

# Social structure

In the social sciences, **social structure** is the patterned social arrangements in society that are both emergent from and determinant of the actions of the individuals. On the macro scale, social structure is the system of socioeconomic stratification (e.g., the class structure), social institutions, or, other patterned relations between large social groups. On the meso scale, it is the structure of social network ties between individuals or organizations. On the micro scale, it can be the way norms shape the behavior of actors within the social system.

These scales are not always kept separate. For example, recent scholarship by John Levi Martin has theorized that certain macro-scale structures are the emergent properties of micro-scale cultural institutions (this meaning of “structure” resembles that used by anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss). Marxist sociology also has a history of mixing different meanings of social structure, though it has done so by simply treating the cultural aspects of social structure as epiphenomena of its economic ones.

Since the 1920s, the term has been in general use in social science,<sup>[1]</sup> especially as a variable whose sub-components needed to be distinguished in relationship to other sociological variables.

## 1 Overview

The notion of social structure *as relationship between different entities or groups* or *as enduring and relatively stable patterns of relationship*<sup>[2]</sup> emphasises the idea that society is grouped into structurally related groups or sets of roles, with different functions, meanings or purposes. One example of social structure is the idea of “social stratification”, which refers to the idea that most societies are separated into different strata (levels), guided (if only partially) by the underlying structures in the social system. This approach has been important in the academic literature with the rise of various forms of structuralism. It is important in the modern study of organizations, because an organization’s structure may determine its flexibility, capacity to change, and many other factors. Therefore, structure is an important issue for management.

Social structure may be seen to influence important social systems including the economic system, legal system, political system, cultural system, and others. Family, religion, law, Economics economy, and class are all social structures. The “social system” is the parent system of those various systems that are embedded in it.

## 2 History

The early study of social structures has informed the study of institutions, culture and agency, social interaction, and history. Alexis de Tocqueville was apparently the first to use the term social structure; later, Karl Marx, Herbert Spencer, Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies, and Émile Durkheim all contributed to structural concepts in sociology. Weber investigated and analyzed the institutions of modern society: market, bureaucracy (private enterprise and public administration), and politics (e.g. democracy).

One of the earliest and most comprehensive accounts of social structure was provided by Karl Marx, who related political, cultural, and religious life to the mode of production (an underlying economic structure). Marx argued that the economic base substantially determined the cultural and political superstructure of a society. Subsequent Marxist accounts, such as that by Louis Althusser, proposed a more complex relationship that asserted the relative autonomy of cultural and political institutions, and a general determination by economic factors only “in the last instance”.<sup>[3]</sup>

In 1905, the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies first published his study *The Present Problems of Social Structure* in the U.S.A.,<sup>[4]</sup> arguing that only the constitution of a multitude into a unity creates a “social structure” (basing this approach on his concept of social will).

Émile Durkheim (drawing on the analogies between biological and social systems popularized by Herbert Spencer and others) introduced the idea that diverse social institutions and practices played a role in assuring the functional integration of society through assimilation of diverse parts into a unified and self-reproducing whole. In this context, Durkheim distinguished two forms of structural relationship: mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity. The former describes structures that unite similar parts through a shared culture; the latter describes differentiated parts united through social exchange and material interdependence.<sup>[3]</sup>

As did Marx and Weber, more generally, Georg Simmel developed a wide-ranging approach that provided observations and insights into domination and subordination, competition, division of labor, formation of parties, representation, inner solidarity coupled with exclusiveness toward the outside, and many similar features in the state, in a religious community, in an economic association, in an art school, and in family and kinship networks (how-

ever diverse the interests that give rise to these associations, the forms in which interests are realized may yet be identical (Crothers, 1996)).

