Unit 5

Concept and Theories of Structure

Contents

Learning Objectives

After going through this unit you will be able to

- explain the concept of social structure
- compare the theoretical contribution of Radcliffe-Brown and Evans Pritchard
- critically discuss lrvi-strauss's concept of structure.

5.1 Introduction

The term 'structure' (Latin *structura* from *struere*, to construct) was first applied to 'construction'. Later, during the classical period, it was used in the scientific field of biology. To grasp the meaning of this oft-used concept in sociology and social anthropology (and now, in other social sciences), let us begin with the analogy of a house.

Irrespective of the type of community to which a house belongs, it is divided into rooms, with each room set apart for conducting a particular set of activities. For instance, one room may be used for cooking foods and keeping raw ingredients and utensils for cooking, and it may be called the kitchen. Another room may be used for housing the idols and pictures of sacred deities and ancestors, and stacking sacred books and objects (such as lamps, incense sticks, peacock feathers, etc), and it may be called the place of worship, while another room may be used for spreading the bed, keeping clothes, money and jewelry, storing grains, as happens in rural communities, and it may called the bedroom. In this way, depending upon the purpose(s), the other rooms of the house may be set aside, given some sort of specialisation and name. Terms like 'study room', 'store', 'guest room', 'toilet', 'bathroom', 'pantry', 'anteroom', 'children's room', etc, all indicate the purpose for which a particular portion of the land is marked, and thus designated. Where the tract of land is less, many of these 'rooms' may not be there, but rather different corners of the same room may be associated with different tasks and activities, so one of its sides may be used for cooking, while another, for keeping deities.

Different rooms of a house are all interconnected. Passages, alleyways, and corridors link different rooms, thus facilitating mobility from one part to the other. Entry to rooms is through doors and their connection with the outside world is through doors, windows and ventilators. When all of them are shut,

the room becomes a well-demarcated and closed unit, bearing little interaction with the external world, and when open, it is constantly interacting with the other parts of the house. Each room has its own boundary, its distinctiveness, which separates it from other rooms. At the same time, it is not an 'isolated entity', for it is defined (as a bed room or study room) as a distinct entity in relation to the other rooms, which are also defined distinctly. In other words, the 'wholeness of the room', looking from one point of view, by stationing oneself in the room, is juxtaposed to 'its being a part of the house', when one looks at it by situating oneself outside it.

Pursuing this analogy further, a village or a neighbourhood may be described as an aggregate of houses, where each village or neighbourhood maintains its 'wholeness', at the same time, it is a part of the larger units. Each village or neighbourhood maintains its boundary, its identity, and also, has several connections (quite like the passages, alleyways, and corridors) with other villages or neighbourhoods. The relevant concepts that emerge from this analogy are of the 'whole', the 'interconnections', the 'boundary-maintaining mechanisms', the 'aggregation', and the 'vantage point of the observer'.

Like a house (or a village or a neighbourhood), a society may be conceptualised (or imagined) as consisted of parts. One needs to begin with this analogy, because society does not have the kind of concreteness one finds in a house, village, or neighbourhood. In fact, the method of analogy is useful for trying to know the unknown through the known. One knows what a house is, what it looks like, and by extending its model, one tries to formulate a tentative idea of society. However, it should not be forgotten that analogy is not homology: the idea that society is like a house does not imply that society is a house. Thus, after drawing similarities between a society and a house, one should also look at the differences between them, for such an exercise will direct us to the uniqueness of society – the distinct properties of society.

In their attempts to formulate the idea of society, different scholars have adopted different analogies. Herbert Spencer (1873) is one of the first ones to use the analogy of building, with which we have also begun. But of all the analogies that were used in the formative stage of sociology to comprehend the idea of society, the most frequently used analogy has been of the organism: Society is like an organism (Rex 1961). In addition to the analogy of building, Spencer also develops the organic analogy, believing that this analogy will be greatly valid if we are able to show not only that society is like an organism but also that 'organism is like society' (see Barnes, H.E. 1948; Harris 1968). Why organic analogy is used more than other analogies – such as of the solar system, and later, of atomic and chemical systems – is because an organism is far more concrete than other systems, and is easy to understand, comprehend, and explain. This analogy was basic to the understanding of the concept of social structure, a term used for the first time by Spencer.

