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## UNIT 10 STRUCTURALIST PERSPECTIVE

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### Learning Objectives

- To learn about the concept of social structure and social institutions
- How is social stratification achieved and maintained by these structures and institutions
- The variations and dynamics of structure
- Critical appraisal and limitations of the social structural approach

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### 10.1 INTRODUCTION

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The concept of social structure or the structure of social relations is basic to the discipline of social anthropology. Although the theory of structural-functionalism, from where the concept first arose has been both criticised and rejected in the present day, the notion of structure, in the form of some enduring patterns of relationships guided by given norms and rules of behaviour, still forms a part of social theory. All societies are seen to have a basic underlying structure, in terms of their given statuses and accompanying roles, the social positions that are legitimate and accepted and the conglomeration of relations that exist as what we call social institutions. Any society carries out its functions of production and reproduction with the help of these institutions such as the family, the kin group, the local community, the village council, the university, the law courts and the parliament for example.

Some statuses are seen as natural but even biological statuses like age and sex are interpreted socially and produce different kinds of stratification. Stratifications are related to the formal distribution of power and prestige in various statuses and status groups. But there is the added dimension of informal power which can be used to control, coerce and manipulate. Once the notion of informal power is used to understand stratification, then the analysis assumes a degree of dynamism.

Let first understand the most recurrent formal structures of stratification that are found in most historical societies.

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## 10.2 THE BASIC STRUCTURES

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What can be most basic to any human society? The most universal characters of any living being; namely sex, and age. All living things have some form of sexuality. In a more conservative analysis of society, these were just taken to be two, but now it is acceptable that there are many more than just two forms of sexuality and all are accompanied by and dictated by norms and rules of stratification. Age is likewise a universal biological process but may be cast into a system of stratified statuses with differential power and prestige. The variety of ways in which these natural differences are interpreted in different cultures indicates very clearly that biology is secondary to culture and social rules.

So how are these ‘natural inequalities’ interpreted across societies and what kind of stratifications result from them?

**Sex or Sexuality:** The term sexuality is more in use than simply the concept of sex that is more or less dichotomous or assumes heterosexuality as normal. Sexuality expands the man/woman dichotomy to include many more categories that are now recognised by the acronym LGBTQ+; meaning Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, transsexual and queer and a plus for those who may still be left out. This separation of heteronormative individuals and the others is in itself a stratification, where the so-called ‘normal’ are accorded higher status and acceptance in society. Most the gender theory and even classical feminist theory accepted the man/woman division and described the hierarchy that is perceived there as patriarchy or universal domination of women.

There has been a debate across theoreticians about the universality of patriarchy and the inequality of the sexes. Some anthropologists, especially of the Marxist school attribute patriarchy to the institution of private property and the state; while others take it as a universal, present at all times, even in the simplest societies. Maurice Godelier (1982) has shown that among the Baruya of New Guinea, a hunting food gathering community, while men and women are equal in all respects, men have symbolic domination and while society is not stratified into economic or social strata, there is a symbolic stratification based on ritual hierarchy. Channa (2013) has shown a similar situation among the Jad Bhotiya of Uttarakhand, among whom although women have full control over the social world and are equally placed in economic terms, there is a ritual stratification based on the concept that men’s bodies are purer than that of women.

Gendered stratifications begin at the level of the family and kinship group but extend into the public domain of economy and polity. While most persons outside of the heterosexual normative structures are placed at the bottom or the margins of society, men dominate women, nearly universally, although the nature of the domination varies.

**Kinship and Lineage:** Structural stratification mainly indicates social positions that determine the access to resources and the power of control over others. Stratifications occur where ever some social positions or statuses have differential access to both. For example within a household, there is someone recognised as the head of the household who controls the household resources, allocates funds to different ends and whose commands are obeyed by everyone. Such a person, male or female is known as a household head. In lineage-based societies, the eldest in the lineage or a set of elders in the lineage have control. In pre-capitalist societies, lineage-based societies women were considered important as a resource, both for productive purposes, as they contributed significantly in terms of labour and also for reproductive purposes, as

they produced the children to continue the lineage structures. Therefore, control over women was an important indicator of status.

Some Marxist scholars had called this structure, the Lineage Mode of Production, claiming that the elders constituted an exploiting class. But others differed as age is an ongoing process and cannot create a closed class stratification.

