Social Structure

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Abstract

Social structure is about patterns of relations. Two main families of approaches conceive these patterns differently. One, a top down one, tends to see a global organization as stemming from a common shared culture. The second, a bottom up, pays more attention to agglomerative processes that begin with individuals who may or may not begin with shared cultural templates.

Social structure refers to patternings in social relations that have some sort of obduracy. Within this general definition, there are two primary families of more specific approaches. In the first, 'structure' may be used to refer on the macro level to the abstract organization of reciprocally defined social categories that are seen to comprise some social whole. In the second, the term can be used to refer to smaller scale 'social structures,' configurations of concrete relationships among individuals without reference to a notion of a larger societal totality. We organize our exposition accordingly. (We note that Porpora (1989) in addition gave as conceptions of social structure first, that of Anthony Giddens, which we treat here as an extreme form of the first understanding of structure, and second, relations between variables, but we have not seen any examples of people claiming this as a definition of structure, and we discuss this under the related heading of *social systems* below.)

Structure as Abstract Relations between Social Positions

Although all the approaches in this category link structure to some sort of organization of positions or types that anchor action, they differ as to the logic of the organization of the positions that may variously be taken to be social functions, roles, or classes.

Structure and Function

The idea of 'social structure' was first introduced by Herbert Spencer (e.g., 1896[1873]: pp. 56–60). At the time, the word 'structure' in biology referred to what we would now call 'organs,' sets of contiguous tissue that performed a specifiable function for the organism as a whole. Spencer argued that society had 'social structures' that carried out social functions.

Thus the root of the idea of social structure comes from the organismic metaphor applied to society. This metaphor is certainly an old one; in the Western tradition we often begin with Plato, who (we now say) suggested that the city might be understood as a 'man writ large,' and thus a convenient place for an anthropology. (In the *Republic* (II:368d) Plato argues that, given that those of us with imperfect vision have an easier time reading larger letters, we should find a place to study the nature of justice similarly writ large, and that is the city. From here, he uses our interdependence to derive the need for specific occupations, for specialization, and for trade (369–371).) Now indeed, Plato did suggest a mapping between characteristics of persons and those of the city. Most important, Plato made a distinction between (what might appear to us as) cognition, emotions, and instincts. Thus in the fourth book of the *Republic* (espec. §436), Plato had Socrates demonstrate that there are three parts of the soul that have different functions – that we "learn with one part of ourselves, feel anger with another, and with yet a third desire the pleasures of nutrition and generation." (The physical organs to which these were taken to correspond were for many centuries taken to be the head, the heart, and the liver, organized in a vertical hierarchy.) So too, he argued, the city has three classes, each of whom must do its part. Some make things (or 'make money,' corresponding to the appetitive), some make rules (corresponding to the *nous*, the intellect), and some make war. These correspond to three qualities of the good city, which should be wise (the wisdom of the city is the wisdom of its counselors), brave (the bravery of the city is the bravery of its fighters), and sober (*Republic*, §428–434). Now despite his famous emphasis on our interdependence and even on the division of labor, Plato did not propose an organismic model of the state, and it seems that no such developed analogies arose in Europe until the mass of differentiable urban occupations were no longer associated with servile status.

With the rise of materialist views of human beings and of society, organismic metaphors were extended into more developed allegories: thus Hobbes (1943[1651]: pp. 8, 171, 183–188, 193f., 246–257) proposed correspondences in the body politic to nerves, blood and joints, and could liken its states of illness to pleurisy, Siamese triplets, and constipation. But despite his categorical rejection of metaphor, Hobbes's use of the organismic language stemmed as much from his love of pursuing a simile as from his explanatory goals. (Thus not only is the distribution of goods analogous to nutrition, but these good ultimately come from either the land or the sea, '(the two breasts of our common Mother),' adds Hobbes (1943[1651]: p. 189).) Certainly, Hobbes treated the organismic predicate as one of metaphor and not as one of identity (e.g., systems "*may be* compared … to the similar parts of man's body" (emphasis added)), and alternated between it and others (the commonwealth as building, as Leviathan, or as 'Mortall God').

