Basic Theories

Theories Overviews

WHY DO WE NEED THEORIES?

This is one of the first and most pertinent questions an anthropologist should ask himself before reading the theories in details. Let me ask you, why do you study anthropology? The copybook answer is anthropology studies human beings. And I am by choice or by chance in to the discipline to study human beings. A more refined answer is "to study human beings from every possible angles is anthropology." The idea of ANGLES is important and often we tend to overlook. Whatever anthropology we do, no matter how fascinating it is we always need to explain a phenomenon from different dimensions. The dimensions that are available to us and the dimensions which we can generate and/or add to the existing dimensions. The research process starts with exploring dimensions and ends with dimensions. To understand social world from every possible angles we need to look in to the existing angles, and be aware of the lenses through which we can look into the social world. Theories is one such arena where you can earn an understanding of the existing angles. Lets look into the theories briefly.

**EVOLUTIONISM**

19th Century Evolutionism:

The theory of Nineteenth-century Evolutionism claims that societies develop according to one universal order of cultural evolution. The theorists identified the universal evolutional stages and classified different societies as savagery, barbarian and civilization. The Nineteenth-century Evolutionists collected data from missionaries and traders and they themselves rarely went to the societies that they were analyzing. They organized these second-hand data and applied the general theory to all societies. Since Western societies had the most advanced technology, they put the societies at the highest rank of civilization.

The Nineteenth-century Evolutionists had two main assumptions that form the theory. One was that human minds share similar characteristics all over the world. This means that all people and their societies will go through the same process of development. Another underlying assumption was that Western societies are superior to other societies in the world. This assumption was based on the fact that Western societies were dominant because of their military and economic power against technologically simple societies.

The Nineteenth-century Evolutionists contributed to anthropology by providing the first systematic methods for thinking about and explaining human societies. Their evolutionary theory is insightful with regard to the technological aspect of societies. There is a logical progression from using simple tools to developing complex technology. In this sense, complex societies are more “advanced” than simple societies. However, this judgment does not necessarily apply to other aspects of societies, such as kin systems, religions and childrearing customs.

Contemporary anthropologists view Nineteenth-century Evolutionism as too simplistic to explain the development of various societies. In general, the Nineteenth-century evolutionists relied on racist views of human development, which were popular at that time. For example, both Lewis Henry Morgan and Edward Burnett Tylor believed that people in various societies have different levels of intelligence, which leads to societal differences. This view of intelligence is no longer valid in contemporary science. Nineteenth-century Evolutionism was strongly attacked by Historical Particularists for being speculative and ethnocentric at the early twentieth-century. At the same time, its materialist approaches and cross-cultural views influenced Marxist Anthropology and Neo-evolutionists.

**DIFFUSIONISM**

Diffusionism as an anthropological school of thought, was an attempt to understand the nature of culture in terms of the origin of culture traits and their spread from one society to another. Versions of diffusionist thought included the conviction that all cultures originated from one culture center (heliocentric diffusion); the more reasonable view that cultures originated from a limited number of culture centers (culture circles); and finally the notion that each society is influenced by others but that the process of diffusion is both contingent and arbitrary (Winthrop 1991:83-84).

Diffusion may be simply defined as the spread of a cultural item from its place of origin to other places (Titiev 1959:446). A more expanded definition depicts diffusion as the process by which discrete culture traits are transferred from one society to another, through migration, trade, war, or other contact (Winthrop 1991:82).

Diffusionist research originated in the middle of the nineteenth century as a means of understanding the nature of the distribution of human culture across the world. By that time scholars had begun to study not only advanced cultures, but also cultures of nonliterate people (Beals and Hoijer 1959:664). Studying these very diverse cultures created a major issue among scholars, which was how humans progressed from primeval conditions to superior states (Kuklick 1996:161). Among the major questions about this issue was whether human culture had evolved in a manner similar to biological evolution or whether culture spread from innovation centers by diffusion (Hugill 1996:343).

