribal constitution” and “framework,” and important features of it require fieldwork to detect. A social structure involves a set of persons and relationships connecting those persons, so that they are not a haphazard set (1952: 10). The relationships which Radcliffe-Brown mainly emphasizes are relationships of rights and duties, such as being forbidden to marry certain relatives (a duty not to do that) or to bear up the joking of certain relatives (a duty to do that).

References. Evans-Pritchard, E.E. (abridged by E. Gillies). 1976. *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Malinowski, B. 1922. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Radcliffe-Brown, A.R. 1952. *Structure and Function in Primitive Society. Essays and Addresses*. The Free Press: Glencoe, Illinois.