

Malinowski's contribution to ethnography and fieldwork



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Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) is arguably the most acclaimed anthropologist in the realm of ethnography and fieldwork of the twentieth century. He is recognised as one of the original authors of contemporary social anthropology and reinvented the practice of intensive fieldwork. This was due to his contributions to the field, but it is possible that his influence was partially due to his personality and ego. In 1908 Malinowski achieved a doctorate in physics and mathematics but turned his focus to anthropology, and in 1910 he started his postgraduate studies in London. Three years later, Malinowski was hired by R. G. Marett who was travelling to Australia.

Malinowski then went on to take three trips to New Guinea; the first trip he stayed for 6 months visiting the Mailu of Toulon, the following trips he visited the Trobriand Islanders for 11 and then 12 months. Malinowski was amongst the first anthropologists to conduct intensive fieldwork; 'A typical piece of intensive work is one in which the worker lives for a year or more among a community [...] and studies every detail of their life and culture; in which he comes to know every member of the community personally'[1](Kuper, 1973). Malinowski's most influential contributions to anthropology were his "Theory of Needs" and his innovative way of conducting research; therefore I will evaluate how valuable these contributions were to ethnography and fieldwork.

The Theory of Needs follows Malinowski's functional approach where he argues that 'culture exists to meet the universal biological, psychological and social needs of an individual'[2]. He suggested that for every basic human need there is a cultural response and that every aspect of a culture is either a direct or indirect response to a basic need. Malinowski wrote in

1944 ' every culture must satisfy the biological system of need' and ' every cultural achievement that implies the use of artefacts and symbolism is an instrumental enhancement of human anatomy'[3]. This theory gained much praise from scholars at the time and has continued to be instrumental in social anthropology today. Richards wrote " Malinowski's concept of culture [...] was one of his most stimulating contributions to the anthropological thought of his day" (1957)[4]. Malinowski's theory of culture is not without its' critics; for instance in the same article, Richards goes on to point out that Malinowski's ' revolutionary' definition of culture, ' culture, comprises inherited artefact, goods, technical process, ideas, habits and values' (1931), is not that different from Tylor's 1871 definition ' culture is a complex whole which included knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs and all other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society'[5](Barrett, 2009)[6]. Therefore Malinowski's contribution to ethnography was not as innovative as proclaimed to be, as Tylor had already instigated the idea of culture being a ' whole' with many complexities. Although, Malinowski puts more emphasis on the ' wholeness' of culture compared to, Tylor, who focused more on the complexity. It's arguable that Malinowski extended the idea of culture to include a wider variety of subjects that are more fitting to contemporary culture. This is demonstrated by Geertz (1973) concept of culture " the symbolic dimensions of social action - art, religion, ideology, science, law, morality, common sense"[7]. This is evidence of how Malinowski has caused inclusion of more essentially modern phenomenon; such as looking at material culture and reaches further than the limitation of highbrow culture.

One criticism of Malinowski is that he generalised his finding from Trobriand, a small archipelago off the east coast of New Guinea, to all other societies and cultures in the world. It is quite a brave, or naive, assumption that aspects of culture identified by Malinowski while researching a specific indigenous group are applicable to every culture across the miscellaneous world; especially as he did not conduct any fieldwork outside of New Guinea. This suggests that Malinowski's theory of culture may be oversimplified and lack validity. It has been suggested that Malinowski used Trobrianders as a case study while globally shared culture was an abstract general case; but Nadel (1957) pointed out that there are remarkable similarities between them[8].

Another criticism of Malinowski's approach is due to the nature of the theory, which relies on the audience's ability to find a function for a behaviour, it is difficult to disprove; which in turn means it cannot be validated entirely. Fortes reminds us that Malinowski often said he would write a book on Trobriand kinship but he never did; Fortes suggested this was because he could not identify any type of ' kinship system'[9]. Besides the extreme reductionist essence of the theory, it's arguable that culture is in fact formed through the integration of beliefs and behaviours; however, it cannot be understood by merely pulling out random elements and proposing functions for them. While he offered a new perspective on the concept of culture, Malinowski's contribution to ethnography is limited. " His ethnographic triumph was based upon a novel perspective" (Kuper, 1973)[10].

Malinowski also owes his fame to the techniques he administered and advocated in his fieldwork. He formed basic rules on how to conduct <https://assignbuster.com/malinowskis-contribution-to-ethnography-and-fieldwork/>

fieldwork; stay long enough, learn the native language, mix with the natives, try understand the indigenous point of view, record detailed aspects of the indigenous life and practices, keep a field diary and to draw distinctions between direct observations and narratives provided by informants and one's own interpretation. Although he was applauded for his ability to live like the natives and separate himself from the outside world (Barrett, 2009); Malinowski's Diary (1967), which was published after his death, revealed that he was not as integrated into the Trobriand as he led people to believe. Instead, he had paid members of the Trobrianders to become his informants, and met them in his own hut rather than visiting them in their homes (Barrett, 2009), reducing any genuine rapport and insight. This method can result in demand characteristics as the indigenous people may 'put on a show' for the western researchers, which undermines his findings. Additionally, he did not invest in the Trobriand natives for human interaction or any social needs; instead, he actually spent an extraordinary amount of his time with European missionaries and traders that passed through. This demonstrates a real lacking in Malinowski's efforts into building a rapport with the natives; which is fairly contradictory to the academic work he published. This raises questions of his work that relied on this fieldwork. Furthermore, Thornton and Skalnik (1993) stated that Malinowski's theories were developed before he conducted any fieldwork, "In reading [...] [his earlier work] we must keep in mind Malinowski's dictum, repeated throughout his published work, that for social science, theory creates facts, not fact theories"[11]. This continues to draw scepticism towards Malinowski's concept of culture, as the theory was conceived from his fieldwork whereas, in reality, he used the Trobrianders as a device to

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validate his already established theory. Thornton and Skalnik stated; " the question that defined Malinowski fieldwork emerge clearly during the period of his most intense theoretical investigations before leaving Europe"[12].

Although Malinowski may not live up to his name as the pioneer of modern intensive fieldwork, where ethnographer should make every effort to build a rapport with those they are researching, the principles he established make a useful contribution to ethnography and fieldwork.

In conclusion, Malinowski contribution to ethnography and fieldwork was constructive in principle rather than contents. When looking in depth into Malinowski's work while it provided an original concept of culture that sparked the interests of many ethnographers, although the foundation of this theory is partially fabricated. Similarly, the rules Malinowski proposed for fieldwork offered a progressive new way of conducting research that has been beneficial to anthropology and the social sciences; however, Malinowski himself did not fulfil the methods he urged others to use in the way he claimed. Malinowski's work may have been flawed, and perhaps even wrong, but his work resulted in a rise in interest in ethnography and his documented methods were significant to the field. His theories were questionable and his methods in his fieldwork were invalid, due to the exaggeration of his own adherence to them, but his body of work was influential in the development of ethnography study and in fieldwork methods. Therefore, Malinowski's lasting legacy and influence on the field of anthropology has a far more valuable contribution, in the sense of the techniques of research and proposed concepts, than the substance of his work.

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