The notion of social structure was extensively developed in the 20th century, with key contributions from structuralist perspectives drawing on the theories of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Feminist or Marxist perspectives, from functionalist perspectives such as those developed by Talcott Parsons and his followers, or from a variety of analytic perspectives (see Blau 1975, Lopez and Scott 2000). Some follow Marx in trying to identify the basic dimensions of society that explain the other dimensions, most emphasizing either economic production or political power. Others follow Lévi-Strauss in seeking logical order in cultural structures. Still others, notably Peter Blau, follow Simmel in attempting to base a formal theory of social structure on numerical patterns in relationships—analyzing, for example, the ways in which factors like group size shape intergroup relations.<sup>[3]</sup>

The notion of social structure is intimately related to a variety of central topics in social science, including the relation of structure and agency. The most influential attempts to combine the concept of social structure with agency are Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration and Pierre Bourdieu's practice theory. Giddens emphasizes the duality of structure and agency, in the sense that structures and agency cannot be conceived apart from one another. This permits him to argue that structures are neither independent of actors nor determining of their behavior, but rather sets of rules and competencies on which actors draw, and which, in the aggregate, they reproduce. Giddens's analysis, in this respect, closely parallels Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of the binaries that underlie classic sociological and anthropological reasoning (notably the universalizing tendencies of Lévi-Strauss's structuralism). Bourdieu's practice theory also seeks a more supple account of social structure as embedded in, rather than determinative of, individual behavior.<sup>[3]</sup>

Other recent work by Margaret Archer (morphogenesis theory), Tom R. Burns and collaborators (actor-system dynamics theory and social rule system theory), and Immanuel Wallerstein (World Systems Theory) provided elaborations and applications of the sociological classics in structural sociology.

### 3 Definitions and concepts

As noted above, social structure has been identified as

- the relationship of definite entities or groups to each other,
- enduring patterns of behaviour by participants in a social system in relation to each other, and
- institutionalised norms or cognitive frameworks that structure the actions of actors in the social system.

Lopez and Scott (2000) distinguish between *institutional structure* and *relational structure*, where in the former:

whereas in the latter:

Social structure can also be divided into *microstructure* and *macrostructure*. Microstructure is the pattern of relations between most basic elements of social life, that cannot be further divided and have no social structure of their own (for example, pattern of relations between individuals in a group composed of individuals - where individuals have no social structure, or a structure of organizations as a pattern of relations between social positions or social roles, where those positions and roles have no structure by themselves). Macrostructure is thus a kind of 'second level' structure, a pattern of relations between objects that have their own structure (for example, a political social structure between political parties, as political parties have their own social structure). Some types of social structures that modern sociologists differentiate are *relation structures* (in family or larger family-like clan structures), *communication structures* (how information is passed in organizations) and *sociometric structures* (structures of sympathy, antipathy and indifference in organizations - this was studied by Jacob L. Moreno).

Social rule system theory reduces the structures of (3) to particular rule system arrangements, that is, the types of basic structures of (1 and 2). It shares with *role theory*, *organizational* and *institutional sociology*, and *network analysis* the concern with structural properties and developments and at the same time provides detailed conceptual tools needed to generate interesting, fruitful propositions and models and analyses.

Sociologists also distinguish between:

- normative structure — pattern of relations in given structure (organisation) between norms and modes of operations of people of varying social positions
- ideal structure — pattern of relations between beliefs and views of people of varying social positions
- interest structure — pattern of relations between goals and desires of people of varying social positions
- interaction structure — forms of communications of people of varying social positions

### 4 Origins and development

Some believe that social structure is naturally developed. It may be caused by larger system needs, such as the need for labour, management, professional and military classes, or by conflicts between groups, such as competition among political parties or among elites and masses. Others believe that this structuring is not a result of natural processes, but is socially constructed. It may be

created by the power of elites who seek to retain their power, or by economic systems that place emphasis upon competition or cooperation.

The most thorough account of the evolution of social structure is perhaps provided by structure and agency accounts that allow for a sophisticated analysis of the co-evolution of social structure and human agency, where socialised agents with a degree of autonomy take action in social systems where their action is on the one hand mediated by existing institutional structure and expectations but may, on the other hand, influence or transform that institutional structure.

## 5 Critical implications

The notion of social structure may mask systematic biases, as it involves many identifiable subvariables, for example, gender. Some argue that men and women who have otherwise equal qualifications receive different treatment in the workplace because of their gender, which would be termed a “social structural” bias, but other variables (such as time on the job or hours worked) might be masked. Modern social structural analysis takes this into account through multivariate analysis and other techniques, but the analytic problem of how to combine various aspects of social life into a whole remains.<sup>[5]</sup>

## 6 See also

## 7 References

- [1] Merton, Robert. 1938. *Social Structure and Anomie*. American Sociological Review, Vol. 3, No.5, pp.672-682
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## 8 Further reading

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