

The Universal Structure of Societies

By Dr. Frank Elwell

A decorative graphic consisting of several horizontal lines of varying lengths and colors (teal, light blue, white) extending from the right side of the slide.

Introduction

For a starting point, it is necessary to break sociocultural systems down into their component parts. This makes it possible to examine the relationships among the component, to see how the components affect one another.

Introduction

There have been numerous ways of doing this. The outline offered in this course is a modification of cultural materialism that was developed by Marvin Harris. This scheme is an extremely useful analytic device for understanding the origin, structure, stability, and change of sociocultural systems.

Introduction

In this lecture we will look at the Universal Structure of Societies, that is, the various parts of human societies and how they fit in to the entire sociocultural system. In the lecture to follow, we will look at the dynamics of sociocultural systems--how they change and evolve over time.

Sociocultural Systems Defined

A collection of people who make use of various means of adapting to their physical environment, who engage in patterned forms of social conduct, and who create shared beliefs and values designed to make sense of their collective actions.

Social Theory

A social theory is simply a world view-- a framework for understanding your world and organizing observations. A theory points to things to look for when examining phenomena.

Cultural Materialism

Cultural materialism attempts to account for human societies:

- Origin
- Maintenance
- Change



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Several Assumptions

There are a couple of assumptions to the theory. First, the various parts of society are interrelated. When one part of society changes, other parts must also change.

Assumptions

An institution, such as the family cannot be looked at in isolation from the economic, political, or religious institutions of a society. When one part of the system changes it necessarily has effect on other parts of the system.

Assumptions

Viewing society as a system of interrelated parts is at the core of most sociological theory. The difference in most theories is in terms of organizing principles.

Assumptions

According to Cultural Materialism, the way a society is organized to meet the needs of its population determines the rest of the system.

Assumptions

So, the two key assumptions:

- Society is a system, and the various parts of the system are interrelated.
- The foundation of the sociocultural system is the environment.



David Curl, Oxford Scientific Film

Biopsychological Needs

Mankind is relatively free from biological drives and pre-dispositions. While we are born with some reflexes such as grasping and suckling, we have no real instincts. Rather than relying on instincts the vast repertoire of human behavior is learned.

Biopsychological Needs

To say most behavior is learned and not instinctual does not mean that it is not deeply rooted and internalized. Food taboos are an easy example. Such taboos are clearly learned. But the violation of many food taboos can cause physiological reactions. (Say, eating banana slugs.)

Biopsychological Needs

Mankind has five basic biological-psychological needs:

- Eat
- Energy
- Sex
- Love
- Meaning

Need to Eat

People need to eat and will generally opt for diets that offer more rather than fewer calories and proteins and other nutrients.



Ken Graham, ALLESTOCK, INC.

Need to Conserve Energy

People cannot be totally inactive, but when confronted with a given task, they prefer to carry it out by expending less rather than more human energy.

Need for Sex

People are highly sexed and generally find reinforcing pleasure from sexual intercourse.



Need for Love

People need love and affection in order to feel secure and happy, and other things being equal, they will act to increase the love and affection others give them.



Need for Meaning

People need meaning in their lives. This need arises out of our capacity for self awareness.



Archiv Fur Kunst Und Geschichte

Biopsychological Needs

While the needs are universal, the ways in which societies meet these needs as well as the extent to which these needs are met are highly variable. Some societies approve of eating worms, homosexuality, wife sharing, gods, etc.

Biopsychological Needs (minor points):

There are clearly other needs we could list, but we want to be brief, parsimony takes precedence. All the needs we have enumerated are shared with other primates (save meaning).

Biopsychological Needs (minor points):

American's have carried eating rich foods to a high art. Now we diet--but it is a discipline.

American's have carried the conservation of energy to a high art as well. Now, we actively look for ways to expend energy, but exercise is a discipline.

Biopsychological Needs (minor points):

It is also apparent that people learn proper (and improper) objects of their sex drive.

Finally, without love, human infants fail to thrive and can die. With minimal love in adolescence and adulthood, we warp.

Biopsychological Needs (minor points):

Sometimes the need for meaning is fulfilled through religion, sometimes philosophy, sometimes entire cultures try to give meaning to lives (say through consumption).

