



SYM 101

Sociological Concepts

Unit : 4

Topic – Social structure Part III

Content

Levi-Strauss' views on Social Structure

Edmund Leach's views on Social Structure

S.F. Nadel's views on Social Structure

Talcott Parsons' views on Social Structure

Levi Strauss: Structural Anthropology, 1972

- Claude Lévi-Strauss, a central figure in **structural anthropology**, had a distinctive understanding of social structure that diverged significantly from empiricist or functionalist views (like those of Radcliffe-Brown or Durkheim). For Lévi-Strauss, social structure is not an immediately observable empirical reality, but rather an **abstract model that exists in the human mind** and is inferred by the anthropologist through the analysis of cultural phenomena.
- His approach, known as **Structuralism**, was heavily influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure's structural linguistics. Just as a linguist studies the underlying rules (grammar, syntax) that enable language (langue) to be spoken (parole), Lévi-Strauss sought to **uncover the unconscious, universal mental structures that underpin diverse cultural expressions**.

Levi Strauss: Structural Anthropology, 1972

The 'Model': The true social structure resides at a deeper, unconscious level of the human mind. It's a logical construct, a model that the anthropologist builds to explain the coherence and patterning of seemingly disparate cultural phenomena (myths, kinship systems, rituals, culinary practices, art).

A 'Grammar' of Culture: Just as a language has a grammar that speakers follow without consciously knowing all its rules, cultures are governed by underlying mental structures that individuals unconsciously utilize in their social interactions. The anthropologist's task is to uncover this grammar.

Levi Strauss: Structural Anthropology, 1972

- **Observation vs. Experimentation (on Models):**
- **Observation:** The initial, empirical stage of fieldwork, collecting raw data on actual social relations and cultural practices (e.g., documenting marriage patterns, recording myths). This is what you see on the surface.
- **Experimentation (on Models):** The analytical, intellectual stage where the anthropologist constructs abstract, logical models from the observed data. They then experiment with these models (mentally manipulating elements, comparing them across contexts) to uncover deeper, unconscious structures that explain the observed patterns. The goal is to move from the empirical reality to the underlying logical principles.



Levi Strauss: Structural Anthropology, 1972

- **Conscious vs. Unconscious Character of Models:**
- **Conscious Models:** These are the explicit rules, norms, and explanations that people within a society give for their own behavior or social organization (the "insider's view" or "folk models"). They are often idealized or simplified and serve to perpetuate social practices.
- **Unconscious Models:** These are the true "social structures" Lévi-Strauss sought. They are the deeper, hidden, logical principles and binary oppositions that actually govern social behavior and cultural forms, operating outside the awareness of the society's members. The anthropologist's task is to discover these more fundamental, universal structures.

Levi Strauss: Structural Anthropology, 1972

- **Mechanical vs. Statistical Models:**
- **Mechanical Models:** Occur when there's a nearly perfect, direct correspondence between a social rule/model and the actual behavior in a society. This is common in smaller, rigid societies where rules are strictly adhered to. The model and the reality operate on the same scale.
- **Statistical Models:** Occur when there's a discrepancy between ideal rules and actual behavior, or when behavior is influenced by many variables. This is typical in larger, more complex societies. The model describes the frequency or probability of behaviors, rather than a direct, deterministic link. The model and the reality operate on different scales.

Edmund Leach: Political Systems of Highland Burma, 1984

- **Edmund Leach (1910-1989)**, a prominent British social anthropologist, was a significant figure who bridged and often critiqued both British structural-functionalism (like Radcliffe-Brown) and French structuralism (like Lévi-Strauss). One of his key contributions was his nuanced understanding of the relationship between ideal social rules and actual social behavior, famously articulated through his distinction between jural rules and statistical norms.
- **Jural rules** refer to the idealized, prescriptive rules, laws, and norms that a society says it operates by. These are the explicit statements of how people should behave, the rights and obligations that are formally recognized, and the principles that are publicly upheld. **Statistical norms**, in contrast, refer to the actual patterns of behavior that are empirically observed in a society. These are the ways people actually behave, which may or may not perfectly align with the jural rules.



S.F. Nadel: Theory of Social Structure:1957

- For Nadel, social structure is an abstract network of social relationships. He argued that these relationships are best understood by analyzing the roles that individuals play within a society. A role, for Nadel, is a standardized way of acting that is "allocated to individuals by the norms of society."
- He saw social structure as the totality of these roles, interconnected and patterned, without necessarily needing to consider the specific individuals who occupy them. He viewed it as the "outer aspect" or "framework" of society, relatively stable and enduring, that allows us to predict behavior and understand how a society is put together, even as the specific individuals performing these roles change.

S.F. Nadel: Theory of Social Structure:1957

Essentially, Nadel provided a more rigorous, formal way to analyze social structure by focusing on the system of roles and their interdependencies, making it a central analytical tool for understanding social organization. He combined the theories of Levi Strauss and Radcliffe Brown.

From Radcliffe-Brown: Nadel adopted the idea that social structure is about observable, patterned social relationships and is crucial for understanding social order.

He agreed that these relationships are organized around roles. However, he departed from Radcliffe-Brown's view that structure is directly observable, arguing instead that it's an abstraction from observation.

S.F. Nadel: Theory of Social Structure:1957

From Lévi-Strauss: Nadel shared the idea that social structure is ultimately an abstract model or a conceptual tool for analysis, not a concrete, empirical entity. He valued the search for underlying patterns. However, he rejected Lévi-Strauss's emphasis on unconscious mental structures and the idea that social structure had nothing to do with empirical reality. Nadel insisted that his abstract models must still be testable against observable data.

Parsons: An Outline of Social System, 1961

- For Parsons, the **structure of a social system** is made up of **institutionalized patterns of social interaction, roles, and norms**. These are the relatively stable and enduring aspects of society that guide and constrain individual behavior.
- He emphasized that society is a complex **system of interrelated parts**, where each part (like the family, economy, or political system) performs specific **functions** that contribute to the overall **stability and equilibrium** of the whole.



Thankyou
