

UNIT II: Theories of Social and Cultural Anthropology

Module 4: Diffusionism

Objectives

After going through this module, one will be able to:

- understand the meaning of diffusion;
- know the causes stimulating diffusion and the types of diffusion;
- critically examine the contributions of each schools of diffusion;
- have a clear idea why diffusionism is more acceptable than unilineal evolutionism; and
- know the drawbacks of diffusionism.

Summary

The anthropologists who believed that customs and practices are spread from one culture to another are diffusionists. They arose against the nineteenth century unilineal evolutionists. In the present module, the concept of diffusionism in Anthropology is discussed in its three schools – British school, German school and American school. The British diffusionists explained the contemporary primitive societies as the results of degeneration from a high estate one conferred upon them by Egypt. German diffusionists held that diffusion may take place over great distances and culture traits may disperse in complexes. The American diffusionists are also interested in the concern of culture contact and culture circles instead of evolutionary stages. These theorists preferred careful historical-geographical analysis of the relationships between cultures and culture areas to the speculative history of the evolutionists. In modern Anthropology the concern for historical reconstruction and the debate between diffusionism and evolutionism has largely given way to different kinds of study of social structure and historical process.

Text

Introduction

The nineteenth century unilineal evolutionist scheme was criticized by some anthropologists. In America and Britain, some professionals perceived inadequacies in classical social evolution. The greatest objection raised against them involved the ethnographic data used by them. They were criticized for being ethnocentric in their judgments, that there was no proof of evolutionary stages, no proof that the reconstructions were accurate, and that they generalized far too readily. The critics asserted that the psychic unity concept was obviously wrong because there was a wide

range in human responses to the same situation. The evolutionists ignored the processes of diffusion and migration largely. In the early part of the twentieth century several schools of thought emerged which maintains that societal change occurs when societies borrow cultural traits from one another. This view is known as diffusionism. Cultural knowledge regarding technology, economic ideas, religious views, or art forms spreads, or diffuses, from one society to another.

Types of Diffusion

Throughout human history cultures have never been truly isolated and so contact between neighbouring groups has always existed and has extended over vast areas. Diffusion may be direct, indirect or forced.

Direct diffusion: Diffusion is direct when two cultures trade, intermarry or wage war on one another.

Indirect diffusion: Diffusion is indirect when items move from group A to group C via group B without any firsthand contact between A and C. In this case, group B might consist of traders or merchants who take products from a variety of places to new markets. Or group B might be geographically situated between A and C, so that what it gets from A eventually winds up in C, and vice versa.

Forced diffusion: Diffusion is forced when one culture subjugates another and imposes its customs on the dominated group.

Basic postulates

- Any cultural group will adopt a culture trait of other cultural group, only when it would be meaningful and useful either economically or socially or both.
- In the course of diffusion, culture trait may not remain in original form, but changes can take place in it due to different environments.
- Process of diffusion of culture traits always follow from a developed culture into an underdeveloped culture.
- Process of diffusion may create culture change in groups adopting culture of other groups. Sometimes borrowed culture traits get assimilated easily, but sometimes, they are responsible for many changes.
- Lack of transport and communication facilities, ocean, river, mountain, desert etc., operates as obstacles in cultural diffusion.

Major contributions of Diffusionists

Three schools have made diffusion basic to their formulation and study of cultural dynamics. They are the English group composed of Elliot Smith, W.J.Perry and their followers, the German-Austrian culture-historical school, founded by F.Graebner and E.Foy and Pater W Schmidt and the American group associated with Franz Boas, Kroeber, Sapir, Spier, Lowie and others.

British School of Diffusion

The British school of diffusionism derived its theory from research on ancient Egypt. Smith and Perry were specialists in Egyptian culture and had carried out research in Egyptology for a number of years. From this they concluded that all aspects of civilizations, from technology to religion, originated in Egypt and diffused to other cultural areas. The main figures behind this school are Elliot Smith and W.J.Perry.

Grafton Elliot Smith (1871-1937): He was an Australian anatomist and surgeon of high reputation who had gone to Egypt to pursue anatomical studies on mummies. He was so impressed with the Egyptian culture and technology that he concluded that Egypt was literally the cradle of civilization which spread out to the rest of the world. According to him, civilization was so special a combination of traits that it could not have been invented more than once. He contended that the complex of irrigation agriculture, sun worship, pyramids, mummification---all of which could be found in New World societies in the Andes and Meso-America---was proof of the great chain of diffusion from Egypt. His emphasis on sun worship and large stone monuments gave the names heliocentric or heliolithic to his school.