In this unit, we will explore the meaning of the term structure and then go on to examining the contributions of Radcliffe-Brown, Evans Pritchard and Levi-Strauss to the understanding of social structure.

5.2 Organic Analogy and Structure

The principal unit of an organism is a cell, which combines with others of its kind to form a tissue. An aggregate of tissues is an organ, and an aggregate

of organs is an organism. Thus, an organism can be broken down into organs, an organ into tissues, a tissue into cells, and from the latter, one of them can be taken up for study. In a similar fashion, the basic unit of society is a 'socialised individual', one who has internalized the norms and values, and the ways of meaningful social behaviour. A collectivity of individuals is a group, and several of them combine together to form a community. An aggregate of communities is called society. As in the case of organism, a society can be broken down into communities, which in turn can be divided into groups, and groups into individuals.

Organic analogy is quite useful as a starting point, but it should not be regarded as an end in itself, for it breaks down at many levels. For instance, a single cell can survive; there are organisms made up of single cells. But no individual can survive alone; the most elemental unit of human society is a dyad, i.e., a group of two individuals. Aristotle had said long time back: 'One who lives alone is either a beast or god.' Organic analogy helps us to understand the concepts of society and its structure, but it should not blind us to the specificities of society, not found in other systems of natural and biological world.

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (1999) gives three meanings of the term structure: 1) the way in which something is organised, built, or put together (e.g., the structure of the human body); 2) a particular system, pattern, procedure, or institution (e.g., class structure, salary structure); and 3) a thing made up of several parts put together in a particular way (e.g., a single-storey structure). When a sociologist speaks of structure, he has all the three meanings in his mind. By structure, he means an 'interconnectedness' of parts, i.e., the parts of a society are not isolated entities, but are brought together in a set of relationships to which the term structure may be used.

Everything has a structure. Unless it is there, the entity will not be able to carry out any tasks; it will not be able to work. When its structure breaks down, or is jeopardized, it stops working, becomes inert, thereby affecting the activities of the other systems because they are all interconnected. Why the parts are connected in particular manner is because of the logical and rational relationship between them. For those who regard structure as an important analytical concept, the world is an organized entity; it comprises interconnected parts, where each part is to be studied in relationship with other parts. To sum up: 'Structure refers to the way in which the parts of an entity are interconnected so that the entity emerges as an integrated whole, which for the purpose of analysis can be broken down into individual parts.'

No dispute exists in sociology with respect to the idea that structure means an 'interconnectedness of parts', but it exists as to the identity of these parts – whether these parts are individuals, or groups, or roles, or institutions, or messages. In other words, the question is: Which of these parts should receive our primary attention? Second, a difference of opinion exists whether the structure is an empirical entity, something that can be seen and observed, or is an abstraction, arrived at from the regularity and consistency of human behaviour. Around these two ideas are built different theories of social structure. Robert Merton (1975) is quite right in saying that the notion of social structure is 'polyphyletic and polymorphous', i.e., it has many meanings and ideas.

5.3 Social Structure is a Reality: A.R. Radcliffe-Brown's Contribution

As said earlier, Spencer coined the term social structure, but did not offer a theoretical perspective on it, except for advancing the analogy between societies and organisms, which influenced later scholars in developing the concepts of structure and function. For instance, Émile Durkheim (1938 [1895]), although a staunch critic of Spencer, was greatly attracted to organic analogy, and said that the idea of function in social sciences was based on analogy between the living organism and society. He used the term 'social morphology', by which he meant what we mean by the term 'social structure'.

