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Structuralism

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Structuralism is a catchall term for a set of explanatory approaches or paradigms in the social sciences that emphasize the causal force of the relations among elements in a system or of emergent properties of their patterning. The character of the elements themselves (beyond what conditions their relations) is viewed as arbitrary and of no explanatory bearing. Various structural approaches have at times been popular in linguistics, psychology, anthropology, and sociology. In the latter two fields, distinct forms developed that can both be traced back to Émile Durkheim, while sociology has also produced strains of structuralism influenced by Georg Simmel. Arising from Durkheim and Simmel as well has been the programmatic contention that in structuralism alone will be found a basis for distinguishing sociology from other disciplines.

Anthropological structuralism achieved celebrity in the third quarter of the twentieth century through the writings of Claude Lévi-Strauss. He argued that structural factors pattern our cultural expressions so as to make them resonate with us beneath awareness. His explanatory strategy first involved reducing expressive objects (e.g., artwork or mythological stories) to *contrastive structures* in which some elements were opposed to others. These structures were then argued to be similar in form to (or otherwise influenced by) an abstract picture of the social structure in which they were produced. The formal correspondence produced a resonance that explained why particular expressive objects were enjoyed and repetitively consumed. Methodologically, Lévi-Strauss followed Prague School linguists who saw meaning as conveyed structurally by contrasts among sound elements, as well as Ferdinand de Saussure's suggestion that meaning arose from relations among essentially arbitrary linguistic elements. Substantively, Lévi-Strauss followed Durkheim's suggestion in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* and in *Primitive Classification* (written with Marcel Mauss) that certain cognitive constructs have the same form as elements of social life.

For example, in *Tristes Tropiques* Lévi-Strauss reduced the face paintings of the Caduveo of Brazil to a pattern that is diagonally sectioned, defining two dimensions of contrast such as we see in playing cards. The two dimensions played symmetry off against asymmetry to achieve a striking effect unique to the Caduveo among surrounding tribes. To explain this, Lévi-Strauss argued that the Caduveo faced a particular social structural problem that their neighbors had solved. A system of castes which exchanged marriage partners within themselves exerted disintegrative pressures on Caduveo society, pressures reduced in surrounding tribes by marriage rules that forced exchanges across caste lines. This produced a social symmetry that balanced the hierarchic asymmetry of castes and thus held these tribes together. The Caduveo were too snobbish to marry across caste lines, argued Lévi-Strauss, but they produced the same balance of symmetry and asymmetry in their face paintings, which he interpreted as a cultural solution to a social structural problem. In this analysis, both the cultural product and the social structure were reduced to contrastive relations between symmetric and asymmetric features, with social factors influencing cultural phenomena.

In Lévi-Strauss's later work on Amerindian myths (*Mythologiques*), the influence of social structure dropped out and myth was analyzed as an elaborate self-organizing system reflecting fundamental structuring habits of the human mind. The stories that myths told, which often seemed surreal, were viewed as less important to listeners than the harmonies that derived from

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logical relations among properties of the creatures, artifacts, or incidents that the myths included. It was these harmonies that caused myths to please people, and thus to be told over and over even when they lacked intelligible narrative structure. Lévi-Strauss argued that ‘‘savage minds’’ employed different principles in constructing myths from those we use in stories – ones that were entirely novel and heretofore unimagined. In his decoding of myths, the reduction to contrastive structures was retained, but the explanation of their pattern took a path similar to the generative grammar being formulated in linguistics by Noam Chomsky, looking to features of the human brain rather than social structure.

This revolutionary work soon came under attack. It was seen as too systematic and scientistic by some scholars in the humanities (e.g., Derrida 1978; for an overview, see Culler 1975), whose critiques were instrumental in launching poststructuralism and postmodernism as intellectual currents. At the same time, some anthropologists and sociologists (e.g., Harris 1968; Schneider 1993) criticized it as a form of self-validating idealism that depended upon dubious interpretive methods and unlikely cognitive mechanisms. It never propagated as a method.

In sociology, structuralism has had a longer, more varied, and less meteoric career. One strand of structural analysis follows Durkheim and Mauss in viewing *expressive culture* (which differs from *instrumental culture* – such as our tools – in being relatively free of practical constraints) as determined by social structure. Another carries forward Simmel’s view of social structure as having formal properties that condition behaviors well beyond the domain of expressive culture. They join in viewing social structure as the source of what Durkheim called *social facts*, that is, causal currents that generally operate outside the awareness of social actors.

The attempt to uncover structural determinants of expressive culture has been handicapped by disagreement among sociologists and anthropologists over the precise meaning of social structure. Without consensus over the important dimensions along which social structure varies, not to speak of measures thereof, scholarship has been eclectic and has not given rise to organized research traditions. Two examples must suffice.