William J Perry (1887-1949): He was a school headmaster and author of the book **Children of the Sun** (1923). Perry's work was widely read and generally believed by the public.

To explain the view that some cultures no longer had cultural traits from Egypt, they resorted to an ethnocentric view that some cultures had simply become degenerate. That is, in contrast to the civilized world, the lesser developed peoples had simply forgotten the original ideas borrowed from Egypt.

German Diffusionism

The German school of diffusionism differed somewhat from that of the British. Schmidt and his followers argued that several early centers of civilization had existed, and that from these early centers cultural traits diffused outward in circles to other regions and peoples. This view is referred to in German as the kulturkreise (culture circles) school of thought. In examining why some primitive societies did not have the characteristics of

civilization, the German school, like the British diffusionists, argued that these peoples had simply degenerated. Thus, diffusionists' views, like the unilineal evolutionary views, represent ethnocentric perspectives of human societies outside the mainstream of Western civilization.

Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904): He was founder of anthropogeography or cultural geography. According to Ratzel, the most important consideration was to discover from where cultural traits came and where they went. Ratzel felt that culture traits may become simplified or elaborated in their course of diffusion or migration, depending upon the local conditions and relative sophistication of local technology. According to Ratzel, every similarity cannot be taken as proof of historical connection because objects of material culture must possess certain features in order to have any utility. For example, a canoe paddle needs a blade, and an arrow head or a spear must have a point. If however, there are other similarities which are not related to use they serve as proof of historical relationship. Thus if paddles have similar incised ornamentations, or spears have feathers attached to their shafts, this cannot be accidental but they certainly imply borrowing or migration, even though respective cultures may be widely separated in time and space. Ratzel called this principle as Formgedanke or 'Criterion of Form'.

Leo Frobenius (1873-1938): Leo Frobenius, a student and colleague of Ratzel, took the idea of diffusion several steps further. According to him historical connections implied much more than transmission of single culture traits, because whole culture complexes were often involved. Thus, he asserted that migration was an important factor of explanation than diffusion in explaining cultural similarities. He thus added another criterion of form other than Ratzel's Formgedanke. He called it as Geographical Statistics. His geographical statistics meant that one should count the number of similarities. Ratzel's criterion of form and Leo Frobenius geographical statistics were vigorously combined in the strategy of Kulturekreise School, whose main figures were Graebner and Father Wilhelm Schmidt.

Graebner (1877-1934): Graebner, a museum curator at Germany, applied the culture circle and culture strata idea on a world basis. The two basic rules, accepted by both Graebner and Schmidt in connection to culture circle and culture strata, were as follows:

- i) Criterion of Form as called by Graebner or Criterion of Quality as termed by Schmidt. It states that similarities between two culture traits which do not automatically emerge out of nature, material purpose of the traits, should be interpreted as resulting from diffusion, regardless of the distance which separates the two instances.

- ii) Criterion of Quantity (as called by both): It states that the probability of historical relationship between two items increases as the number of additional items showing similarities increase.

Father Wilhelm Schmidt (1868-1954): Schmidt was born in Australia in 1868. Being a follower of Graebner, they both applied the Criteria of Form or Quality and Criteria of Quantity to divide the culture of the world in different strata and circles. Schmidt was responsible for the final elaboration of the developmental scheme also employed by Graebner and Frobenius. They postulated that a few original cultures spread out from the point of origin in time and through space like ripples on water to produce all world culture. To the ripple effect of the culture growths they gave the name culture circles, which provided the title by which the Austro-Germans are best known: Kulturekreisschule, or culture circle school.

American School of Diffusionism

Franz Boas was the founder of American School of Diffusionism. Clark Wissler and Alfred Kroeber were his devout followers. It is historical in its approach, stressing field research and restricted reconstructions of history rather than the comparative studies, on a world-wide basis, that characterize the two preceding points of view.