Two schools of thought emerged in response to these questions. The most extreme view was that there were a very limited number of locations, possibly only one, from which the most important culture traits diffused to the rest of the world. Evolutionism, on the other hand, proposed the "psychic unity of mankind", which argues that all human beings share psychological traits that make them equally likely to innovate. According to evolutionists, innovation in a culture, was considered to be continuous or at least triggered by variables that are relatively exogenous. This set the foundation for the idea that many inventions occurred independently of each other and that diffusion had little effect on cultural development (Hugill 1996:343).

During the 1920's the school of cultural geography at the University of California, Berkeley purposely separated innovation from diffusion and argued that innovation was relatively rare and that the process of diffusion was quite common. It generally avoided the trap of Eurocentric notion of the few hearths or one hearth origination of culture traits. The school of cultural geography combined idealism, environmentalism, and social structural explanations, which made the process of diffusion more feasible than the process of innovation (Hugill 1996:344).

Boas (1938) argued that although the independent invention of a culture trait can occur at the same time within widely separated societies where there is limited control of individual members, allowing them freedom to create a unique style, a link such as genetic relationship is still suspected. He felt this was especially true in socities where there were similar combinations of traits (Boas 1938:211). Boas emphasized that culture traits should not be viewed casually, but in terms of a relatively unique historical process that proceeds from the first introduction of a trait until its origin becomes obscure. He sought to understand culture traits in terms of two historical processes, diffusion and modification. Boas used these key concepts to explain culture and interpret the meaning of culture. He believed that the cultural inventory of a people was basically the cumulative result of diffusion. He viewed culture as consisting of countless loose threads, most of foreign origin, but which were woven together to fit into their new cultural context. Discrete elements become interrelated as time passes (Hatch 1973:57-58).

The American Lewis Henry Morgan infuriated his British contemporaries, when his research demonstrated that social change involved both independent invention and diffusion. He agreed with British sociocultural anthropologists that human progress was due to independent innovation, but his work on kinship terminology showed that diffusion occurred among geographically dispersed people (Kuklick 1996:161).

During the mid-twentieth century studies of acculturation and cultural patterning replaced diffusion as the focus of anthropological research. Ethnological research conducted among Native American tribes, even though influenced by the diffusionist school of thought, approached the study of culture traits with a more holistic interpretation. The concept of diffusion still has value in ethnological studies, but at best plays a secondary role in interpreting the processes of culture change (Winthrop 1991:84).

Recently there have been theoretical developments in anthropology among those seeking to explain contemporary processes of cultural globalization and transnational culture flows. This "anthropology of place" approach is not an attempt to polarize autonomous local cultures against the homogenizing movement of cultural globalization. Instead the emphasis of this line of research is to understand and explain how dominant cultural forms are "imposed, invented, reworked, and transformed." In order to do this, an ethnographic approach must be taken to study the inter-relations of culture, power, and place: place making, identity, and resistance. Anthropologists have long studied spatial units larger than "the local" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:6-7).

In spite of the fact that diffusion has its roots in anthropology, archaeology, and cultural geography, modern research involving the process of diffusion has shifted from these areas to agriculture business studies, education (Rogers and Shoemaker 1971), economic geography (Brown 1981), history (McNeill 1963), political science, and rural sociology. In all of these areas, except history, research involves observing societies, how they can be influenced to innovate, and predicting the results of such innovation (Hugill 1996:343).

Diffusion is well documented in the business and industrial world. The creation of copyright and patent laws to protect individual innovations, point to the fact that borrowing ideas is a decidedly human practice. It is often easier to copy an invention, than to create a new invention. Japanese business historians have been very interested in the role diffusion has played in the industrial development of Japan. Business historians give credit to the role diffusion has played in the development of industrial societies in the U.S. and continental Europe. It is hard to justify the view that diffusion in preindustrial societies was any less prevalent than it is in the industrialized societies of today (Hugill 1996:344).