Although such organismic metaphors remained popular, we do not know of any attempt to produce a serious and detailed exposition until Spencer. Comte (1974[1842]: 510ff) too had advanced an organismic metaphor by applying it to the societal division of labor, examining the laws according to which the societal whole develops and how the whole regulates its constituent organs. But Comte's overriding theme of wholism (and his impatience to begin wholesale social reconstruction) led him to neglect a detailed consideration of the parts.

By contrast, Spencer argued that the functional needs of the whole not only were met by the parts (like Plato), nor that there were laws of development of the whole (like Comte), but that structures (and functions) have their own developmental tendencies that direct the social organism's course of development. ("Just as in the man there are structures and functions which make possible the doings his biographer tells of, so in the nation there are structures and functions which make possible the doings its historian tells of; and in both cases it is with these structures and functions, in their origin, development, and decline, that science is concerned" (Spencer, 1896[1873]: p. 52).) Further, despite his use of the organismic metaphor, Spencer (e.g., 1910: p. 244) always saw the functions that were met by social structures as being, at base, functional needs of the *individuals* who composed society (and not those of the social whole apart from the individuals). Human action is fundamentally driven to meet human needs and wants such as defending against enemies and obtaining food. Individuals cooperate to fulfill those ends, giving rise to structures. Thus 'social structure' referred to the internal organization of the social whole arising as a by-product of the functional interdependence of human life (a point that Malinowski was later to reiterate).

The organismic analogy developed in ways charted by Kaufmann (1908) and Levine (1995). What was crucial for sociology and anthropology was the duality of structure and function that was accepted by Durkheim (most notably in *The Division of Labor*) and elaborated by Radcliffe-Brown.

Like Spencer and Comte, Durkheim proposed that society is structured according to the functions that social groups fulfill in the division of labor. But while Spencer retained an emphasis on the ontological primacy of the individual, Durkheim unreservedly based his theory in the *sui generis* existence of social order. He examined how the functional interdependence upon which the division of labor is based served as society's source of social solidarity. The most fundamental 'function' in society is the division of labor's function of integrating and uniting the societal organism, thereby sustaining its life (1933[1893]: p. 11). While mechanical solidarity – solidarity based on individuals' similarities – was the dominant foundation for social bonds in earlier epochs, modern society, according to Durkheim, is bound primarily by 'organic' solidarity – solidarity that arises from individuals' interdependence in the societal division of labor. Differentiated social groups comprise a system of 'organs' (p. 132), each of which performs a specialized duty that sustains the whole. These organs are bound to each other by relationships of functional interdependence (pp. 83, 173), where the survival of the whole depends on each organ performing its specific duty. The more specialized the function of an organism, the more integrated and developed the society.

This perspective was influential in anthropology, largely mediated by the work of Radcliffe-Brown (1952: p. 179), who emphasized that a structure 'is thus to be defined as a set of relations between entities.' Further, while other theorists had focused on a few roles as key – kinship or occupation, most notably – Radcliffe-Brown (1952: 191f) argued that such structure had to be understood as involving *all* such relations. This suggested a more complete vision of an all-encompassing and mutually consistent social structure. Strangely, sociology tended to be influenced by earlier work in anthropology that drew more upon notions of kinship than social functions, perhaps because it had clearer implications.

Structure as Role

In particular, anthropologist Ralph Linton (1936) had suggested a second duality (after that of structure/function), namely that of status and role. A status, argued Linton (1936: p. 113) is a slot in social structure, or as he said (he used the idea of social 'systems,' not 'structures'), 'a position in a particular pattern.' Such a position has both rights and duties associated with it, and action in accordance with these is the performance of a *role*. Thus the role is the active counterpart to the status, the verb form as opposed to the noun. (One will note that in English, perhaps the bulk of early terms for common objects also have proper usage as verbs: to hammer is to use a hammer, to water is to put water on, and so on. So too a mother mothers, and this is a status 'roling.')

