

Structuralism

Another important theoretical approach to the concept of social structure is structuralism (sometimes called French structuralism), which studies the underlying, unconscious regularities of human expression—that is, the unobservable structures that have observable effects on behaviour, society, and culture. French anthropologist Claude Lévi–Strauss derived this theory from structural linguistics, developed by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. According to Saussure, any language is structured in the sense that its elements are interrelated in nonarbitrary, regular, rule-bound ways; a competent speaker of the language largely follows these rules without being aware of doing so. The task of the theorist is to detect this underlying structure, including the rules of transformation that connect the structure to the various observed expressions.

According to Lévi–Strauss, this same method can be applied to social and cultural life in general. He constructed theories concerning the underlying structure of kinship systems, myths, and customs of cooking and eating. The structural method, in short, purports to detect the common structure of widely different social and cultural forms. This structure does not determine concrete expressions, however; the variety of expressions it generates is potentially unlimited. Moreover, the structures that generate the varieties of social and cultural forms

ultimately reflect, according to Lévi–Strauss, basic characteristics of the human mind.

Structures such as the human mind, grammar, and language are sometimes called “deep structures” or “substructures.” Since such structures are not readily observable, they must be discerned from intensive interpretive analysis of myths, language, or texts. Then they can be applied to explain the customs or traits of social institutions. French philosopher Michel Foucault, for example, used this approach in his study of corporal punishment. His research led him to conclude that the abolition of corporal punishment by liberal states was an illusion, because the state substituted punishment of the “soul” by monitoring and controlling both the behaviour of prisoners and the behaviour of everyone in the society.