Acculturation Kroeber (1948) stated that acculturation comprises those changes in a culture brought about by another culture and will result in an increased similarity between the two cultures. This type of change may be reciprocal, however, very often the process is assymetrical and the result is the (usually partial) absorption of one culture into the other. Kroeber believed that acculturation is gradual rather than abrupt. He connected the process of diffusion with the process of acculturation by considering that diffusion contributes to acculturation and that acculturation necessarily involves diffusion. He did attempt to separate the two processes by stating that diffusion is a matter of what happens to the elements of a cultures; whereas acculturation is a process of what happens to a whole culture (Kroeber 1948:425).

Acculturation, then, is the process of systematic cultural change of a particular society carried out by an alien, dominant society (Winthrop 1991:82-83). This change is brought about under conditions of direct contact between individuals of each society (Winthrop 1991:3). Individuals of a foreign or minority culture learn the language, habits, and values of a standard or dominant culture by the cultural process of acculturation. The process by which these individuals enter the social positions, as well as aquire the political, economic, and educational standards of the dominant culture is called assimilation. These individuals, through the social process of assimilation, become integrated within the standard culture (Thompson 1996:112).

Milton Gordon (1964) proposed that assimilation can be described as a series of stages through which an individual must pass. These three stages are behavioral assimilation (acculturation), structural assimilation (social assimilation), and marital assimilation of the individuals of the minority society and individuals of the dominant society. Although this proposal has been criticized , it does indicate that there is a continuum through which individuals pass, beginning with acculturation and ending with complete assimilation (Thompson 1996: 113).

Complete assimilation is not the inevitable consequence of acculturation, because value systems of the minority or weaker culture are a part of the entire configuration of culture. It may not always be possible for the minority culture to take over the complete way of life of the majority culture. Often a period of transition follows where the minority society increasingly loses faith in its own traditional values, but is unable to adopt the values of the dominant culture. During this transition period there is a feeling of dysporia, in which individuals in the minority society exhibit feelings of insecurity and unhappiness (Titiev 1958:200).

Acculturation and assimilation have most often been studied in European immigrants coming to the United States during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as minority groups already living in the United States. European "white ethnics" have experienced a higher rate of assimilation than nonwhite, non-European, and more recently immigrated groups. These studies have resulted in several important cross-cultural generalizations about the process of acculturation and assimilation (Thompson 1996:113).

According to Thompson (1996), these generalizations are as follows: First, dominant cultures coerce minorities and foreigners to acculturate and assimilate. This process is slowed down considerably when minorities are territorially or occupationally concentrated, such as in the case of large native minorities who often become ethnonationalistic. Second, acculturation must precede assimilation. Third, even though a minority may be acculturated, assimilation is not always the end result. Fourth, acculturation and assimilation serve to homogenize the minority group into the dominant group. The many factors facilitating or preventing this homogenization include the age of the individual, ethnic background, religious and political affiliations, and economic level (Thompson 1996:114).

**HISTORICAL PARTICULARISM**

Historical Particularism claims that each society has its own unique historical development and must be understood based on its own specific cultural context, especially its historical process. Historical Particularists criticized the theory of the Nineteenth-century Evolutionism as non-scientific and claimed themselves to be free from preconceived ideas. They collected a vast amount of first-hand cultural data by conducting ethnographic fieldwork. Based on these raw data, they described particular cultures instead of trying to establish general theories that apply to all societies.

The Historical Particularists valued fieldwork and history as critical methods of cultural analysis. At the same time, the anthropologists in this theoretical school had different views on the importance of individuals in a society. For example, Frantz Boas saw each individual as the basic component of a society. He gathered information from individual informants and considered such data valuable enough for cultural analysis. On the other hand, Alfred Kroeber did not see individuals as the fundamental elements of a society. He believed a society evolves according to its own internal laws that do not directly originate from its individuals. He named this cultural aspect superorganic and claimed that a society cannot be explained without considering this impersonal force.