Durkheim's sociology exercised an indelible impact on the British social anthropologist, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, who was a student of the diffusionist W.H.R. Rivers, and had carried out his first-hand fieldwork with the Andaman Islanders from 1906 to 1908. The findings of this field study were first submitted in the form of an M.A. dissertation in 1910. Subsequently, it was reworked for a book published in 1922 titled *The Andaman Islanders*, which is regarded as one of the first important books leading to the foundation of the functional approach. Besides his contribution to what he called the 'structural-functional approach', one of his important contributions was to the understanding of the concept of social structure. As said previously, there are scholars prior to Radcliffe-Brown who had used the term social structure, but it was Radcliffe-Brown (1952) who not only defined this concept but also initiated a debate on it. Throughout his teaching, he emphasised the importance of the *study of social structure*. This submission of Radcliffe-Brown was closely linked to his notion of social anthropology, which he was quite willing to call after Durkheim, 'comparative sociology'.

a) **A Natural Science of Society**

For Radcliffe-Brown (1948), social anthropology is the 'theoretical natural science of human society'. That is to say, social phenomena are investigated by methods similar to those used in natural and biological sciences. Each of the sciences has a subject matter that can be investigated through our senses. Thus, the subject matter is empirical, which can be subjected to observation. Radcliffe-Brown pursues the analogy of the natural science: all natural sciences systematically investigate the 'structure of the universe as it is revealed to us through our senses'. Each branch of science deals with a 'certain class or kind of structures' — for instance, atomic physics deals with the structure of atoms, chemistry with the structure of molecules, anatomy and physiology with the structure of organisms. Then, it moves further with the aim to 'discover the characteristics of all structures of that kind'. Each science endeavours to understand *a* structure with which it is concerned, and then, all the structures of that type are compared to discover their common characteristics. All sciences move from particular to general, from understanding *a* structure to understanding *the* structure.

If social anthropology is a natural science of society, then its subject matter must be amenable to observation and empirical enquiry. Social structure is what social anthropologists study; it is the province of their enquiry. It is observable; it has a concrete reality. Radcliffe-Brown (1952) writes: 'Social structures are just as real as are individual organisms.' It is clear that Radcliffe-Brown's concept of social structure is tied to his natural science conception of social anthropology.

b) **The Content of Social Structure**

When we speak of structure, we have in mind, as said earlier, some sort of an ordered arrangement of parts or components. A piece of musical composition has a structure, and its parts are notes. Similarly, a sentence has a structure: its parts are words, so does a building, the parts of which are bricks and mortar. The basic part of social structure is the person. Here, Radcliffe-Brown (1952) makes an important distinction between an 'individual' and a 'person'. As an individual, 'he is a biological organism', comprising a large number of molecules organised in a complex way, which keeps on carrying out a multitude of physiological and psychological functions till the time he is alive. This aspect of human beings — the 'individual' aspect — is an object of study for biological and psychological sciences.

As a 'person', the human being is a 'complex of social relationships'. It is the unit of study for sociologists and social anthropologists. As a person, he is a citizen of a country, a member of a family, a supporter of a political party, a follower of a religious cult, a worker in a factory, a resident of a neighbourhood, and so on. Each of these positions the person occupies denotes a social relationship, because each position is related to another position. A person is a member of a family in relation to other members and the set of interrelationships of the members of a family constitutes its structure. Each person occupies, therefore, a 'place in a social structure'. Radcliffe-Brown uses the term 'social personality' for the 'position' a human being occupies in a social structure. It however does not imply that the position remains the same throughout the life of an individual, for it changes over time. New positions are added; old are deleted. We study persons in terms of social structure and we study social structures in terms of persons who are the unit of what it is composed.

