

Claude Levi-Strauss & Structuralism

Structuralism is a method used by sociologists, anthropologists, literary theorists, and linguists. They employ this method to show how all aspects of culture are based upon some underlying structure. This underlying structure or structures are formed by interrelations.

The origins of *structuralism* are linked to the work of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. He separated language into "parole" (actual uses of words and language in speech and writing) and "langue" (the abstract structure of language). Words do not get their meanings from themselves. The word "bear" signifies the idea of a bear and/or the actual bear in the world. But the Latin word "ursa" also means bear. There is no essential link between a word "bear" and the idea bear. Rather, the meaning comes from the abstract structure in which the concept of bear interrelates with other concepts. We know what a bear is by showing its relationships within an abstract structure. This is just a technical way of saying how we define what a bear is. A bear is a mammal who feeds on fish and berries, lives outdoors, etc. The meaning of the bear derives from his similarities, differences, and relations to all of these other things: fish, berries, outdoors, etc.

Psychoanalysts use structuralism to discover the underlying structures of consciousness. In other words, they believe that the behaviors we exhibit arise from some underlying structure. With Freud, it was the division of consciousness into the Id, Ego, and Superego. With Lacan, it was the structural divisions of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary.

Some Marxist theorists suggest that culture and ideology emerge from the economic conditions of life. Our ideas and the ways we think about the world are therefore based upon the way our economic lives (jobs, businesses, products) are structured.

Anthropologists and sociologists also look for the underlying structures of human life. *Claude Levi-Strauss* was one of the most famous structural anthropologists. (1908 – 2009) He is unquestionably the founding and most important figure in anthropological structuralism. He was born in Brussels in 1908. and obtained a law degree from the University of Paris. He became a professor of sociology at the University of Sao Paulo in Brazil in 1934. It was at this time that he began to think about human thought cross-culturally when he was exposed to various cultures in Brazil. His first publication in anthropology appeared in 1936 and covered the social organization of the Bororo (Bohannon and Glazer 1988:423). After World War II, he taught at the New School for Social Research in New York. There he met Roman Jakobson, from whom he took the structural linguistics model and applied its framework to culture (Bohannon and Glazer 1988:423). Lévi-Strauss has been noted as singly associated with the elaboration of the structuralist paradigm in anthropology (Winthrop 1991). argued that certain rituals, habits, and behaviors were based upon the familial roles and interactions of a culture. These underlying structures of family and kinship inform how the people interact locally and how they interact with other tribes, nations, etc. Consider how marriage rules, incest taboos, and name changes structure the way men and women interact.

The basic idea behind structuralism is that individual and collective behaviors emerge from some underlying structure. With Saussure and the linguists, the structure is an abstract system

of interrelated concepts. With the Marxists and anthropologists, the structures are daily, physical interactions and rules and codes, respectively.

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Structuralism, in cultural anthropology, the school of thought developed by the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, in which cultures, viewed as systems, are analyzed in terms of the structural relations among their elements.

According to Lévi-Strauss's theories, universal patterns in cultural systems are products of the invariant structure of the human mind. Structure, for Lévi-Strauss, referred exclusively to mental structure, although he found evidence of such structure in his far-ranging analyses of kinship, patterns in mythology, art, religion, ritual, and culinary traditions.

The basic framework of Lévi-Strauss's theories was derived from the work of structural linguistics. From N.S. Trubetzkoy, the founder of structural linguistics, Lévi-Strauss developed his focus on unconscious infrastructure as well as an emphasis on the relationship between terms, rather than on terms as entities in themselves. From the work of Roman Jakobson, of the same school of linguistic thought, Lévi-Strauss adopted the so-called distinctive feature method of analysis, which postulates that an unconscious "metastructure" emerges through the human mental process of pairing opposites. In Lévi-Strauss's system the human mind is viewed as a repository of a great variety of natural material, from which it selects pairs of elements that can be combined to form diverse structures. Pairs of oppositions can be separated into singular elements for use in forming new oppositions.

Lévi-Strauss stressed that the emphasis in structural analysis of kinship must be on human consciousness, not on objective ties of descent or consanguinity. For him, all forms of social life represent the operation of universal laws regulating the activities of the mind. His detractors argued that his theory could be neither tested nor proved and that his lack of interest in historical processes represented a fundamental oversight.

Lévi-Strauss, however, believed that structural similarities underlie all cultures and that an analysis of the relationships among cultural units could provide insight into innate and universal principles of human thought.

Lévi-Strauss's structuralism was an effort to reduce the enormous amount of information about cultural systems to what he believed were the essentials, the formal relationships among their elements. He viewed cultures as systems of communication, and he constructed models based on structural linguistics, information theory, and cybernetics to interpret them.