A number of sociologists have similarly examined social structure as an organized set of roles. This 'structure' was increasingly understood by sociologists as one-half, or one-third, of the realm of study at hand. Pitrim Sorokin (e.g., 1962) proposed a triad of *personality*, *society*, and *culture* (though he is more known for employing the latter two as a pair), and this triad was also adopted by both his younger colleague (and nemesis), Talcott Parsons and his graduate student, Robert Merton. Both saw the 'social' dimension as referring to something structural, and both paradigmatically took this to mean the organization of social roles, thus preserving the Lintonian duality. Parsons in particular emphasized the close mapping between structure and culture. In Parsons's (1961) words, "the structure of social systems … consists in institutionalized patterns of normative culture." Societal roles, in other words, are defined by specific norms that prescribe rules for behavior.

Robert Merton (1957) also explicitly began with this understanding of social structure, and indeed said "status and roles become concepts serving to connect culturally defined expectations with the patterned conduct and relationships which make up a social structure." (Parenthetically, we also note that Merton (e.g., 1976) maintained an interest in the emerging structuralist theories and believed them related to his own structural approach. We return to this branch below.)

In sum, this approach to social structure tended to emphasize culture, and see structure as, at least in the long-run equilibrium, a nonproblematic objectivation of cultural patterns. This priority tended to be reversed in most approaches that drew from Marx.

Structure and Class

Now we have said that Spencer was the first to use the term 'social structure,' and this is indeed true. However, Marx had

used similar language, and, with Engels in *The German Ideology* (Marx and Engels, 1976[1845–1846]: 35f), had written "The social structure and the state are continually evolving out of the life-process of definite individuals, however, of these individuals, not as they may appear in their own or other people's imagination, but as they *actually* are; i.e., as they act, produce materially, and hence as they work under definite material limits, presuppositions, and conditions independent of their will." The term translated as social structure, namely *gesellschaftliche Gliederung* (*Werke*, 3:25) carries more connotations of organization or arrangement, and somewhat fewer of a construction. Marx's conception in its most general is to emphasize what he called (in the 'Theses on Feuerbach') the 'ensemble of societal relations' (*Werke* 3:7).

The social relations of paramount interest to Marx were economic ones, more specifically, the social relations of production. These relations appear in juridical form as property relations, but in social form as the relations between classes. It is this set of relations that Marx argued constituted the 'economic structure' of society; the 'superstructure' erected on top of this includes legal, political, and ideological formations that have some degree of homology to the underlying economic structure (*see* Marxism). Thus as in the previous conception of social structure, we have a close duality between cultural understandings and patterns of relations. But while the first conception privileged the cultural realm as having explanatory priority, here it is the pattern of relations that must be understood first.

Structure as Culture as Structure

These conceptions tend to establish a duality between what one's position in structure is, and what one does; we have seen that in the Lintonian and Parsonian versions, this implies a duality between social structure and aspects of culture. This was taken to its logical vanishing point in the work of Anthony Giddens. Giddens decided to claim as 'structure' in social systems 'rules and resources,' arguing (e.g., 1979: pp. 64–66) that structure exists only as the structural – indeed, the structuring – properties of a social system. (Here he seems to have been influenced by the conception of structuralism discussed below.) Although intellectually pleasing, by placing a heap of social structure in the heads of the actors (in the form of rules), Giddens, wittingly or unwittingly, sent social theory careening down a hill in which structure and culture would end up being not simply dual, but indistinguishable. This was associated with further confusions.