Society is not a 'haphazard conjunction of persons', rather an organised system where norms and values control the relationships between persons. A person knows how he is expected to behave according to these norms and values, and is 'justified in expecting that other persons should do the same.' Radcliffe-Brown includes the following two aspects within the social structure:

1) All social relations of person to person, i.e., interpersonal relations. For example, the kinship structure of any society consists a number of dyadic relations, such as father and son, mother and daughter, mother's brother and sister's son, etc.
2) The differentiation of individuals and of classes by their social role. For instance, the relation between men and women, chief and commoners, employers and employees, etc, are aspects of social structure, for they determine social relations between people.

In both cases, we are in fact concerned with relations between persons, which norms and values of that society condition.

Bringing these together, Radcliffe-Brown says that social structure is that concrete reality that comprises the 'set of actually existing relations at a given moment of time, which link together certain human beings.' We can conduct direct observation on social structure – we can see the 'actually existing relations', describe and classify them, and understand the relations of persons with others. Social structure is observable, empirical, and fully amenable to study by methods of natural and biological sciences.

c) Structural Type

When a social anthropologist carries out his fieldwork in a particular, territorially defined, society, what he actually investigates is its social structure, i.e., 'an actually existing concrete reality, to be directly observed.' But from what he observes, he abstracts a general picture of that society. In this context, Radcliffe-Brown makes a distinction between 'social structure' and 'structural type or form'. This distinction is also related with Radcliffe-Brown's conception of science, and of social anthropology as a 'natural science of society'. He says that as distinguished from history (or biography), science is not concerned with the particular or unique. It is concerned, rather, with the general, with propositions that apply to the entire phenomenon. We are concerned with, he says, 'the form of the structure'.

Say, in the study of an Australian tribe, an anthropologist is concerned with the relationship between the mother's brother and sister's son. He observes several instances of this relationship in their actual context, from which he abstracts its 'general or normal' form, which is largely invariant. If social structure is bound by factors of time and space, varying from one context to another, structural type is general and invariant.

Social structure continues over time, a kind of continuity that Radcliffe-Brown calls 'dynamic continuity'. It is like the 'organic structure of a living body'. As a living body constantly renews itself by replacing its cells and energy level, in the same way, the actual 'social life renews the social structure.' Relations between people change over time. New members are recruited in a society because of birth or immigration. While the social structure changes over time, there remains an underlying continuity and relative constancy, which designates its structural form.

Reflection and Action 5.1

What does Radlliffe-Brown mean by dynamic continuity?

This certainly does not imply that the structural form is static — it also changes, sometimes gradually, sometimes with suddenness, as happens in cases of revolution. But even then, some kind of a continuity of structure is maintained. Our job as sociologists and social anthropologists is to discover the structural form of society. It is to move from particular to general, or in the language of Radcliffe-Brown, from 'ideographic' to 'nomothetic'. While the former designates a specific social structure, the latter is the structural form. While the former requires an intensive study of a single society, the latter is an abstraction of the form of that society. Also, the study of a single society needs to be compared with similar studies of other societies. This process, systematically carried out, can lead us to the discovery of general laws that apply to human society as a whole.

For Radcliffe-Brown, the various steps of reaching the general laws are:

1) Intensive study of a social structure using the standard anthropological procedures.
2) Abstraction from this its structural type.
3) Comparing the structural type of a social structure with the structural types of other social structures, by rigorously using the comparative method.

4) Arriving at the laws of society, the invariant propositions that explain human behaviour in diverse social situations.

For Radcliffe-Brown, there is only *one* method of social anthropology, i.e., the comparative method, for it helps us to move from the particular to the general. Social structure is what we study, but what we arrive at is the structural type.

d) **Society and Social Structure**

Radcliffe-Brown's attempt was praiseworthy, for it was the first rigorous attempt to define the concept of social structure, rather than just taking its meaning for granted. However, it led to many questions and confusions. If social structure is a collectivity of interpersonal relations, real and observable, then what is society? Do we study society and find its structure? In his letter to Claude Lévi-Strauss, Radcliffe-Brown gave the following example: 'When I pick up a particular sea-shell on the beach, I recognize it as having a particular structure' (see Kuper, ed., 1977). The question that immediately comes in our mind is: What do I study? The seashell or its structure? Pursuing the example further, Radcliffe-Brown says: 'I may find other shells of the same species which have a similar structure, so that I can say there is a form of structure characteristic of the species.' Here, do I describe the structure of each of these shells and then subject their structures to comparison? Or, do I assume that since they all happen to be seashells, they will have a similar structure?

