

STRUCTURALISM

Structuralism states that **human culture is just an expression of the underlying structures of the human mind**. It is shaped by **pre-programmed code of human mind**. Structuralism asserts humans act not because of where we live or other social factors, but **because of the actual structure of the human mind**.

Influences:

Structuralism was predominantly influenced by **Gestalt psychology**. Gestalt psychology **maintained that all human conscious experience is patterned**. Gestalt psychology is a school of thought that looks at the human mind and behavior as a whole. When trying to make sense of the world around us, Gestalt psychology suggests that we do not simply focus on every small component. Instead, our minds tend to perceive objects as part of a greater whole and as elements of more complex systems. This school of psychology played a major role in the modern development of the study of human sensation and perception. The adage "**whole is greater than the sum of its parts**" is often used to summarise the viewpoint of gestalt psychology definition.

Structuralism developed as a theoretical framework in linguistics by **Ferdinand de Saussure in 1920s and 1930s**. De Saussure proposed that **languages were constructed of hidden rules that practitioners know but are unable to articulate**. In other words, though we may all speak the same language, we are not fully able to articulate the grammatical rules of the language. However, we understand the rules and hence are able to understand and speak the language.

CLAUDE LEVI STRAUSS (FATHER OF STRUCTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY)

Structural Anthropology (Book):

To Levi-Strauss, **culture was only a means of communication, a system of transmission of meanings that held society together as a system of exchange**.

Anthropology examines the unconscious foundations of social life: "**Anthropology draws its originality from the unconscious nature of collective phenomena**"



Levi Strauss is of opinion that:

- i) Language and culture are homologous
- ii) Language and culture are analogous
- iii) Language and culture are structural

He said that **like language, kinship, marriage, and other manifestations of culture are communication system**. He proposed that culture, **like language, is composed of hidden rules that govern the behavior of its practitioners**. What made culture unique and different from one another are the hidden rules participants understood but are unable to articulate. Thus, the goal of structural anthropology is to identify these rules.

In any society, **communication operates on three different levels**: communication of women, communication of goods and services, communication of messages. Therefore, kinship studies,

economics, and linguistics approach the same kinds of problems on different strategic [that is, methodological] levels and really pertain to the same field.

In 1940s he proposed that proper focus of anthropological investigation was on **underlying pattern of human thought that produce cultural categories**. He believed these processes were not deterministic of culture but instead operated within culture. He gave the **concept of 'BINARY OPPOSITION'** which is fundamental to this theory.

In this definition, there are **3 fundamental properties of human mind**:

- *People follow rules*
- *Reciprocity is the simplest way to create social relationships*
- *A gift binds both giver and recipient in a continuous social relationship.*

Such **social structures, according to Levi Strauss, mirrors cognitive structures**, the way in which mankind thinks and understands. **(We think in the form of Binary opposites).**

The structuralist paradigm in anthropology suggest that the structure of human thought process is same in all cultures, and that these mental processes exists in form of binary opposition. **Some of these opposition include hot-cold, male-female, culture-nature and raw-cooked.** Structuralist argue that **binary opposition are reflected in various cultural institution – Kinship, art, religion, ritual.** Binary opposites differ from society to society and are defined in a particular way that is logical to its members for example shoes are “good” when you wear them outside but “bad” if you put them on the table; role of anthropologist is to understand these rules to interpret the culture.

The basis of the structural anthropology of Lévi-Strauss is the idea that the human brain systematically processes organised, that is to say structured, units of information that combine and recombine to create models that sometimes explain the world we live in, sometimes suggest imaginary alternatives, and sometimes give tools with which to operate in it. The task of the anthropologist, for Lévi-Strauss, is not to account for why a culture takes a particular form, but to understand and illustrate the principles of organisation that underlie the onward process of transformation that occurs as carriers of the culture solve problems that are either practical or purely intellectual.

