Chapter 2 overview

 The concept of structure has been essential to the study of society from the very beginning of sociology. The concept of structure is somewhat vague, and sociological approaches to the study of it have been numerous. Chapter 2 provides an overview of these different approaches to the study of social structure and how they have evolved over time. Some of the earliest sociological theorists, including Durkheim and Comte, were structuralists. These theorists attempted to discern the universal laws that governed society, and how they shaped human behavior. In particular, they felt that social structure was comprised of the various institutions that were necessary for a society's continued existence. These early theorists borrowed heavily from biology both concepts and language. For them, structure and function were intertwined. Structures emerged in response to the functions necessary for society's survival, and structures changed in response to changing societal needs. The object of their study was not individual behavior, but the structures that shaped it.

 In the twentieth century, theories of social structure developed considerably. Anthropologists, such as Malinowski, adopted Durkheim's view of the relationship of structure and function, but also focused on the importance of language in shaping how individuals saw the world and how the world was held together. In addition, he focused on the importance of rituals and noneconomic trading for social cohesion. Rituals, such as the Kula Ring Exchange ritual of the Trobriand Islanders of New Guinea, created durable connections between people within and among different societies. Alfred Racdliffe-Brown focused on kinship relations, and how they created a network structure that helped hold societies together.

 Perhaps the most prominent structural theorist of the 20th century was Talcott Parsons. Parsons was part of the Sociology Department at Harvard University, which became a center for structural theory largely due to the influence of Vilfredo Pareto. Parsons was chiefly concerned with the ways in which societies maintained order. He viewed societies as goal-seeking systems that were comprised of complex subsystems of patterned behaviors. Parsons developed the AGIL paradigm that focused on four functional imperatives in any society: Adaptation, Goal attainment, Integration, and Latency. Societies develop particular systems, including social, personal, biological and cultural systems that allowed them to accomplish these goals and minimize conflict. Niklas Luhmann, who briefly studied with Parsons at Harvard, also theorized about the functioning of social systems, and argued that communication was a vital process through which systems establish meaning and adapt to external environments.

 Structuralism turned away from the systems-based theories of Durkheim, Parsons, and others in the mid-Twentieth century, and moved toward a more linguistic approach. This linguistic turn highlighted the importance of language as the creator of the social world. For those a part of the linguistic turn, language was viewed as having the potential not only to connect and divide the peoples of the world, but also to give meaning to the world in particular ways. Several prominent philosophers contributed to this theoretical perspective, including Ludwig Wittgenstein, who focused on the role that words and language played in human thought and meaning-making. All interpretations and meaning in the world had to develop from language. Ferdinand de Saussure shifted the focus to the context in

which meaning emerges. His science of semiotics examined not only how meaning is constituted, but also how the rules of language determine how sentences and, in turn, meaning could be structured. His perspective focused on the sign, or the basic unit of communication, which included both the signifier (a word, symbol, etc…) used to denote something and the signified, which is the mental concept in which people of a particular culture associate with the signifier. Developments in anthropology also affected the development of structuralism. Claude Levi-Strauss developed the idea of "Deep-structures" to refer to unconscious internal rules that guided language and behavior. It is from this unconscious infrastructure that social structure emerges.

While the linguistic turn focused on language and unconscious processes that created structure, others, including Louis Althusser, drew on the 19th century structuralists that focused on the macro-level systems that governed human behavior. Althusser helped to reinvent the work of Karl Marx by focusing on the work of Karl Marx. For Althusser, reigning social ideologies shape social structures, including the economy, the family, and religion, which in turn shape human activity. Ideologies provide codes or frameworks that individuals use to make sense of society. These codes are internalized through early socialization. It shapes individual consciousness, and is crucial to the development of social structure. The reach of the linguistic turn was felt beyond the boundaries of sociology. Roland Barthes advocated for the development of a more scientific literary criticism that examined hidden meanings of popular images in the media, and the power they had to shape human consciousness. He argued that the consumers, and not the producers, of texts brought meaning to them by placing them in social context. The linguistic turn was also felt in psychoanalysis. Jacques Lacan focused on language and the role in played in mediating the natural and social worlds.

Although some, including the prominent sociological theorist Anthony Giddens, have claimed that structuralism has failed as a theoretical paradigm, it's clear that there are a variety of structuralisms, and that some have fared better than others. Several theoretical traditions, including the global theory advanced by Immanual Wallerstein, remain healthy and vigorous today. Wallerstein's world systems theory views the world as a broadly delineated economic entity not confined to political or cultural boundaries. This entity is comprised of subsystems that interact to produce the world—the core, or central groups or nations, a semiperiphery, and a periphery. Similar to Marxian structuralism, world systems theory argues that resources flow from the periphery towards the core, while the core exploits peripheral areas for economic benefit.