Franz Boas (1858-1942): Boas became a vigorous opponent of the unilineal evolutionists. He maintained that these nineteenth-century schemes of evolution were based on insufficient empirical evidence. He proposed that all anthropologists do rigorous, scientifically based fieldwork to collect basic ethnographic data. Boas's fieldwork experience and his intellectual training in Germany led him to conclude that each society has its own unique historical development. This theory came to be known as historical particularism. It maintains that each society must be understood as a product of its own history. This view led Boas to adopt the notion of cultural relativism, the belief that each society should be understood in terms of its own cultural practices and values. One aspect of this view is that no society evolved higher than another. Thus, we cannot rank any particular society above another in terms of degree of savagery, barbarity, or civility. Boas called for an end to the use of these derogatory, ethnocentric terms.

Clark Wissler (1870-1947): Wissler pointed out that neighbouring cultures are alike, and he called an area of similar cultures a culture area. He made no attempt to explain the cause of similarity beyond the historical fact of diffusion within a limited region and the common subsistence base of an area. His first culture area scheme for North America was based on food regions. In addition to its application to museum exhibits, Wissler found the area concept useful in organizing his books on Indian cultures. Wissler also plotted what he called the culture center, that area with the greatest concentration of the most

typical traits of the whole region. Wissler also attempted to delineate “universals” of culture, which are classes of culture traits that all cultures possess.

Alfred Kroeber (1876-1960): Kroeber was the dean of American anthropology. According to him, individuals were unimportant in understanding culture change and other cultural phenomena and that cultures could be understood only in terms of interacting cultural patterns and historical events. Those patterns or configurations in effect controlled individuals. Kroeber was also a configurationist. He sought a means of ordering data or classifying or characterizing societies by their basic patterns. The idea behind configurationism is that each society has a cluster of characteristics that mark it as different from all others. Kroeber also added new dimensions to the culture area concept by correlating environmental conditions with native American cultures.

Limitations and strengths of diffusionism:

Early diffusionists views were based on erroneous assumptions regarding humankind’s innovative capacities. Like the unilineal theorists, they maintained racist assumptions about the inherent inferiority of different non-Western peoples. The diffusionists assumed that some people were not sufficiently innovative to develop their own cultural traits.

Another limitation of the diffusionists approach is its assumption that cultural traits in the same geographical vicinity will inevitably spread from one society to another. Anthropologists find that diffusion is not an inevitable process. Societies can adjoin one another without exchanging cultural traits.

However, diffusionism as a means of understanding societal development does have some validity. For example, diffusionism helps explain the emergence of the classical civilizations of Egypt, Greece, Phoenicia, and Rome. These peoples maintained continuous contact through trade and travel, borrowing many cultural traits from one another, such as writing systems.

Conclusion

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century anthropology there was an important debate between the diffusionists theorists of evolution or independent invention. Evolutionary theorists held that universal psychological features had generated similar inventions in different parts of the world, while diffusionists believed that important cultural elements had been in very few parts---or even in only one part---of the world and had spread outwards from there by diffusion. These theorists preferred careful historical-geographical analysis of the relationships between cultures and culture areas to the speculative history of the evolutionists. In modern anthropology the concern for historical reconstruction and the debate between diffusionism and evolutionism has largely given way to different kinds of study of social structure and historical process, though

acculturation studies maintain an interest in the processes whereby cultural elements may be transferred from one group to another, and the manner in which such elements are transformed and adapted to their new context.

Transcript

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Glossary

Cultural Relativism: The view that cultural traditions must be understood within the context of a particular society's responses to problems and opportunities.

Cultural universals: Essential behavioral characteristics of humans found in all societies.

Culture area: A culture area is defined on the basis of distribution of culture traits, and is a geographic area where the population shares many common characteristics such as related language, common artistic traditions, similar features of social organization, and so on.

Culture center: The point of greatest concentration of the most typical traits of the culture area.

Culture circle: English translation of *Kulturreise*, the area or location of a complex of culture traits in the usage of the Austro-German diffusionists.

Historical Particularism: An approach to studying human societies in which each society has to be understood as a unique product of its history.

FAQs

1) What is heliocentric or heliolithic school?

Ans. The British Diffusionist school is known as heliocentric or heliolithic school. G E Smith's emphasis on sun worship and large stone monuments gave the names heliocentric or heliolithic to this school.

2) What does *Kulturreise* mean?

Ans. *Kulturreise* is a German word which means culture circles.

3) What type of cultural traits generally diffuses from one society to another?

Ans. Cultural knowledge regarding technology, economic ideas, religious views, or art forms spreads, or diffuses from one society to another.