For whether it is the expectation that the duties of the younger sister include looking after aging parents, or it is the class relation that the proletariat does not own the means of production but instead sells labor power, social structure was easily assimilated to constraint and restriction of individuals. As a result, especially in Britain, there arose a conviction that social action could be analyzed as a two-part beast, one part the structural constraint and the other, agency. Unlike the seemingly homologous division of the self by Mead into the 'me' (including, 'what they expect me to do') and the 'I' ('what I *actually* did'), here most conceptions made a differentiation between those actions that *reproduced* structure (and hence had no valid claim to agency) and those that challenged,

transformed, or at least grumbled about the structure. But with the transition from (1) structure being defined as organized relations to (2) structure being defined by its pernicious effects, we leave the realm of sociology, and hence do not pursue this approach further. Instead, we briefly indicate how these top-down conceptions of social structure influenced and then were influenced by the development of two related concepts.

Continuities

Systems Theory

This conception of social structure influenced the development of two relatively coherent schools of thought, treated separately in this volume. The first is systems theory (*see* Systems Theory), which also started with the organismic metaphor (indeed, when Hobbes spoke of 'social systems,' he was using the then-current term 'system' for 'organ'). Modern systems theory, the rise of which is often assumed to begin with Ludwig von Bertalanffy's (1968) work in the 1940s, explores the regularities that emerge when sets of elements – whether physiological, environmental, or social – assume such a form that they become self-regulating. In other words, they maintain themselves within a range of possibilities (a state space) through self-correcting feedback mechanisms. In the context of social science, systems theory explores how societies remain stable and functioning as their constituent parts cooperate and adapt to one another. What is important for us is the effects that this had on notions of social structure.

Talcott Parsons first popularized a systems approach to the study of social structure in *The Social System* (1951). He went on to propose four systemic necessities – basic functions that systems must perform in order to maintain their existence – as key to understanding the organization and development of societies. Parsons tended to propose subsystems that were defined *wholly functionally* (and not structurally), and to examine the media that various subsystems used to order their relations or to interact with other subsystems. To the extent that such systems thinking was taken seriously, it tended to lessen interest in social structure as such (an emphasis preserved by Merton, who maintained an ambivalent relation to the idea of systems).

A further divergence of systems and structural thinking came with the work of Luhmann. Once mentored by Parsons, Niklas Luhmann developed a rival approach to systems theory whose core is communication rather than action. Humans are not coordinated into action systems but systems of observing and sense making. Actors confront an external environment in which massive amounts of information circulate. As they observe, select out, and make sense of, bits of information, the system is constituted (1996: p. 24). By observing the environment, the observer distinguishes between himself and the environment, and this act of distinction brings the observer into being. What is essential for us are three points: first, the components here are acts of communication, not social relationships. Second, there is a self-organization (*autopoiesis*) of this set of communications that may be largely decoupled from the needs of organic individuals. Third, such systems are more than a mere analytical tool that elucidates societal processes; rather, 'systems exist' (1995: p. 12). Thus although Luhmann did argue that the major social subsystems corresponded to well-understood realms (which he

successively explored: law, art, politics, religion, economy and education), we must be prepared for functional sub-sub-systems that are potentially divorced from needs of individuals and even from the role structure.

Structuralism

The second offshoot is the line of thought termed 'structuralism' (*see* Structuralism). This tradition in many ways branched off of Comte and Durkheim; although it is generally understood to have originated with the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, Saussure himself was influenced by Durkheim's Comtean division between statics and dynamics. Saussure argued that words' meanings arise not from an intrinsic quality that links them to the phenomena they represent, but from the systematic distinctions that differentiate them (as signs or sounds) from one another in a linguistic system (Saussure 1983[1916]). (Words are "purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not" (Saussure [1916]1983: p. 651).) This approach was then elaborated in the science of phonology by Roman Jakobson, who examined how the organization of sounds into systems conveys linguistic meaning. In all cases, structuralism proposed two types of relations (syntax/system, metonymy/metaphor, affine/cognate) that, brought into the realm of social structure, suggested attention both to empirical relations of interaction (on the one hand) and relations of structural equivalence – functional substitutability (on the other).