In *The Birth of the Gods*, sociologist Guy Swanson argued that the structure of relations among organized groups in society determined how the spiritual world was conceptualized. His approach modified Durkheim’s argument in *Elementary Forms* to make it more amenable to testing. Using anthropological sources for a sample of world societies, Swanson showed, for instance, that the concept of a ‘‘high god’’ directing lesser spiritual agents occurred with frequency only in societies with a significant number of hierarchically organized ‘‘sovereign groups,’’ each having jurisdiction over an array of human affairs. Societies with lesser numbers of such groups believed either in unorganized spiritual forces or in multiple, competing divinities. Thus the structure of socio-political organization was shown to determine relative monotheism within the cultural domain.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas looked to different aspects of social structure in explaining why some cultures or subcultures enjoy rituals while others find them hollow. Drawing on comparative case studies, Douglas hypothesized that impermeably bounded groups divided among many ranked statuses favored ritual, whereas more permeable groups with few ranked statuses viewed ritual as empty, opting for individually crafted or spontaneous ceremonials that were seen as more authentic. Thus important aspects of cultural style were argued to be determined by variation in social structure.

If this Durkheimian strand of structuralism has devoted itself largely to explaining variation in expressive culture, the Simmelian strand has taken a more systematic approach to defining and mapping social structure, and used the result to explain a wider range of social behavior. The main objective is to show how well-defined properties of social structures (or occupancy of particular positions within them) constrain behavior. The structures range from small-scale friendship or work groups, mapped sociometrically, to entire societies, viewed in terms of specific structural properties.

Network theories, for instance, use features of social structure such as the comparative intimacy of social relationships, the proportion of weak to strong ties among individuals, and the relative frequency of bridging ties among groups, to explain an array of social phenomena ranging from

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the capacity of communities to mobilize politically to the comparative catholicity of cultural tastes. An interesting feature of network theories has been their suggestion that occupants of positions that are connected to other positions in similar ways should behave similarly (Burt 1982). The explanatory power of the principle of structural equivalence is only now being explored.

A somewhat different approach was taken by Blau (1977), who viewed the skeleton of social structure as composed of the different dimensions along which people are differentiated from one another. Among these might be wealth, education, gender, religious confession, political party, and so on. Societies vary in the number of dimensions involved in drawing distinctions (their heterogeneity) and the tendency of dimensions to be ranked (their inequality). They also vary in the degree to which positions allow for interaction with diverse others (the relative intersection of dimensions) and the degree to which ranking on one dimension predicts ranking on others (relative consolidation of dimensions). Blau explores many features of social life that are dependent upon these variables, as well as on the proportions of the population distributed into differentiated groups and rates of mobility among them. For instance, greater intersection of dimensions seems to decrease the likelihood of intergroup conflict.

Bridging this approach and the one derived from Durkheim, DiMaggio (1987) argues that the tendency of societies to view expressive culture as divided among distinct genres is determined by such structural features as social heterogeneity, the prevalence of weak ties, and the relative complexity of role structure in a society. DiMaggio also notes that the relative consolidation of status dimensions within the society determines its tendency to see genres as ranked and their mixing as a species of cultural pollution. Less consolidation leads to less stratification of genres and consequently less concern with their mixing. DiMaggio's theory draws upon symbolic interaction as well as Durkheimian and Simmelian strands of structuralism, and connects with structuralist arguments that were central to Goffman's sociology of culture.

Programmatic structuralism advances the claims of Durkheim and Simmel that the integrity of sociology as a scientific discipline depends upon establishing a realm of causation distinct from those explored by psychology or economics. Among contemporary sociologists, this position has been most forcefully argued and illustrated by Black (1976, 2000). Neither Durkheim nor Simmel, he argues, had the strength of their convictions, since both consistently relied on individual psychologistic explanations despite their evident concern with sociology's disciplinary integrity. All classical and most modern sociology, suggests Black, is psychological, teleological, and individualistic. Its focus is on understanding people rather than understanding social life, with the consequence that it is not really sociological. To finally become sociological, sociologists must replace their interest in people with an interest in social life and how it can be explained structurally.

Black's structural theory attempts to explain the behavior of law as a property of social life. Law, taken to be governmental social control, can be viewed as a quantitative variable. For instance, social life is more regulated by law as the average social distance among individuals increases. Law's "direction" influences its quantity as well. More law flows downward from higher ranking positions in social structures than flows upward, and more flows outward from positions more densely connected to those less densely connected. The greater the vertical and horizontal distance between two positions, the greater the proportion of downward and outward law in comparison with inward and upward. In practice this means that lower ranking and more peripheral litigants succeed in court less frequently against higher ranking and more central litigants, with the imbalance directly proportional to their positional distance. Like DiMaggio, Black shows how these structural effects play out in a wide range of human interaction, connecting his structural analysis to what Goffman called the interaction order.

The above examples illustrate again the lack of agreement among sociologists over how to define social structure. Were consensus reached, problems of measurement would still plague structuralist theorizing, since many of its propositions will be hard to test unless and until metrics are established that allow comparisons across the important dimensions of social structure. Put somewhat differently, a successful structuralism must be able to assign to particular positions an

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absolute location at the intersection of multiple dimensions of social structure, rather than, as is most often the case today, assigning a relative location along only one dimension. Until this methodolgical problem can be solved, structuralist theorizing is apt to remain suggestive rather than establishing the core of a purified sociology.

A much more detailed and somewhat broader view of structuralism is available in Turner (1998), who includes an array of sociologists who have made anatomizing social structure and analyzing the processes by which it is reproduced over time the subject of scrutiny.

SEE ALSO: Culture; Deconstruction; Networks; Paradigms; Poststructuralism; Poststructuralism (Cultural Aspects)

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