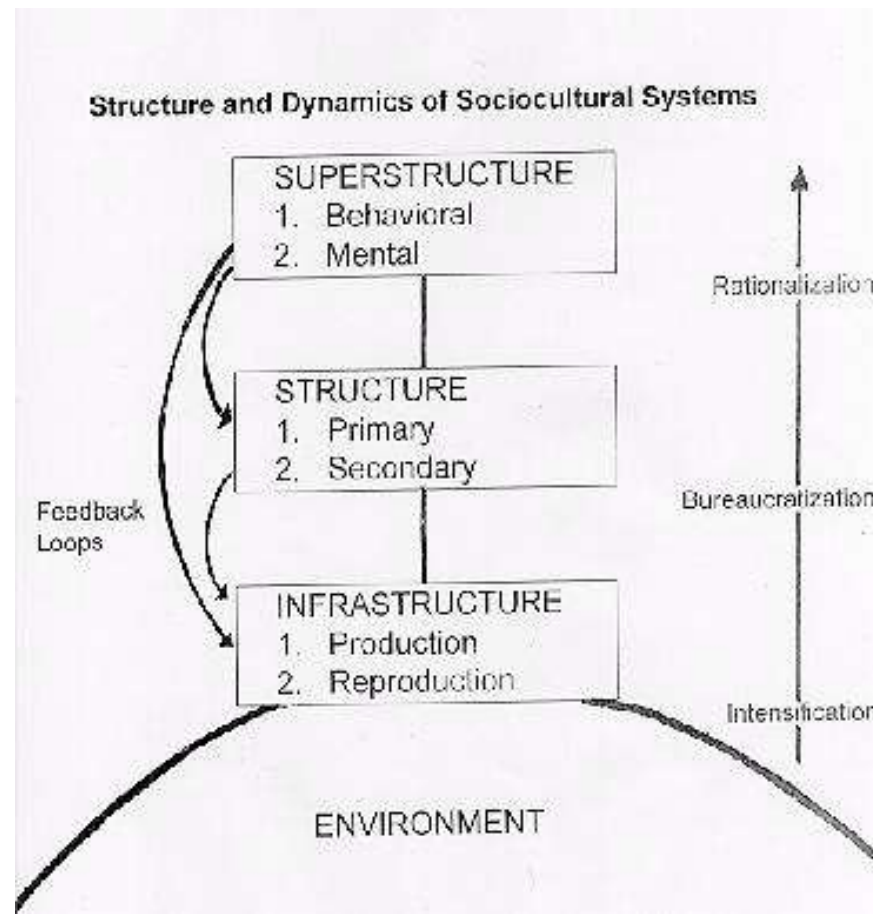
Biopsychological Needs

The entire sociocultural system rests on the way society exploits its environment to meet the five bio-psychological needs of its population.

Universal Structure of Societies

The following slide depicts an outline of the sociocultural system as envisioned by Cultural Materialism. All human social systems can be analyzed in terms of this universal structure. Familiarize yourself with the whole, we will then proceed to discuss the various parts of the system.

Universal Structure of Societies



Environment

The physical, biological, and chemical constraints to which human action is subject.



Steffen Hauser, Oxford Scientific

Environment

The environment includes the physical, chemical and biological constraints to human action. It involves such things as types of soils, the nature of plant and animal life, and the availability of natural resources.

Environment

Like all living organisms, Humans must draw energy from their environment. The environment is limited in terms of the amount of energy and matter it contains, and the amount of pollution it can tolerate.

Environment

The need to draw energy out of the environment in order to satisfy the basic bio-psychological needs of its people is the first and central task of any society.

Environment

Therefore, each society must ultimately exist within the constraints imposed by its environment.



Environmental Constraints

Chief among these constraints is the availability of natural resources. A further constraining factor is the amount of pollution created by society. While mankind can modify these constraints, they cannot be escaped.

Environmental Constraints

It is the external environment to which sociocultural systems must adjust. Adjustment takes place through the infrastructure of societies.

Infrastructure

The infrastructure consists of the production and reproduction practices by which a society manipulates its environment by modifying the amount and type of resources it needs

Infrastructure

A society's infrastructure is its most basic component in the sense that without it physical survival is impossible. All societies must exploit the natural environment in order to survive.

Infrastructure

It is through the infrastructure (reproduction and production) that society manipulates its environment by modifying the amount and type of resources needed.



Infrastructure

The infrastructure is the principal interface between a sociocultural system and its environment. All societies must live within the constraints of the natural environment (depletion and pollution). While these constraints can be modified, they cannot be escaped.

Infrastructure

The modes of production and reproduction are attempts to strike a balance between population and the consumption of energy from a finite environment.



Kim Westerskov, Oxford Scientific

Infrastructural Components:

- Technology
- Population



Dr. A.C. Twomey, Photo Research

Technology

Technology consists of the tools, and techniques with which humans adapt to their physical environment.

Mode of Reproduction

Consisting of behaviors aimed at controlling destructive increases or decreases in population size.