Further, Radcliffe-Brown writes: 'By examining a number of different species, I may be able to recognize a certain general structural form or principle, that of a helix, which could be expressed by means of logarithmic equation.' Do I compare different species of seashells to arrive at their general structural form? Or, do I compare the structural forms of each of the species of seashells to reach at a structural form that is common to all? These questions clearly show that while there is no confusion between the categories of particular and general, confusion prevails with respect to the distinction between 'society' and 'social structure', 'social life' and 'social structure', and the 'structural form' of a social structure and the 'structural form' of social structures. One more observation: what Radcliffe-Brown understands by the term 'structural type' is what many understand by the term 'social structure'. And, what Radcliffe-Brown calls 'social structure' is what many would call 'society'.

5.4 Social Structure Refers to Relations Between Groups: The Contribution of E.E. Evans-Pritchard

Radcliffe-Brown's paper on social structure, originally the Presidential Address to the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland in 1940, referred to Evans-Pritchard's idea of social structure. While Radcliffe-Brown did not disagree with Evans-Pritchard's use of social structure, he found it more useful to include under the term social structure a good deal more than what Evans-Pritchard had included. Evans-Pritchard delineated his concept of social structure in the last section of the last chapter of his book, *The Nuer* (1940).

Evans-Pritchard carried out a piece of intensive fieldwork with the Nuer of

the Sudan. In his first monograph on them, he tried to describe Nuer society on a more abstract plane of analysis than was usual at that time because of a lack of a proper theory. Evans-Pritchard looked for such a theory in his work on the Nuer, although many of his ideas that exercised impact on sociology and social anthropology developed later.

In his monograph on the Nuer, he first gives an account of the importance of cattle for the life of the people he had studied. The ecological system in which they find themselves conditions their territorial distribution and transhumance. The Nuer concepts of time and space arise largely from their patterns of livelihood. Then, Evans-Pritchard examines the territorial sections which form their political system, in the absence of a centralised political authority. The Nuer are a good example of a stateless (or, acephalous) society. Their discussion has given rise to the concept of segmentary political system, where social order is largely a function of the opposition and balance of different sections of society.

Evans-Pritchard's description of the elements of Nuer society and their interrelationship guided him to the concept of social structure. Instead of beginning with the idea of person, as did Radcliffe-Brown, he began with viewing social structure in terms of groups. To quote him (1940: 262):

By social structure we mean relations between groups which have a high degree of consistency and constancy.

Structure is an 'organised combination of groups'. Individuals come and go, they are recruited and eliminated over time, but the groups remain the same, for 'generation after generation of people pass through them' (1940: 262). The processes of life and death condition individuals, but the structure of society endures. It is clear that for Evans-Pritchard, social structure deals with units which are largely invariant, i.e., groups. What Radcliffe-Brown means by 'structural form' is what Evans-Pritchard means by 'social structure'. The groups considered for describing social structure may be called 'structural groups' – the examples of which among the Nuer are territorial groups, lineages and age-sets.

Evans-Pritchard does not consider the family as a 'structural group'. It is because he thinks that the family does not have the kind of consistency and constancy which other groups have. A family disappears at the death of its members and a new family comes into existence. However, it does not imply that the family is less important, for it is 'essential for the preservation of the structure' (1940: 262). New members are born into family, which maintain the system and its continuity. This formulation of structure, Evans-Pritchard clarifies, does not imply that the groups — consistent and constant — that constitute the structure are static. Territorial, lineage and age-set systems do change, but slowly, and 'there is always the same kind of interrelationship between their segments.'