Examples of Binary Opposites

- Good vs Evil,
- Black vs White,
- Boy vs Girl,
- Peace vs War,
- Civilised vs Savage,
- Democracy vs Dictatorship,
- First world vs Third world,
- Domestic vs foreign/alien,
- Articulate vs inarticulate ,
- Young vs Old,
- Man vs Nature,
- Protagonist vs antagonist,
- Action vs inaction,
- Motivator vs observer,
- Empowered vs victim ,
- Man vs Woman,
- Good looking vs Ugly,
- Strong vs weak,
- Decisive vs indecisive,
- East vs West,
- Humanity vs technology,
- Ignorance vs wisdom

This search for the underlying structures of social life led Lévi-Strauss to explore three principal areas: systems of classification, kinship theory, and the logic of myth.

LEVI STRAUSS AND KINSHIP SYSTEM

Moiety: In explanation of moiety systems – Levi Strauss says that **moiety systems reflect the human mind's predisposition to think in terms of binary opposition**. Clearly, moiety system involves binary opposition, you are born into one of 2 groups, and you marry someone in other.

The problem with Levi Strauss's explanation of moieties is that he is postulating a constant (i.e. human mind's supposed dualism) to account for a cultural feature that is not universal. Moiety systems are found in only a relatively small number of societies.

He also analyzed kinship terminology. He said that elementary structure or unit of kinship on which all systems are built is a set of 4 types of organically linked relation- brother/ sister, husband/wife, father/ son, mother's brother/ father's sister.

Incest taboo: In his book entitled “**Elementary Structure of kinship**”, Levi Strauss holds the view that regarding incest taboo, it has been empirically established that it appears in every society, though specific rules differ from society to society or culture to culture. Incest taboo depends upon the property of human mind to think in opposites. The most fundamental dichotomy to be recognized for man to become human and to develop culture is that between self and others. Only when this distinction is made, a true symbolic communication is possible.

According to him incest taboo is concerned with exchange of women. Among animals, mating is random and promiscuous but incest taboo, by its very nature, dictates on ordered exchange of women, and thus also institutes marriage rules.

Alliance theory: In his book, “**Elementary Structure of Kinship**”, Levi Strauss gave alliance theory in opposition to what is called descent theory, which was put forth by British anthropologist (Radcliff Brown) and was the dominant theory in kinship studies till then. The emphasis of descent theory was on the transmission of property, office, ritual complex and rights and obligations across the generation (either in father’s or mother’s line or both) which produces solidarity among the members of the group related by the ties of consanguinity. Lineage was seen as a corporate group, property holding and organizing labor on the lines of blood ties. In this set of ideas, marriage was secondary. Since one could not marry one’s sister or daughter, because of the rules of incest taboo, one married from another group. The primary objective of marriage was the procreation of the descent group.

Levi Strauss’s alliance theory brought marriage to the center. **The function of marriage was not just procreative.** It was far from important, for it led to the building of a string of relation between groups, respectively, called the wife givers and wife takers. In this context the concept of incest taboo acquires a central place. It is the ‘**pre-social**’ **social fact**, if society is a social fact, which explains and account for a number of other social facts, the fact that explains society, its emergence and functioning, is incest taboo.

For Levi Strauss it is the ‘cornerstone’ of human society. **The logical outcome of the prohibition of incest taboo is a system of exchange.** It is not only the negative aspect of the rule of incest taboo that needs to be recognized, as was the case with descent theorist. What was significant to Levi- Strauss was positive aspect- it is not only that I do not marry my sister, but I also give her in marriage to another man whose sister then I marry. **Sister exchange creates a ‘federation’ between exchanging groups.**

LEVI STRAUSS ON TOTEMISM

Levi Strauss Totemism was published in French in 1962. **Totemism refers to an institution, mostly found among tribal community, where member of each of its clan consider themselves as having descended from a plant, or animal or any other animate or inanimate objects, for which they have a special feeling of veneration which leads to the formation of a ritual relationship with that object.** The plant, animal or any other object is called ‘totem’, the word totem Levi Strauss says, is taken from the Ojibwa, a tribe in North America. The members who share same totem constitute a ‘totemic group’. People have a special reverential attitude towards their totem- they abstain from killing and/or eating it, or they may sacrifice and eat it on ceremonial occasions; death of the totem may be ritually mourned; grand celebrations take place in some societies for the multiplication of totems; and totems may be approached for showering blessing and granting long term welfare. In other words, the totem becomes the center of beliefs and ritual action.