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MODE OF REPRODUCTION

- Demography
- Mating patterns
- Fertility, natality, mortality rates
- Nurturance of infant
- Medicine
- Contraception, abortion, infanticide

Population

Demographic factors are those involving the nature and dynamics of human populations. The size and density of the population, its growth, decline or stability, marriage patterns, patterns of sexual practices, infant mortality, infanticide, methods of population control, and its age and sex composition are important in determining the amount and type of resources needed from the environment.

Mode of Production

Consists of behaviors aimed at satisfying requirements for subsistence.

- Technology of subsistence
- Technological-environmental relationships

Modes of Production through History

- Hunting and Gathering
- Horticulture
- Pastoral
- Agrarian
- Industrial
- Hyper-industrial



Criteria for Classifying Societies

- | Type | Cultivate | Metal | Plow | Iron | Fossil Fuel |
|---------|-----------|-------|------|------|-------------|
| H&G | - | - | - | - | - |
| S. Hort | + | - | - | - | - |
| A. Hort | + | + | - | - | - |
| S. Ag | + | + | + | - | - |
| A. Ag | + | + | + | + | - |
| Ind. | + | + | + | + | + |

Environment-Infrastructural Foundation

It is the environmental and infrastructural relationships that form the foundation of the entire sociocultural system; it is upon this base that the remaining parts of the social system are rooted.

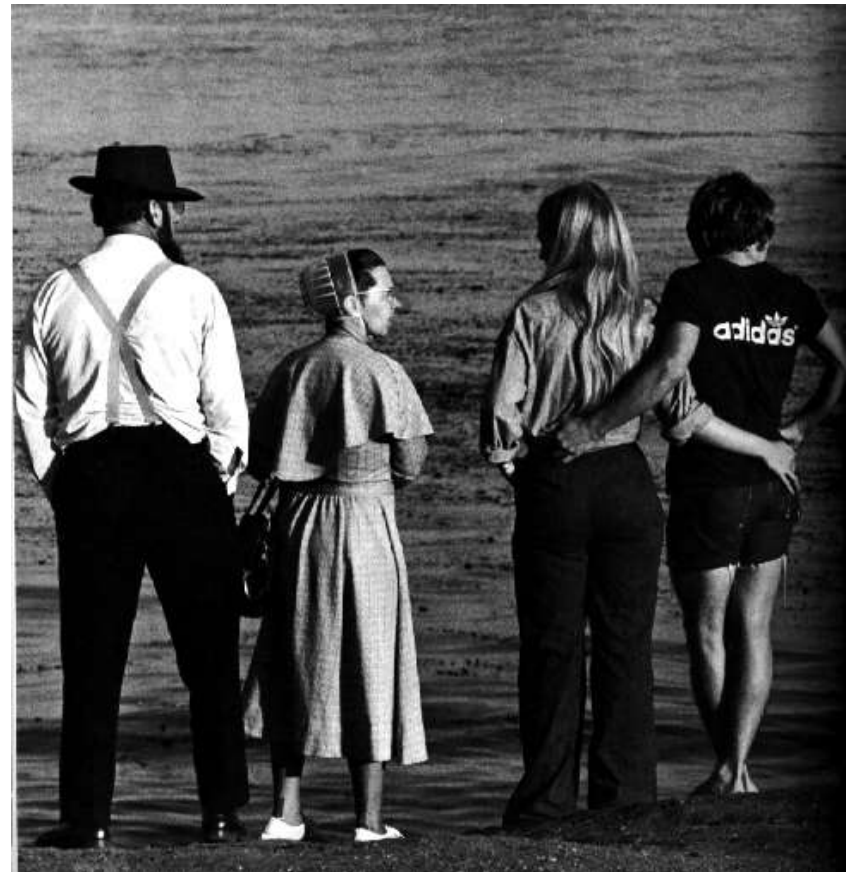
Social Structure

Social structure refers to all human groups and organizations within a sociocultural system.



Social Structure

This component of sociocultural systems consists of the organized patterns of social life carried out among the members of a society.



Social Structure

Social structure consists of all human organizations and groups:

- Primary Groups
- Secondary Organizations

Primary Groups

Primary groups consist of small groups like the family that order our lives within domestic settings. They regulate reproduction, exchange and consumption within these settings. Normally primary groups are small and intimate; we perform multiple roles when we interact within these groups.