Reflecting on the example of the Nuer, Evans-Pritchard says that the tribe is not a haphazard congregation of residential units. Every local group is segmented, and these segments are fused in relation to other groups. Because of this, each unit can only be defined in terms of the whole system. One may conceptualise a society as a 'system of groups' in which relations exist between 'groups of persons', and these relations are structural relations. Thus, structure is a 'relation between groups'. These relations can be spoken

of in terms of a system. Evans-Pritchard considers kinship relations as a kinship system; or, one may speak of political relations as a political system.

This brings us to the issue of defining a group. For Evans-Pritchard, a group is a congregation of people who consider themselves as a distinct unit in relation to the other units. The members of a group have a discernible sense of identity and they are defined so by other groups. Among the members of a group exist reciprocal obligations. They are expected to fuse together whenever they encounter an issue pertaining to their group or one of its members. The 'vengeance groups' are formed on this basis. Their aim is to avenge the death of one of their members. In a case of homicide, the members of the group of the slain become one as opposed to the members of the group of the slayer, thus emerge two 'structurally equivalent and mutually opposed groups'. In this sense, the segments of a tribe, a lineage, and an age-set are all examples of groups. However, a man's kindred does not constitute a group, and so do the members of a neighbouring tribe or the strangers.

To sum up: for Evans-Pritchard, the parts of social structure, among which structural relations are to be described, are groups that endure over time. Social structure is not an empirical entity for him. From the study of the social relations of people, we move on to an understanding of their groups. When we describe the relations between groups, we are already on our way of describing their social structure. Therefore, social structure is an anthropologist's abstraction from the existing reality. It should be kept in mind here that for Evans-Pritchard (1951), social anthropology is not a branch of natural science, as it is for Radcliffe-Brown, but it is a kind of historiography. Its kinship is with history, and not natural and biological sciences.

5.5 Social Structure is a Model: Contributions of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Edmund Leach

Perhaps the most provocative and debatable contribution to the concept of social structure was that of Claude Lévi-Strauss, the French structuralist, who is famous for his ingenious cross-cultural analysis of myths and kinship systems. If for functionalism, society is a 'kind of living creature', consisting of parts, which can be 'dissected and distinguished', for structuralism, it is the analogy from language that helps us in conceptualizing society. From the study of a given piece of language, the linguist tries to arrive at its grammar, the underlying rules which make an expression meaningful, although the speakers of that language may not know about it. Similarly, the structuralist from a given piece of social behaviour tries to infer its underlying structure. In structuralism, the shift is from observable behaviour to structure, from organic analogy to language (Barnard 2000).

Further, structuralism submits that the set of relations between different parts can be transformed into 'something' that appears to be different from what it was earlier. It is the idea of transformation — of one into another — that lies at the core of structuralism, rather than the quality of relations. Edmund Leach (1968: 486) has given a good example to illustrate this. A piece of music can be transformed in a variety of ways. It is written down, played on a piano, recorded on a phonographic record, transmitted over the radio, and finally played back to the audience. In each case, the piece of music passes through a 'whole series of transformations'. It appears as 'printed notes, as a pattern of finger movements, as sound waves, as modulations of

the grooves on a piece of bakelite, as electromagnetic vibrations, and so on.' But what is common to all these manifestations of music, one different from the other, and each conditioned by its own rules, is their structure. In a similar fashion, while different societies vary, what remains invariant (and common) to them is their structure. Lévi-Strauss (1963) aptly showed this in one of his studies where he compared the totemic society of the Australian Aborigines with Indian caste system, and found that both of them had the same structure. If for Radcliffe-Brown, structure is observable, for Lévi-Strauss, it is an abstract concept. If for Radcliffe-Brown, what persists is the 'structure' of a particular society, at a particular point of time and place, for Lévi-Strauss, what persists is the 'structure of the entire human society' (Barnes, R.H. 2001).