Historical Particularism was a dominant theoretical trend in anthropology during the first half of the twentieth century. One of the achievements of the Historical Particularists was that they succeeded in excluding racism from anthropology. The Nineteenth-century Evolutionists explained cultural similarities and differences by classifying societies into superior and inferior categories. Historical Particualrists showed that this labeling is based on insufficient evidence and claimed that societies cannot be ranked by the value judgment of researchers.

FUNCTIONALISM

The theoretical school of Functionalism considers a culture as an interrelated whole, not a collection of isolated traits. The Functionalists examined how a particular cultural phase is interrelated with other aspects of the culture and how it affects the whole system of the society. The method of functionalism was based on fieldwork and direct observations of societies. The anthropologists were to describe various cultural institutions that make up a society, explain their social function, and show their contribution to the overall stability of a society. At the same time, this functionalism approach was criticized for not considering cultural changes of traditional societies. The theory of Functionalism emerged in the 1920s and then declined after World War II because of cultural changes caused by the war. Since the theory did not emphasize social transformations, it was replaced by other theories related to cultural changes. Even so, the basic idea of Functionalism has become part of a common sense for cultural analysis in anthropology. Anthropologists should consider interconnections of different cultural domains when they analyze cultures.

Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942, Poland-Britain-The United States)

Bronislaw Malinowski is credited with Functionalism, which explains a culture as an interrelated whole, not a collection of isolated traits. Based on his fieldwork in various areas of the world, particularly the Trobriand Islands in New Guinea, Malinowski established the theory of Functionalism. A culture is composed of many different elements, such as food acquisition, family relationships, and housing. Malinowski believed that all of these elements are connected and work together for one purpose, which is to meet the needs of individuals in the culture. In other words, culture exists to satisfy the basic biological, psychological, and social needs of individuals.

Malinowski is known for his psychological analysis. A classic example is his analysis on magic. In Trobriand Islands, magic was used for various purposes, such as to kill enemies and prevent being killed, to ease the birth of a child, to protect fishermen, and to ensure harvest. Malinowski hypothesized that magic is reliable in domains where there is a limited amount of scientific knowledge. Magic appears to work in these areas because people cannot handle situations with systematic knowledge. For example, the Trobriand Islanders did not practice magic when they fished inside a protected coral reef because they were able to predict catch and safety by weather and the conditions of the sea. In contrast, they did rely on magic when they went ocean fishing because it was difficult to predict unknown dangers and the amount of fish they might harvest. Based on this data, Malinowski argued that magic has a profound function in exerting human control over those dimensions that are otherwise outside of our element. The essential function of magic is to extend control over uncontrollable elements of nature and thereby reduce anxiety.

Malinowski is also known as a pioneer of fieldwork, which is intense and long-term research conducted among people in a particular community. He set criteria for fieldwork and brought this method to a fundamental element of the discipline. His criteria require anthropologists to actually live in communities and to acquire the language of the people among whom they are conducting their researches.

Alfred Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955, Britain)

Alfred Radcliffe-Brown is credited with Structural Functionalism, which analyzes particular social systems in a wider context of many different societies. Radcliffe-Brown was concerned with what keeps societies from falling apart. He identified similar customs in different societies and compared them in order to discover the customs’ inherent functions. Through this comparative method, he attempted to explain underlying principles that preserve the structure of each society.

For example, Radcliffe-Brown analyzed exogamous moieties in aboriginal societies of Australia, Melanesia and America. An exogamous moiety is a custom in which a population is divided into two social divisions and a man of one group must marry a woman of another. Since these three different aboriginal societies had almost no contact in history, it is surprising that they shared the custom of exogamous moieties. How can this phenomenon be explained? Radcliffe-Brown found that the two social divisions of exogamous moieties within each culture were named after a pair of animals or birds which are similar, such as coyote and wild cat, or eaglehawk and crow. He argued that these animal pairs represent opposing characteristics of a society, for example, friendship and conflict, or solidarity and opposition. According to Radcliffe-Brown, those aboriginal societies incorporate the dual divisions in their kin systems in order to keep the balance between these opposing characteristics. This balance is important for the stability of the whole society.

