

Henrika Kuklick on the functionalist paradigm in British social anthropology

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Abstract. In Britain and also in France, arguments have been put forward against the claim that there are or have been paradigms in British social anthropology. But historian of anthropology Henrika Kuklicka supposes that there was a paradigm from the late 1920s to just before the 1960s. I raise an objection to her portrait of this research community and observe that her text implies two quite different replies.

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“—A debate that’s in no introductory guide

And yet it’s worldwide, worldwide!”

Introduction. Does Thomas Kuhn’s portrait of the development of science apply to British social anthropology? It was developed for the natural sciences but the question of whether it applies to the social sciences is near irresistible. In Britain and also in France, there have been denials that this discipline has or had paradigms in the relevant sense (Strathern 1987; see also Samuel 2012: 451). But was not the functionalist period one in which there was a paradigm? Historian of anthropology Henrika Kuklick characterizes the period in this way in an entry for *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*. She rather naughtily writes:

In the late 1920s, a rather different type of functionalism became the dominant paradigm among British social anthropologists, thereafter diffusing to

anthropologists elsewhere. (2010: 312)

I find it “natural” to propose this as a case of a paradigm outside the natural sciences, but I shall register a problem for Kuklick’s perspective and observe that she implies two different solutions to the problem. But to begin with, I think it is a good idea to do something which Kuklick does not do and consider what a paradigm is.

Defining “paradigm.” Kuhn famously uses the term in different ways. This is not my first time involving myself with the thorny issue of how to define it (see Edward 2020 [2012]). In an earlier paper, I more or less presented the following as a starting point:

(Initial definition) Something is a paradigm of social anthropology if and only if:

- (i) It is a set of general assumptions which a community of anthropologists studying human societies rely on.
- (ii) It is possible for there to be anthropologists who study human societies but do not rely on those assumptions – they are not essential to the discipline.

But in the earlier paper I actually wrote of culture rather than society at a crucial point (Edward 2020: 10) – a mistake in the current context of assessing British functionalism. I also said that we should allow for some exceptions to the generality requirement in (i). I am going to ignore that allowance below, which is probably irrelevant in the current context.

I also resisted adding a further condition proposed by an anthropologist (Strathern 1987: 281; Edward 2020: 13-14). However, this initial definition may well be too permissive. We are interested in to what extent Kuhn’s portrait applies, so we remember that within it a community of scientists in a normal period engages in puzzle-solving on the basis of shared assumptions. A build-up of unsolved puzzles leads to doubt about that framework of assumptions and a

revolutionary period is initiated, in which scientists search for a new framework. The widespread acceptance of such a framework within the research community initiates another normal period. Thus, on the basis of what Kuhn says, it makes sense to amend the definition above by proposing a further condition:

(Revised definition) Something is a paradigm of social anthropology if and only if it meets conditions (i) and (ii) above and this further condition:

- (iii) The set of assumptions enable puzzle-solving, in that there is consensus amongst anthropologists who share them on when a puzzle is solved.

One can conceive of watered-down versions of this condition, such as that the consensus is on when a proposed solution is worthy of public written evaluation. (We probably have that in large parts of analytic philosophy.) I shall just work with (iii) above.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to address the worry that Kuklick should not be interpreted in such Kuhnian terms. “Researchers often use the word ‘paradigm’ without thinking too carefully about its use and how it relates to that influential text, though loosely influenced by it” you might say. Well, she refers to Kuhn and she is very much involved with the question of to what extent the social sciences correspond to his portrait:

Since the 1960s, no grand theory has compelled collective effort among either anthropologists or sociologists...But many still insist that the social sciences ought to be guided by some dominant paradigm – which must represent a comprehensive scheme; their view accounts for the disciplines’ reluctance to repudiate functionalism definitively, and, indeed, for some significant recent efforts to rehabilitate it. (2010: 313-314)

It makes sense to examine her claims by working with the revised and more demanding

definition proposed above (or something much like it, if it needs a little more refinement).