Lévi-Strauss offers a critique of the explanations that had been (and were) in vogue at that time. Firstly, **he rejects the thesis that the members of the American school** (Franz Boas, Robert Lowie, A.L. Kroeber) put forth, according to which the totemic phenomena are not a reality sui generis. **In other words**, totemism does not have its own existence and laws; rather it is a product of the general tendency among the ‘primitives’ to identify individuals and social groups with animal and plant worlds. Lévi-Strauss finds this explanation highly simplistic.

He also **criticises the functional views of totemism**; for instance, Durkheim’s explanation that totemism binds people in a ‘moral community’ called the church, or Malinowski’s idea that the Trobrianders have totems because they are of utilitarian value, for they provide food to people. Malinowski’s explanation (which Lévi-Strauss sums up in words like ‘totems are good to eat’) lacks universality, since there are

societies that have totems of non-utilitarian value, and it would be difficult to find the needs that the totem fulfils. Durkheim's thesis of religion as promoting social solidarity may be applicable in societies each with a single religion, but not societies with religious pluralism. Moreover, the functional theory is concerned with the contribution an institution makes towards the maintenance of the whole society, rather than how it is arranged. In other words, the functional theory of totemism deals with the contribution the beliefs and practices of totemism make to the maintenance and well-being of society rather than what is the structure of totemism, and how it is a product of human mind.

Totemism for Levi Strauss is a mode of classification. Totemic classifications are regarded as a 'means of thinking' governed by condition that what we find in the case of language. **The function that totemism fulfill are cognitive and intellectual: 'totems are not good to eat, they are good to think'. The problem of totemism disappears when we realize that all human, at all point of time, are concerned with one or other mode of classification and all classification operate using mechanisms of differentiation, opposition, and substitution.**

Totem provide tribal communities with consciously held concepts which guide their social actions. Food taboos, economic exchanges and kinship relations can be conceptualized and organized using schemes which are comparable to the totemic homology between natural species and social characteristics. Totemism is a relationship between Culture and Nature. Similarities and differences between natural species are used to understand the similarities between human beings. Totemism, which for people is a type of religion, is a way of understanding similarities and differences between man and nature.

LEVI- STRAUSS VIEWS ON SAVAGE MIND

In his **book** entitled, '**Savage Mind**' (1962), Levi – Strauss tries to reach into human mind at the structural aspects of unconscious.

Levi- Strauss holds view that **human mind has logical pattern of thought which is found in all societies whether primitive or civilized.** Primitive society engage in high level of reasoning different from but not necessarily inferior to that evolved in cultivated systematic thought.

LEVI- STRAUSS STURCTURAL ANALYSIS OF MYTH

Levi Strauss sums up his views on myth in series of propositions, which are as follows:

- If there is **a meaning to be found in mythology** it cannot reside in the isolated elements, which enter into composition of myth, but only in the way those elements are combined.
- Although myth belongs to the same category as language, being part of it, language, in its mythic usages, has certain specific properties.
- These properties are more complex than those found in any other kind of linguistics expression, i.e., they exist above linguistic level.
- Myth, like rest of language, is **constituted out of units (mythemes)**
- Mythic units are of higher and more complex level than units of language.

In his **article," The Structural study of myth"**, Levi- Strauss took various versions of Oedipus myth as his example. Levi- Strauss opines that for studying myth we must have way of identifying units of myth i.e., mythemes. Thus, myth is not to be read as a story, but must be broken down into its basic constituent

element or mytheme and relation between them must be examined. **They represent the idea of binary opposites.**

In his **4-volume book Mythologiques** Levi Strauss studied several hundred myths across various cultures. While they are often very different in content, Levi-Strauss endeavours to demonstrate that their underlying structures display significant similarities. Examining myth of different culture, **Levi Strauss shows that one tale can be converted into another through a series of simple operation like:**

1. *Converting positive element of a myth into negative.*
2. *Reversing order of element.*
3. *Replacing male hero with female hero.*

Through such operation dissimilar myth can be shown to be variation on a common structure. E.g., He showed how Cinderella story can be turned to Ash boy story by such steps.

