

Brown and Pritchard

Radcliffe-Brown argued that social structures were “just as real as are living organisms” and that social structure was “the set of actually existing relations, at a given moment of time, which link together human beings”. He differentiated between his own approach, in which social structure encompassed “all social relations of person to person” and “the differentiation of individuals and of classes by their social role,” and that of Evans-Pritchard, whom he saw as using the term “to refer only to persistent social groups” in his 1940 ethnography of the Nuer.

Evans-Pritchard’s ethnography was the best known example of “descent theory,” in which the structural-functionalists argued that segmentary lineages formed the basis for the societies, most of which were in Africa, that they presented as examples. Lineages were shown to unite and divide along blood lines. Their argument thus posited lineal underpinnings for kinship and political organization. What mattered to the individuals who comprised these systems, they argued, was related to the composition of the groups over time rather than laterally, in the present.