An objection. Kuklick is better with defining “functionalism” than paradigm. She introduces her encyclopedia article by saying that, broadly speaking, “functionalism” refers to explanations of phenomena studied by the human sciences in terms of function. Later we encounter two familiar kinds of functionalism in British anthropology. There is Malinowski’s functionalism, which she introduces second, according to which all stable societies meet a common set of human needs, but they do so in different ways. In this society, if I need shelter, there are hostels, hotels, places where I can find a room to rent, etc., but another society may not have these institutions while having some way of meeting the need. Then there is Radcliffe-Brown’s structural-functionalism, according to which the different institutions of a given society form a structure and each functions to maintain that structure (or makes some contribution to that end if “each functions to maintain” sounds as if one is enough). Kuklick tells us that both figures took inspiration from the French thinker Durkheim.¹ She writes:

Durkheim’s anti-reductionist pronouncements served as rallying cries for anthropologists and sociologists, and had perhaps particularly strong force for the British social anthropologists who developed functionalism. We should note that their two founding figures, Bronislaw Malinowski and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, were joined in accepting Durkheim’s fundamental premises, notwithstanding their critiques of each other’s work (and the very real differences between them). Malinowski taught his students to repudiate Radcliffe-Brown’s ‘dangerous and one-sided... sociological determinism of culture’ and Radcliffe-Brown charged

¹ I wonder whether the French research which (surprisingly) denies that functionalism could ever be a paradigm has to do with disputes between Durkheimians and Foucaultians, which are difficult for outsiders to comprehend.

that Malinowski was not a genuine functionalist because he invoked the biological needs of individual human beings. (2010: 315)

An objection then to Kuklick's portrait is this: the divide between these two influential figures should prevent us from saying that researchers during the functionalist period of British anthropology had a paradigm, a functionalist paradigm, or there was "a dominant paradigm," to use her description.² (Presumably, it will be said that it does not count as a paradigm if it does not dominate a research community. I am going to skip past the issue of what to do if one starts with the impression of a single research community and then seems to spot two paradigms: should one say "Two communities" or "Two paradigms in one community" or something else?)

Suggested replies. Kuklick actually implies, or at least suggests, two different replies to the objection.

Common assumptions. In the material quoted in the previous section, she implies that the objection is to be overcome by identifying a set of assumptions shared by the two figures and calling that the paradigm. But there is a worry that Malinowskians can agree that a certain puzzle is solved while Radcliffe-Brownians would reject that solution and agree on some other solution. The puzzle of explaining the incest taboo might well be an example. The former group might appeal to the psychological needs of children, which ultimately arise from biology, while the latter would not (see Radcliffe-Brown 1949: 507). The worry more fully is: to achieve consensus over puzzle-solving, one has to go beyond the common assumptions of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown and these founding figures offer two different ways of doing so, which lead to different assessments of proposed solutions, undermining the portrait of one puzzle-solving

² The objection can potentially be pursued while granting that both are varieties of functionalism. See the fleshing out in the next section.

framework in the research community of British social anthropology.

Dismissing Malinowski. The first quotation from Kuklick in this paper was the following:

In the late 1920s, a rather different type of functionalism became the dominant paradigm among British social anthropologists, thereafter diffusing to anthropologists elsewhere (2010: 312)

Kuklick goes on to present that type of functionalism as Radcliffe-Brown's structural-functionalism. She writes:

For anthropologists and sociologists, the point of functionalist investigation was to identify the standardized habits that maintained the social organism... the 'more or less stable social structures' regulating individuals relations... (2010: 312)

Perhaps I have removed some slightly inconvenient material, but the other suggestion is to treat the pioneering Pole as not significant as a theorist in anthropology. Malinowski was important as a fieldworker and preparer of others going into the field, but not as a general theorist. "The community of British anthropologists was structural-functionalist with one exception, Malinowski, whom we can set aside, allowing us to say that there was a paradigm."

Final remarks. The previous arguments I have encountered against attributing paradigms to social anthropology are radical ones. The authors want to say that the very nature of this discipline does not allow for a paradigm in the relevant sense. I do not wish to endorse these extreme arguments. Without thinking too carefully about the matter I would just agree with Kuklick. But above I have raised an objection and noted that her text implies significantly different ways of dealing with it.

References

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