Claude Levi-Strauss (1969[1949]) applied these structuralist principles to the study of social structure in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Here Levi-Strauss examined the structural logics that organize complex patterns of kin relationships by understanding them as formal laws of transfers (as a marriage may be seen as the transfer of a daughter (or son) from one lineage to another). Levi-Strauss went on to focus on *cognitive* structures, but the encouraging results of this work on kinship led to a common enthusiasm for 'structure' in the social sense as well. There were relatively few rigorously structuralist approaches to social structure, however, though we discuss one below.

Structure as Patterns of Concrete Interaction

A second major approach divorces the idea of structure from the abstract notion of an organized society. Instead, it sees structure as concrete patterns of interaction among individual persons that may exhibit greater or lesser levels of organization. These social relationships are also attached to cultural meanings of various sorts – for instance, subjective orientations or cultural narratives. But these approaches tend to be more bottom up, and suggest a plurality of structural elements that may overlap with or without mutual reinforcement.

Structure as Forms of Interaction

This general approach was largely rooted in the work of Georg Simmel. Like Durkheim and Marx, Simmel saw society (or social life) as fundamentally about relations among persons.

But he eschewed the structural functionalists' presupposition that society is divided into subparts organized into a (more or less) functional whole or system. Indeed, in his first major work, Simmel (1890: p. 13) challenges the organismic view of society, which sees society as 'an absolute unity.' Rather, this concept of 'society' is 'only secondary to the real interaction of its parts, only a result of it – as much in reality as in conceptualization.' 'The social organism,' speaking loosely, must be understood as but 'a summary expression of the interaction of the parts,' and it is only these parts – individuals – that have vitality. Rather than the process of differentiation leading to simpler and more unitarily defined individuals (as in Durkheim's conception), the true differentiation is internal to individuals who straddle multiple social roles.

As a result, Simmel decoupled the concept of structure from social groups' functional roles in society, and proposed a 'formal sociology' focused on patterns of interaction among individuals. These interactions – continuously broken off and remade – do not necessarily amount to 'actual organization' (1992[1908]: p. 33), nor must they conform to the routines of society's 'service organs' (Simmel, 1897). Thus, 'Society' for Simmel is social interaction among persons "continuously making connections and breaking them off and making them again, a perpetual flowing and pulsing that unites individuals, even when it does not amount to actual organization" (1992[1908]: 33). Social life consists of the living interactions, constantly being made and remade, that pulse beneath and beyond their 'service organs' (Simmel, 1897). The regularity of these interactions comes from their being stamped from a limited set of forms.

This sociology of forms has been appealed to by some network researchers as an aegis for their own efforts. However, despite his focus on formal patterns like the dyad and the triad (actually terms supplied by his translator), Simmel's use of 'form' had a somewhat different meaning than a geometrical structure. Hoping to extend a neo-Kantian approach to social life, as he had previously attempted for the study of history, Simmel meant to uncover the 'a prioris' for social interaction, which he considered forms. Here he certainly meant to draw on Kant's idea of forms, quite possibly interpreted in the Platonic way of Hermann Cohen, as something structured in the subjectivity of actors – not a pattern of relationships itself. While purely geometric abstractions may be useful sociological tools, they cannot be separated from the complex subjective orientations from which they tend to emerge. These objective and subjective elements coalesce in ideal typical forms of 'sociation' (*Vergesellschaftung*): e.g., exchange, conflict, and super- and subordination.

Most important for the science of social structure was that Simmel, by not proposing a partition (or multiple partitions) of society into subparts bound by relations, was able to see structure as shifting patterns of interaction between individual persons and thereby frame structural analysis as a conceptual tool that could be applied to different types of connections. As he (1955[1922]) explained in *The Intersection of Social Circles*, an individual may stand simultaneously in multiple social groups that overlap with each other at the site of that individual. Society is a web of relationships that is not organized into a unified and harmonious set of structures but into multiple overlapping, often uncoordinated, and sometimes conflicting, ones.