In his celebrated essay of 1953 in A.L. Kroeber's *Anthropology Today*, titled 'Social Structure', Lévi-Strauss says that social structure is not a field of study; it is not a 'province of enquiry'. We do not study social structure, but it is an explanatory method and can be used in any kind of social studies. In opposition to Radcliffe-Brown, Lévi-Strauss says that the term 'social structure' has nothing to do with empirical reality. It refers to the models that are built up from empirical reality. He writes: '…the object of social-structure studies is to understand social relations with the help of models' (1953: 532). Social structure is a model; it is a method of study.

Here, Lévi-Strauss distinguishes the concept of social structure from that of social relations. The latter are the 'raw data of social experience' – they are the relations between people, empirical and observable. It is from social relations that models comprising the social structure are built. Although the models are built from raw, empirical reality, they cannot be reduced to it. The ensemble of social relations in a given society can be described, but social structure is an anthropologist's construction, built for the purpose of analysis.

Reflection and Action 5.2

How does Levi-Strauss distinguish between the concept of social structure and social relations?

Lévi-Strauss makes three distinctions: first, between observation and experimentation on models; second, the conscious and unconscious character of the models; and third, between mechanical and statistical models. The observation of social relations and the construction of models after these facts need to be distinguished from 'experiments' on models. By experimentation, Lévi-Strauss means the 'controlled comparison' of models of the same or of a different kind, with an intention to identify the model that accounts best for the observed facts. In a structural analysis, the first step is to observe the facts without any bias, then to describe them in relationship to themselves and in relation to the whole. From this, models are constructed, and in the final analysis, the best model is chosen. This distinction is with reference to the anthropologist who studies society.

By comparison, the distinction between conscious and unconscious models is made with reference to the society under study. Conscious models, also known as 'homemade models' and 'norms', are the "insider's models": they are those according to which the society views itself. Underneath these

models are 'deeper structures', the unconscious models, which the society does not perceive directly or consciously. Anthropologists principally work with the models that they construct from the deeper lying phenomena, rather than with conscious models. It is because, Lévi-Strauss says, the aim of conscious models is to 'perpetuate the phenomena' and not to 'explain' it. But, from this, we should not infer that conscious models could be dismissed, for in some cases, they are far more accurate than those that anthropologists build. Even when conscious models are inaccurate, they guide us to deeper structures.

Let us now come to the last distinction. The classic formulation of mechanical models is that they are those models which lie on the same scale as the phenomenon is. And, when they — the model and the phenomenon — lie on a different scale, they are called statistical models. Unfortunately, as critics have noted, Lévi-Strauss does not explain the meaning of the 'same scale'. But from the example he has given, it seems that he is concerned with the quantitative differences between 'what people say' and 'what they do'. To make it clear, Lévi-Strauss gives the example of the laws of marriage. When there is no difference between marriage rules and social groupings — the two are placed on the same scale — the model formed will be mechanical. And when several factors affect the type of marriage and people have no option but to deviate from the rule, the model formed will be statistical.

Box 5.2: Edmund Leach on Social Structure

The British anthropologist, Edmund Leach (1954, 1961), also made a significant contribution to the idea of social structure as a model, although there are many significant differences between the approaches of Lévi-Strauss and Leach to structuralism. For instance, whereas Lévi-Strauss is interested in unearthing the 'universal structures' – structures applicable to all human societies at all point of time — Leach applies the method of structuralism to understand the local (or regional) structures. Because of this, some term Leach's approach 'neo-structural' (Kuper 1996 [1973]).