Other theories influenced by structuralism have focused more squarely on human decision-making. Rational choice theory assumes that decision-making is a product of reason, which is driven by self-interested behavior. When these decisions and behaviors accumulate, a social structure emerges. Others have viewed the social world as a market of exchanges for tangible and less tangible rewards, and see social structure as a network of obligations that arise as people exchange those rewards. From these early theories of George Homans and Peter Blau have emerged more formal theories of social networks. Social network theory attempts to assess and interpret the structures of human interactive relations through diagrams and analysis of social interconnections, particularly in the area of communications. Through the mapping of interactions, a visual map of network structures can be created and individuals' locations in those networks can be determined.

The linguistic turn continues to exert influence on varieties of structural theory. Narratology is a theoretical perspective that focuses on the ways in which stories about the world are constructed. These theories typically distinguish between what is narrated—that is, the story being told—and how it is narrated—the form the narrative takes. These narratives are important influences on the ways in which society is internalized and interpreted, and can influence social structure in much the same way as the linguistic theorists described above viewed the influence of language.

Although structuralism is not nearly as prominent as it once was, recent theories about the relationship between social structure and human agency are clearly by this paradigm. For some, power rests with individual human agents who have the ability to construct and reconstruct their social environments. For others, structure continues to play a large part in determining the ways in which humans behave. The most fruitful contributions to the agency-structure debate view the relationship in more dynamic terms. Anthony Giddens's structuration theory argues that structures are both constraining and enabling. They are not simply brought into existence by those who comprise them' they are continually being recreated by them. Pierre Bourdieu developed a model of habitus and field, in which the habitus in the internalized, mental, cognitive and somatic structures that people use to interpret the world. The habitus is developed in a particular social location, so that it established a set of personal and social parameters of what is thinkable and unthinkable.   The field is a structured system of social positions occupied by individuals and institutions. The habitus that one develops depends on their position in the field.

More recently, poststructuralism has emerged as a breakaway faction of structuralism. Instead of systems and stability, poststructuralists focus on the instability of language and signs, and many truths existing in the world.

Chapter 2 outline

1) Structuralism and Beyond

   a) The concept of structure has been essential to the study of sociology from the beginning. For the earliest theorists, the goal of sociology was to discover the underlying structures that were necessary for societies to work.

   b) Those early sociological theories focused on these structures instead of individuals

2) Twentieth-century Structuralisms

   a) For a long time, different major sociological theorists used the term structure in different ways

   b) Peter Blau deciphered the three major ways the term was used:

1. Structure of social positions and relationships

2. Deep structure that underlie all social life

3. Networks

c) Anthropologists including Malinowski focused on the needs society had, and the structures that emerged to fulfill those needs

d) Radcliffe-Brown argued that structure was related to, and in some cases led to, culture

3) Parsons and Social Structure

a) Talcott Parsons was influenced by the economist Vilfredo Pareto

b) Parsons leaned heavily on a systems theory approach, and was interested in the maintenance of order in society

c) His focus was on consensus in society

d) To describe how societies maintained order, Parsons developed the AGIL paradigm, which focused on "functional imperatives" in society

4) Luhmannian Structuralism

a) For Luhmann, systems were based on shared meanings. Action was based on the institutionalized meanings in society.

b) Unlike Parsons, Luhmann did not believe that consensus was necessary

c) Systems are set off from the environment by boundaries, which are often comprised of the meanings shared by those within the boundaries

5) Structural Intimacies

a) Wilhelm Wundt focused on the elements or structures constituting human consciousness

    i) Wilhelm's student Edward Titchener more fully developed the structuralist perspective in psychology

b) Sigmund Freud played a pivotal role in the exploration of the structure of the unconscious

6) Structuralism and the Linguistic Turn

   a) The linguistic turn is modern intellectual paradigm that privileges language as the creator of the social world

      i) Human thought, and therefore shared meanings, form the basis of society and can only come from language

   b) For Wittgenstein, language and its organization into sentences were necessary for thought.