Radcliffe-Brown successfully explained many aspects of family structures that other anthropologists viewed as primitive customs. His analysis of social structure and function encouraged anthropologists to look at how a particular custom plays a role in maintaining social stability. At the same time, his analysis was criticized for not considering historical changes of traditional societies, especially those caused by Western colonialism.

**CULTURE AND PERSONALITY**

The theory of Culture and Personality explained relationships between childrearing customs and human behaviors in different societies. There were two main themes in this theoretical school. One was about the relationship between culture and human nature. The other was about the correlation between culture and individual personality.

The theory of Culture and Personality was based on Boas’ cultural relativism and Freud’s psychoanalysis about early childhood. If we premise that all humans are hereditarily equal, why are people so unique from society to society? The theoretical school answered this question by using Freud’s psychoanalysis: the differences between people in various societies usually stem from cultural differences installed in childhood. In other words, the foundations of personality development are set in early childhood according to each society’s unique cultural traits. Based on this basis, the theoretical school of Culture and Personality researched childrearing in different societies and compared the results cross-culturally. They described distinctive characteristics of people in certain cultures and attributed these unique traits to the different methods of childrearing. The aim of this comparison was to show the correlation between childrearing practices and adult personality types.

The theory of Culture and Personality was on the cutting edge when it emerged in the early 20th century. Its analysis of the correlation between childrearing customs and human behaviors was, at that time, a practical alternative to using racism explanations for analyzing different human behaviors.

**NEO EVOLUTIONISM**

The theory of Neoevolutionism explained how culture develops by giving general principles of its evolutionary process. The theory of cultural evolution was originally established in the 19thcentury. However, this Nineteenth-century Evolutionism was dismissed by the Historical Particularists as unscientific in the early 20th century. Therefore, the topic of cultural evolution had been avoided by many anthropologists until Neoevolutionism emerged in the 1930s. In other words, it was the Neoevolutionary thinkers who brought back evolutionary thought and developed it to be acceptable to contemporary anthropology.

The main difference between Neoevolutionism and Nineteenth-century Evolutionism is whether they are empirical or not. While Nineteenth-century evolutionism used value judgment and assumptions for interpreting data, the new one relied on measurable information for analyzing the process of cultural evolution. The Neoevolutionary thoughts also gave some kind of common ground for cross-cultural analysis. Largely through their efforts, evolutionary theory was again generally accepted among anthropologists by the late 1960s.

**THE SYMBOLIC AND INTERPRETATIVE SCHOOLS**

The major focus of symbolic anthropology is studying the ways in which people understand and interpret their surroundings as well as the actions and utterances of the other members of their society. These interpretations form a shared cultural system of meaning, i.e., understandings shared, to varying degrees, among members of the same society. (Des Chene 1996:1274). Symbolic anthropology studies symbols and the processes (such as myth and ritual) by which humans assign meanings to these symbols in order to address fundamental questions about human social life (Spencer 1996:535). According to Geertz, man is in need of symbolic "sources of illumination" to orient himself with respect to the system of meaning that is any particular culture (1973a:45). This shows the interpretive approach to symbolic anthropology. Turner states that symbols instigate social action and are "determinable influences inclining persons and groups to action" (1967:36). This shows the symbolic approach to symbolic anthropology.

Symbolic anthropology views culture as an independent system of meaning deciphered by interpreting key symbols and rituals (Spencer 1996:535). There are two major premises governing symbolic anthropology. The first is that "beliefs, however unintelligible, become comprehensible when understood as part of a cultural system of meaning" (Des Chene 1996:1274). The second major premise is that actions are guided by interpretation, allowing symbolism to aid in interpreting ideal as well as material activities. Traditionally symbolic anthropology has focused on religion, cosmology, ritual activity, and expressive customs such as mythology and the performing arts (Des Chene 1996:1274). Symbolic anthropologists also study other forms of social organization that at first do not appear to be very symbolic, such as kinship and political organization. Studying these types of social forms allows researchers to study the role of symbols in the everyday life of a group of people