Leach has formulated a conception of social structure that is "essentially the same as Lévi-Strauss's" (Nutini 1970: 76). Like Lévi-Strauss, Leach divides the 'social universe' into different epistemological categories: the raw data of social experience (i.e., social relations) and the models that are built from it. Models are not empirical; they are the 'logical constructions' in the mind of the anthropologist. Like Lévi-Strauss, Leach also arrives at the distinction between the mechanical and statistical models, i.e., models built respectively on 'what people say' and 'what people do', but he calls mechanical models 'jural rules' and statistical models 'statistical norms'. The meaning Leach gives to 'jural rules' and 'statistical norms' is essentially the same which Lévi-Strauss gives to mechanical and statistical models.

But two important differences stand out. First, for Lévi-Strauss, both mechanical and statistical models are of roughly equal analytical value and they complement each other. For Leach, jural rules and statistical norms should be treated as separate frames of reference. In an analysis, the statistical norms should have priority over the jural rules. We should begin our study with the actual behaviour of people, the deviations that occur and the conformity they achieve. Second, Leach points out that mechanical models or jural rules are qualitative rules of behaviour. Sanctions support

them and they have the power of coercion. Statistical models or norms are only 'statistical averages of individual behaviour'. They do not have any coercive power.

5.6 Conclusion

The concept of social structure has been a 'pleasant puzzle', to remember the words of A.L. Kroeber (1948), to which, at one time, almost every anthropologist and sociologist tried to make a contribution, either by drawing attention to the part (or parts) of society that seemed important to the author, or by lending support to an already existing idea or theory of social structure. As noted in the beginning, the debate concerning social structure has centered around two issues: (1) Among which parts of society are there structural relations? And, (2) is social structure 'real' or a 'model' which the investigator constructs? Of the two major opinions on social structure, Lévi-Strauss's is closely connected to his method of structuralism – social structure is a 'model' devised for undertaking the study of social behaviour (relations and experiences). For Radcliffe-Brown, social structure is an 'empirical' entity, constituting the subject matter of social anthropology and sociology. In his letter to Lévi-Strauss, Radcliffe-Brown expressed his disagreement with the former's concept of social structure and the confusion clouding the idea of social structure as a 'model'. Radcliffe-Brown also thought that what meant by the term 'structural type' was what Lévi-Strauss's term 'model' implied (see Kuper, ed, 1977).

A concept of social structure that the Australian anthropologist, S.F. Nadel, proposes tries to combine the views of both Radcliffe-Brown and Lévi-Strauss. In his posthumously published *The Theory of Social Structure* (1957), Nadel disagrees with Radcliffe-Brown's idea that social structure is an observable entity, but an abstraction from it. At the same time, he rejects Lévi-Strauss's view that social structure has nothing to do with empirical reality. From Radcliffe-Brown, he borrows the idea that each person occupies a position in the social structure, but from an empirical level of inter-personal interaction, he moves to a level of abstraction where the person becomes the actor who plays a role with respect to the others. This abstraction, however, does not imply that it loses touch with reality. Nadel (1957: 150) writes:

I consider social structure, of whatever degree of refinement, to be still the social reality itself, or an aspect of it, not the logic behind it…

For Nadel, the components of social structure are roles and the pattern (or design) of interconnected roles constitutes the social structure of a society. His definition of social structure is as follows (1957: 12):

We arrive at the structure of a society through abstracting from the concrete population and its behaviour the pattern or network (or 'system') of relationships obtaining 'between actors in their capacity of playing roles relative to one another'.

Besides Nadel, some other sociologists have also emphasised the importance of roles in defining social structure. Parsons (1961), for example, says that the structure of a social system is defined with respect to the 'institutionalized patterns of normative culture'. Norms vary according to, first, the position of actors in interactive situations, and second, the type of activity. Norms define roles, with the corresponding rules of behaviour, and they also

constitute the institutions. The aim of social structure is to regulate human behaviour. In his conception of social structure, Peter Blau (1977) also speaks of the 'social positions among which a population is distributed.' Some of these concepts of social structure have been put to test in empirical situation. For instance, Blau and Schwartz (1984) applied Blau's ideas to understand real life.

5.7 Further Reading

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