

TOPIC-SOCIAL STRUCTURE
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SOCIAL STRUCTURE

To a layman, the term social structure may sound simple enough. Infact for many years, anthropologists and social scientists also took it simply as the ‘form or morphology of society’. Later when social analysts made what they called ‘A survey of the social structure of England and Wales’, they treated social data from a morphological point of view, to construct the society’s picture as a whole but never was any specific definition of social structure was attempted.

Against this broad use of the term social structure, sociologists and anthropologists are trying to get some idea of the elements in the social process and in the process of the social study itself.

The idea of the structure of society has certain conditions:

1. It must be concerned with ordered relation of the part to the whole.
2. These orders must be regarded built up upon one another so that they are a series of varying orders of complexity.
3. Some factors of continuity must be present in them.

Some anthropologists have argued that the social structure is-

1. The network of all person to person relations in a society. It is different to distinguish the idea of structure of society from that of the totality of the society itself.
2. On the other hand the idea of social structure as the relations between major groups in a society-those with a high degree of persistence.
3. A different idea of social structure does not stress much on the actual relations between persons or groups as the expected relations or the ideal relations.

Thus the concept of social structure is an analytical tool, designed to serve us in understanding how men behave in their social life. The essence of this concept is to those social relations which seem to be of critical importance for the behaviour of the members of the society, so that if such relations were not in operation, the society could not be said to exist in that form.

In the types of societies usually studied by anthropologists, the social structure may include basic or critical relationships, arising from a class system based on relations with the soil.

Other aspects of social structure rise out of persistent groups, such as clans, castes, age-sets or secret societies. Other basic relations are based on the position in the kinship system, status in regard to political superior or the distribution of ritual knowledge.

As social structure is a web of interacting social forces, from which have arisen the various modes of observing and thinking..... so the study of social structure as **Nadel** has put it- is concerned with the principal forms of social organization, that is:

1. Types of groups,
2. Associations and institutions and the complex of these which constitute societies.

‘Group structure’ would represent the kind of reality into which we are born and within which we find work and recreation; rewards and penalties, struggle and mutual aid.....’ All the various modes of grouping together comprise of the complex pattern of social structure, in the analysis of social structure, the role of the diverse attitudes and interests of social beings is revealed.

To take an example of the African or Oceanic societies, there is an important structural element in the special relationship between the mother’s brother and the sister’s child. The senior has to protect his junior, help him in sickness or misfortune and make gifts. This relation is so strong, that when there is no true mother’s brother, then a ‘stand- in’ is made. If by chance the role of the mother’s brother is less marked, and the duties cease to be performed, then the structure of the society seems to be altered.

So it is true that we cannot observe the structure of a society, we can infer it from the actual behaviours of the society. Thus, according to **Nadel**, “**Social structure is built out of relationships between persons enacting their roles.**”

Mayer Fortes also agrees to it that the ‘elements of social structure presuming that they are reached through abstraction, are “**the constant features in the pattern of organization of all activities in which the relation is significant.**”

Different social structures are contrasted in terms of the differences in such critical or basic relations. As among the Malays of some regions, the mother’s brother’s

role is well defined, but among the Malays of some other region, there is not much importance attached to this.

So we can reach to some conclusion from this that the structure of a society according to **Nadel** is the “relationship between actors in their capacity of playing roles relative to one- another.” But at the same time it should be remembered that- “social structure is not a model.” We build models to explain some of the attributes of the reality, but we do not study it merely there to give us the idea of an “ideal type”.

Thus from this we can reach to the conclusion of the social structure, of which anthropologists are much concerned. “Social Structure” according to Nadel- “be it of whatever degree of refinement, is social reality itself or an aspect of it”. It is something which is existence in a society along with man. The objective of social structure studies is to understand social relations with the aid of models.

There is a common frame in the understanding of social relations today- “space” and “time” are the two frames used to situate social relations. The two terms “space” and “time”, unlike any other discipline, are used as “social space” and “social time”- meaning that they have no properties outside that of this social phenomena. According to social structure, human societies have many types of “continuums”. The “time continuum” may be reversible or oriented according to the level of reality. What is that of time dimension applies equally well to space. Durkheim and Mauss, for the first time, made it clear that to understand the structure of primitive societies, the variable properties of space should be taken into account.

Raymond Firth has said that “**social structure**” expresses “**the continuity**” of **social life**, its persistence and invariance and no more so that we need another

complimentary concept, organization, in which “time enters in order to do justice to variance and change and to the many “acts of choice and decision” underlying these effects.

According to Nadel, what many scholars think is a blind spot of structural analysis- is the inability to cope- up with the time-dimensions. The “synchronic approach of modern social anthropology contributes towards this weakness. Firth has introduced “organization” in which time enters to change the many acts; Nadel suggests that the whole point of there being a “blind spot” in the structural analysis is wrong.

To begin with, this problem would exist if the concept of social structure excludes the recognition of events and processes in time. This is not so – for in all those relations which ascribe “structure” is succeeded by time defined either by “later” or ‘earlier”. At the same time Nadel does not deny the fact that in the analysis of social structure, we use such language which is suggestive of “as-if” everything is static.

Social structure as **Mayer Fortes** has put it must be “visualized” as “a sum of processes in time”.

Here it is useful to introduce the distinction drawn by **Levi Strauss** between macro- time and micro-time. He explains how social structure has to do with prehistory, archaeology and diffusion processes as well as with psychological typology.

Nadel has given a different view in studying both the concepts- **Micro time** provides the time scale for events described a moment ago, i.e. for the Shifts, movements and variations which still remain within the sounds of some overall

constancy. **Macro time** on the other hand contains the kinds of events which changed the pre existing structural alignment. In other words, events in micro time do not invalidate a structural schema; while even in micro time do so.

Time dimension is not only implicit in the social structure, but constitute an explicit condition of it. Both have to do recruitment of people in roles, relationships and groups and so and so structural, that is the mechanics of intake and circulation. As a matter of fact, structures of the same type may exist on quite different Time and Space levels.