   c) For Saussure, language is meaningless if it is taken out of the context in which it is created

      i) He focused on the underlying rules that existed cross-culturally in languages

      ii) His science of semiotics focuses on how the rules of language affect social meaning

      iii) The sign was the basic unit of communication

         (1) It consists of the signified and the signifier

   d) Claude Levi-Strauss was an anthropologist who focused on language, meaning and structure

      i) He focused on "deep structures," which were formal universals reflecting the nature of human intelligence

      ii) Unconscious internal rules govern both language and behavior

      iii) Four rules governed his structuralism

         (1) It should examine the unconscious infrastructure of cultural phenomena

         (2) Elements of the infrastructure are relational

         (3) Structuralism should be concerned with the system, not the individual

         (4) It was to discover the laws underlying the organizing patterns of phenomena

7) Althusser and Marxian Structuralism

   a) Like other structuralists, Althusser saw structure as the primary determinate of all social activity

   b) Social structures are infused with ideology, or a set of codes or frameworks used to understand society

   c) Capitalism is an economic structure that indoctrinates its subjects

8) Semiotics of Roland Barthes/ Jacques Lacan's Structuralism

   a) Barthes argued the literature was a system of interpretive signs

      i) Barthes questioned hidden meanings underlying popular images displayed in the media

      ii) He proposed that the reader, and not the author, brought meaning to any text

   b) Jacques Lacan saw language as the means through which social and natural worlds were separated from each other

      i) The unconscious is structured like a language

      ii) All conscious life is perceived through meanings that language provides

9) Did Structuralism Fail?

   a) Some argue that is has, but many argue that is hasn't

   b) There are a variety of structuralisms, some are more useful than others

   c) Structuralism can be seen in macro-order issues like urbanization and globalization

10) Contemporary Structural Theory: Critiques of Capital Accumulation

   a) Immanuel Wallerstein draws on historical and structural accounts to explain contemporary globalization

      i) The world is a system comprised of different subsystems

         (1) Core

         (2) Semi-periphery

         (3) Periphery

   b) Many others have approached globalization as a structural phenomenon.

      i) Saskia Sassen

      ii) David Harvey

11) Rational Choice and Network Theory

    a) Rational choice has its roots in utilitarian economics

    b) Assumes that action results from individuals making decisions in their self-interest

    c) Often referred to as "exchange theory" in sociology

    d) George Homans was a pioneer in this theory

        i) He asserted people wanted to maximize rewards and minimize hurt in relations with others

        ii) Exchange also maintained social order

    e) Peter Blau examined how social structure emerged from social interactions and exchanges

    f) James Coleman was another pioneer of rational choice theory.

12) Structuralism and Network Analysis

    a) Social network theory focuses on the structures of human interactions through diagrams and interconnections

    b) These interconnections and interactions are typically mapped graphically

    c) Structure consists of nodes and ties, and the structures of these represent a combination of constraints and opportunities

    d) For many, network analysis is atheoretical. It is more methodological

13) Narrative and Social Theory

    a) Narrative, for structuralists, is less about the story and more about how the story is constructed

    b) Nearly all theories of narrative distinguish between what is narrated and how it is narrated

    c) Roland Barthes was an important narrative theorist, who argued that narratives cannot be produced without reference to a system of units and rules

14) The Legacy of Structuralism: The Structure/Agency Divide

    a) For structuralists, individual agency is a consequence of structure

b) For others, agents construct their own social worlds

c) Several theories and theorists have combined these views in a more nuanced way

d) Anthony Giddens and Structuration

    i) Neither the individual nor the structure is capable of explaining human behavior

    ii) There is a dialectic interplay between the two

    iii) Structure takes on one of three types

        (1) Signification

        (2) Legitimation

        (3) Domination

e) Bourdieu's Habitus and Field

    i) Habitus represents internalized mental, cognitive, and somatic structures that people use to assess the world

    ii) Habitus establishes a set of personal social parameters in terms of what is thinkable and unthinkable

    iii) These parameters also provide an enduring structure

f) Sociology and Poststructuralism

    i) Poststructuralism was a breakaway faction of structuralism

    ii) Poststructuralists see no objective reality at play

Chapter 2 learning objectives

After reading this chapter, students should be able to:

Define and explain the variety of twentieth century structuralisms

Describe the influence of Talcott Parsons, and explain his AGIL Paradigm

Describe the linguistic turn, and its effect on social theory

Define and explain the varieties of contemporary structural theory

Discussion Questions:

1) Think of a social institution or social system (the college/university, the family, your workplace, etc…). What subsystems exist in each of those institutions to accomplish Adaptation, Goal attainment, Integration, and Latency? How well do they actually accomplish those goals?

2) Can you think of any concepts or ideas in English that would be difficult to explain to a non-native speaker? Are you aware of any concepts in other languages that don't really translate to English? Are you familiar with any subcultures that've invented words or language that only members of the subculture understand? What does that say about the role of language in shaping social structure?