Primary Groups

- Family
- Community
- Voluntary Organizations
- Friendship Networks
- Some religious groups

Secondary Organization

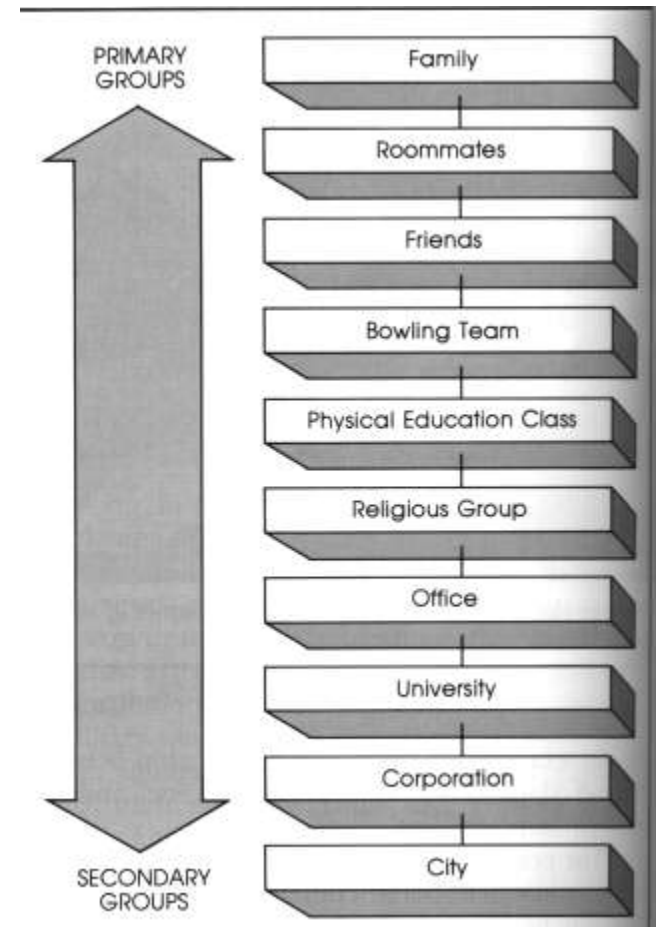
Secondary organizations regulate production, exchange and consumption within and between groups and other sociocultural systems. They tend to be impersonal organizations, members interact on the basis of narrow roles that they play within the organization, and they tend to be coordinated through bureaucracy.

Secondary Groups

- Governments, military, police
- Corporations, business
- Education, media
- Service and welfare organizations.
- Professional and labor organizations.

Continuum:

Primary and secondary groups actually are on a continuum. The diagram at the right illustrates this. For convenience, we dichotomize.



Social Structure

The primary and secondary group dichotomy encompasses all human groups and organizations responsible for the allocation and distribution of all biological and psychological need satisfaction.

Elite

Hierarchies based on class, sex, race, caste, age, ethnic, and other statuses exist throughout the structure of society. All societies have elites that have dominant positions in social groups and organizations. But the power of elites varies across societies and through time.



Elite

In the study of any society it is crucial to note who the elite are, what is their material interest, and gauge the amount of power at its disposal. The bio-psychological satisfaction of those on top of the hierarchies weighs more heavily than those below.

Superstructure

Whereas the structure refers to human groups and behavior, the superstructure refers to mental knowledge, ideas, ideologies, and beliefs. It includes shared assumptions of what is true and false, values (socially defined conceptions of worth), norms (shared standards or rules regarding conduct), mores and folkways.

Superstructure

The Superstructure consists of two parts:

- Cultural
- Mental

Cultural Superstructure

The cultural superstructure includes recreations activities, art, sports, empirical knowledge, scientific theory, folklore, aesthetic tastes, and other cultural products.

Mental Superstructure

The mental superstructure involves the patterned ways in which the members of a society think, conceptualize, and evaluate social and natural reality. Max Weber said there were four basic motivators of human action, four “reasons” why we behave the way we do.

Mental Superstructure

- Values
- Traditions
- Emotions
- Zweckrational

Values

Rational action in relation to a value. Examples:
Attending college because you value the life of the mind. Doing the right thing out of religious or philosophical ideas of right or wrong.



Tradition

Action dictated by custom or habit. Examples:
Sign of the cross. Facing front in an elevator, not talking at movies. Attending college because your mother attended.



Emotional Action

Action determined by affective or emotional states. Examples:
Attending college for a good time, or because your significant other attends.



Zweckrational

Rational action in relation to a goal. Examples:
Building a raft to cross a river. Studying to get a good grade. Attending college to get a good job.



Conclusion

In the next lecture we will look at how sociocultural systems change and evolve through time. You will find that the structure and dynamics of sociocultural systems as outlined in this lecture and the next will bring order, structure, and coherence to the seemingly random acts of history.

Bibliography:

For more information on the structure and dynamics of sociocultural systems, please see my Internet paper:

[Cultural Materialism: A Sociological Revision](#)