



SYM 101

Sociological Concepts

Unit : 4

Topic – Social structure Part II

Content

Merton's Views on Social Structure

Durkheim's Views on Social Structure

Radcliffe-Brown's Views on Social Structure

Evans-Pritchard Views on Social Structure

Robert Merton: Social Theory and Social Structure, 1975

- Notion of social structure is polyphyletic and polymorphous.
- Merton's concept of social structure is best understood through his **structural-functionalist perspective**, which, unlike some of his predecessors (like Talcott Parsons), he sought to refine and make more empirically testable through his **middle-range theories**.
- For Merton, social structure refers to the **patterned and enduring arrangements of social relationships, roles, and institutions that influence individual behaviour and social events**. It provides the **framework** within which individuals act and interact.

Emile Durkheim: Rules of Sociological Method, 1895

- Emile Durkheim was greatly attracted to organic analogy. Émile Durkheim, one of the founding fathers of sociology, viewed social structure as an **objective, external reality that constrains and shapes individual behavior**. His understanding is deeply rooted in his concept of "**social facts**" and his analysis of **social solidarity**.
- For Durkheim, social structure is not merely the sum of individuals; it's a **distinct reality that exists above and beyond individuals**, possessing its own coercive power.

Emile Durkheim: Rules of Sociological Method, 1895

- He famously argued that society is made up of **"social facts"** – ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that are external to the individual and endowed with a power of coercion. These social facts, such as laws, moral rules, customs, religious beliefs, and institutions (like the family or education system), constitute the essence of social structure. They are the **"skeleton" or "framework" of society** that individuals are born into and that shapes their lives.

Emile Durkheim: Rules of Sociological Method, 1895

- Durkheim primarily explored social structure through his analysis of social solidarity, which refers to the bonds that tie individuals to society. He distinguished between two main types of social structure, each characterized by a different form of solidarity:
- **Mechanical Solidarity:** Found in simpler, traditional societies with a low division of labor. Here, social structure is characterized by homogeneity and collective consciousness. Individuals are very similar in their work, beliefs, and values, leading to a strong, pervasive "collective conscience" (shared norms and values). The structure is segmentary, meaning society is made up of similar, self-sufficient units (like clans or villages), bound by strong collective sentiments. Laws in such societies are often repressive, designed to punish offenses against the strong collective conscience.

Emile Durkheim: Rules of Sociological Method, 1895

- **Organic Solidarity:** Prevalent in complex, modern industrial societies with a high division of labor. Here, social structure is characterized by heterogeneity and interdependence. Individuals perform specialized tasks and have diverse beliefs, but they are bound together by their mutual reliance on one another to meet their needs. The structure is organized and differentiated, much like the interdependent organs in a living body. Laws in these societies tend to be restitutive, aiming to restore social relations rather than merely punishing. The collective conscience still exists but is more abstract and less pervasive, allowing for greater individual autonomy.
- In essence, Durkheim's understanding of social structure highlights its coercive and external nature, its role in maintaining social order and cohesion, and its evolutionary transformation from simpler, homogeneous forms to complex, differentiated ones driven by the division of labor. He saw social structure as a powerful force shaping individual lives, rather than merely being a product of individual actions.

Radcliffe Brown: Structure & Function in Primitive Society 1952

- Social structure is something we can see through our senses.
- “Social Structure are as real as individual organisms”.
- Basic part of social structure is person.
- There are 2 aspects to social structure:
 - All social relations of person to person.
 - Differentiation of individuals and of classes by their social role.

Evans- Pritchard: The Nuer, 1940

- Social structure is understood in terms of relation between groups.
- He examined the territorial sections which formed the political system of Nuer, in the absence of centralised political authority.
- His work on the Nuer challenged prevailing assumptions that centralized political authority (like kings, chiefs, or formal governments) was necessary for the maintenance of social order. Instead, Evans-Pritchard demonstrated how a complex and seemingly “acephalous” (headless) society could achieve remarkable stability and cohesion through a sophisticated, decentralized social structure primarily based on **kinship, particularly the segmentary lineage system, and territorial divisions.**

Evans- Pritchard: The Nuer, 1940

- Crucially, the Nuer lacked any formal government, chiefs, or judicial institutions that could enforce laws or mediate disputes from a position of authority. There were no designated rulers or permanent political offices.
- Order was maintained not through coercion from above, but through the balance of power inherent in the segmentary lineage system. Disputes (especially blood feuds) were regulated by the threat of escalating conflict, the need for compensation (cattle payments), and the mediation of "leopard-skin chiefs." These were not true chiefs but ritual specialists who could mediate disputes, perform rites to cleanse homicide, and help negotiate compensation, but they had no coercive power.



Thankyou