Summary

Levi Strauss studies **myth as a system of signs**. For him myth accounts for the basic conceptual categories of human mind. These categories are made of contradictory series of such binary opposition as raw and cooked, nature and culture, left and right etc. Thus, a myth is a version of a theme which is represented in specific combination of categories.

EDMUND LEACH



He is best known for his **book 'Political Systems of Highland Burma- a study in Kachin Social Structure'** His key breakaway assertion was that the notion of a bounded "tribe" with its own language and culture was useless for understanding the Burmese highlands. Instead, he argued, for which he is best known. the social landscape of the Kachin Hills comprised a shared system of social and political relations, in which clans segmented and allied themselves to one another via marriage and identity codes such as dialect and dress. This "system" was neither stable nor closed, as people constantly entered, left, and shifted their position within it. The changes were made possible by two ideal political models that actors had at their disposal: (1) the hierarchical *gumsa*, (2) the anarchic egalitarian *gumlao*

In his book Political System of Highland Burma, he elaborates the notion of verbal category. He examined the ways in which humans use categories to distinguish between self and other, other and nature.

Leach in Burma identified two contrasting ideal types of political organization (gumlao/gumsa) which alternated historically between egalitarian and hierarchical modes.

The social system in Highland Burma area was such that it presented individuals with inconsistencies in the schemes of values, by which they ordered their lives. They were, thus faced with alternative mode of actions. They consistently and consciously attempted to manipulate their myths and marriage choices in manner that would increase their status.

Ambitious persons seeking political and economic advantage employed these models strategically to justify their actions, and the accumulated weight of their decisions tilted politics this way or that, shifting the whole structure of local society over time.

LEACH AND TRAFFIC SIGNALS

With traffic lights on both railways and roads, green means go, and red means stop. If we want to devise further signal with an intermediate meaning, we choose the color yellow. We do this because in the spectrum it lies midway between green and red. The color system and traffic system have same structure, the one is transformation of other.

Leach feels that **mind dichotomizes the spectrum, makes a binary opposition out of a continuum**. It will use the extremes to build that opposition and logical center to mediate those extremes. Thus, road and road signals system is a transformation of universal color code, which is an expression of structure of mind.

CRITICISM

- **Static, ahistorical nature of theory.** Mainly concerned with the structure of human psyche – it does not address the historical aspects/change in culture. That is, it is **ahistoric and static**. Structuralism looks at society in the present without any regard for the past, completely ignoring the historical context of the development of ideas. Structuralism, therefore, does not account for social change which gives a weakness to structuralist claims. Levi-Strauss' assumptions that the structures of human thought are universal gives room for criticism in that there is no scientific research demonstrating his contentions. Because of this, there is no empirical evidence showing the development of the human brain. History, like economies and societies, were completely irrelevant to Claude Levi-Strauss.
- **Theory does not account for human individuality.** Human thought is not as uniform and invariable as structuralism assumes it to be. Theory does not account individual human acts.
- **Lack of proof** – The assumption that fundamental structures of human thought are universal is just that – an assumption. It was never proved, paving way for other theories such as post-structuralism.
- **Theory does not account dynamic aspect of culture.** It fails to explain cultural variation i.e., why should structure be maintained only by this custom and not by some other one i.e. technological, economic and ecological factors might have to be considered to answer such questions
- The problem with structural analysis has been that the analysts have become attracted to what appeared to them to be oppositions, contradictions, and analogies. Thus pursuing his criticism further based again on a careful reading of the Bible, he also differs from Leach to say that there is nothing again to say that the crawling animals are mediators between the domestic and wild animals, for according to Leach, a mediator should have something in common with both the opposing categories, but crawling animals are simply a third kind of animals that have nothing in common with either cattle or animals in the forest. Thus, according to Carroll, the Genesis tells us God created three kinds of animals that can neither be opposed to each other nor is there any category that can be called as a mediator. “Leach is thus imposing binary category on things that were not meant to be opposed”.

- The feminists have been specifically critical of Levi-Strauss treating the women only as objects of exchange. In his theory of how society is structured, LeviStrauss has emphasized that the circulation of women among various groups is the binding force of society and is brought about by the universal principle of incest.

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