

The Problem of Equifinality in Archaeology

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Introduction

Archaeology went through a period of theoretical/methodological debate after 1960. About the nature of archaeological inquiry and whether we can know anything at all regarding the past human societies. Some scholars proposed that archaeology has to be either anthropology or a systemic discipline in order to become scientific. For archaeology to achieve the goal of knowing past societies some scholars wished it to be a mere ideographic discipline while others thought that the past can not be known for certain, and therefore, archaeology could only be hermeneutic or an interpretive discipline (for conspectus see Johnson 2002).

The purpose of this paper is to track the debate and show how it led to the conception of equifinality, meaning that there is “no way to test absolute between alternatives” (Johnson 2002:99). The following part of the paper will evaluate the conception of equifinality in relation to archaeological practice.

Background to the Problem of Equifinality

Traditional vs New Archaeology

In 1960s, some archaeologists were dissatisfied with how archaeology was conducted. They thought archaeology was descriptive of sites and cultural materials which were found, but which did not explain and provide systemic view of those societies of the past. The growing need was for archaeologists to be able to understand the past environmental and cultural processes which led to cultural evolution. The solution for this problem was therefore to find various scientific methods and mechanisms which could be used to get into the past and understand the then existing communities which are today dead.

Although Lewis Binford (1972; also see Johnson 2002) is credited for having started this movement, anthropologist Leslie White is known to have already called for the science of culture. He had argued that:

The basic assumptions and techniques which comprise the scientific way of interpreting reality are applicable equally to all of its phases, to the human social, or cultural, as well as to the biological and the physical (White 1971: 6).