Structure as Configurations of Individuals

This line of research was continued by Leopold von Wiese (1932), in his 'theory of relations' and his 'theory of social configurations (soziale Gebilde).' Von Wiese's work was freely translated by Howard Becker, who rendered Gebilde as 'plurality pattern.' Von Wiese's configurations or structures were ensembles of social relationships that had a particular form: he argued that there were three main types of configurations: masses, groups, and corporate bodies. These were structures, generally composed of other structures, that were somewhat farther from the individual than their component structures and consequently more abstracted. (Sorokin's (1962) own approach was similar in many ways, emphasizing the components of social organization as opposed to beginning with functional requirements.) The somewhat exciting aspect of von Wiese's work was the implication that one could begin with social relationships and scale upward, first to simple configurations composed of relationships, and then larger structures. This general approach has been used by Tilly (1998), Martin (2009), and Martin and Lee (2010).

Structure as Stories

This type of approach may seem to have a great deal in common with the structural approach of Harrison White (1992), who was concerned with the question of how social formations emerge. White's first book was a recasting of Levi-Straussian kinship structures using permutation matrices. He then applied this rigorous structuralist understanding of social structure to other types of social structure in a pair of important papers, the first of which (White et al., 1976) was very influential for social networks (see below); although the second (Boorman and White, 1976) was more theoretically central, it was more methodologically challenging and hence less influential. (This line of work was continued by Breiger and Pattison (e.g., 1986), among others.)

White went on to formulate a more general approach to social organization, and here he drew more heavily on S.F. Nadel's (1957) perspective with its cultural grounding, which became clear in White's magnum opus, where he posited a strict duality between structural form and cultural narratives. Structural ties are bound by common identities. Each tie exists both as a pair of individuals, as well as an identity – a story about the basis of the tie's solidarity that provides it continuity. Small structures like dyads concatenate to create larger ones as 'ties mesh with stories' (2008: p. 27). The conversations that take place in ties, the shared beliefs or understandings that bind them, link up to those of other ties, presenting the opportunity for those ties to concatenate into larger structures.

A somewhat related approach is seen in Ronald Burt's (1982) Structural Theory of Action, though the focus on action takes him more to the Parsonian legacy of a dialogue with economic theories of action. As with White, we start with a focus on the actor who sees social structure sometimes as if it were a jungle gym to be climbed, and sometimes as if it were an undergrowth to be hacked away with a machete. Even more than in the previous understandings, the duality of cultural and structural understandings is one that in no way requires an overarching order; rather, local ordering principles may emerge, but even when they do, skilled actors may choose to crack them.

Social Structure and Social Networks

As the discussion in the previous section makes clear, this approach to social structure often dovetailed, inspired, or turned into social networks research (see Social Networks). Scholarship on social networks focuses on the relationships between concrete actors rather than individuals, groups, or roles. Although the foundational theoretical works in social networks research (e.g., Barnes, 1954) envisioned the network as sprawling, connecting, and all-encompassing form, and hence diametrically opposed to the conventional ideas of well-nested social sub-sub-systems and/or groups, networks have often been understood as being a skeletal structure that should reproduce the outlines of social structure conventionally understood. This is, of course, an empirical question, but the challenges to mounting a full-scale social network survey of a population in order to determine the relation of networks to role structures remain daunting.

Conclusion

Social structure has proved one of the most confusing theoretical terms in our lexicon; it tends to be among the most abstract of our concepts, but has implications of solidity. It often seems to connote constraint of individual actions, but is itself nothing but a set of actions. It is regularly counterposed to culture, but just as regularly appears to be simply the second side of the same coin as culture. Perhaps the best that can be said is that it appears to be an idea we cannot do without.

See also: Action, Theories of Social; Class: Social; Exchange: Social; Institutions; Interactionism, Symbolic; Luhmann's Social Systems: Meaning, Autopoiesis, and Interpenetration; Macrosociology-Microsociology; Marxism in Contemporary Sociology; Power in Society; Social Networks; Sociological Theory; Status and Role: Structural Aspects; Structuralism.

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