There is also the debate as to whether horizontally segmented societies that are those with equally placed lineage segments are stratified? As described by Meyer Fortes, these unilineal descent groups that close their boundaries around descent (either through male or through the female line) act functionally as corporate groups. They are internally managed by the group's elders in terms of both production and reproduction and externally by the political relations of conflict or matrimony that relates to these segments. A careful analysis as done by M. G. Smith (1965) tells that the two aspects of segmentation /hierarchy and power/authority overlap in these societies. On one hand, those in charge of internal management have power and authority by internal stratification; they are also negotiating the feuding and matrimonial relations between the segments that are like external or political relationships. But the segments remain more or less on an equal level. There is a great deal of dynamics in the relations between the segments; arising out of negotiations, contestations, alliances and hostilities by which the segments keep adjusting their structures in relation to each other. The outermost limit of the identity is with the tribe as a whole, as among the Tiv of Nigeria (Bohannon and Bohannon 1953) but at the ground level the segments form and reform, through processes of fission and fusion.

According to Balandier (1970: 58) the segmentary societies, despite their dynamic character are in principle not egalitarian but contain the elements of stratification as the clans are rarely equivalent, and often ranked into orders, sometimes based on specialisations or simply based on achievements of military and matrimonial enterprises. The internal relations of the lineages are always ranked, mostly by age, but also by ability. Such inequalities are reflected in the performance of rituals and the symbolic order. Ability is an added qualification that allows for dynamism within the structure.

Among the Nuer as studied by Evans-Pritchard (1940), despite segmentation, a particular clan or lineage occupies a more privileged position, what Evans-Pritchard has called aristocratic. The members of this lineage have prestige although no power and it is symbolically expressed in the lead role that they play in major ceremonies, like initiations. They play roles like the dignitaries in modern societies who do the cutting of tapes for the inauguration of important events. Members of these lineages do exactly that, they open and close ceremonies but do not have real power or control.

The criteria of stratification given by Pritchard are 1. Clan position (whether they are aristocrats or ordinary). 2. Lineal position, like their position in the lineal line, 3. By the age group, whether they belong to the class of elders and 4. The number of cattle possessed by them and lastly 5. The strength of their personalities.

**Age-sets:** Age-sets are also a structural mode of creating strata that also serve political functions. These perform the role of classes in lineage societies like among the Nuer. These age sets are not a mere classification of persons by age, but the ritual construction of successive classes, that structure the tribe horizontally. An age set comprises individuals of the same sex and equivalent but not the same age. Since age sets are not constructed every year and involve elaborate ritual procedures, they may be separated by as many as seven years or so. All individuals born within that many years will form

an age set only if they have been formally initiated at the same time. If someone misses participation in the ritual, will have to wait till the next age set is formed. Those belonging to the same age set are bound to each other for life and expected to perform social functions together. They are particularly useful to generate a standing labour force. The age sets take on military, judicial and economic functions. It is important to note that scholars like Eisendadt (1954) have noted that age sets cut across kinship and descent relations and bring about a separate set of hierarchy and stratification outside of kinship. They create solidarity beyond kinship and some age groups like those engaged in military activities may impose celibacy to counter kin ties. They are found in societies that have centralised power as well. For example, age groups played a key political role in the Swazi and Zulu kingdoms of Southern Africa. They formed regiments that owed allegiance to the king and served in many capacities.

According to Balandier (1970:83), lineage and age grades are elementary forms of social stratification and even when societies become more complex, these remain present in some form or the other. However, as G.P. Murdock has explained, these institutions by themselves are not hierarchical but become so when they are attached to positions outside of these systems which are based on the control of land, ritual ability and slavery. Slaves, where they exist, were not part of age-grade systems although they could be incorporated within lineages. Many ethnographies have shown the existence of complex hierarchies in societies formed around kinship and lineages.

One of the important examples of complex stratification in a society rooted in kinship, descent and alliance is that of the Kachins of Burma studied by Edmund Leach (1964). He gives the following strata for their society, which are also dynamic and contested: The chiefs or lords (*du*), free men (*darat*), slaves (*mayam*) but between the *du* and the *darat* are the aristocrats or the descendants (real or presumed) of former chiefs and the *surawng*, who are above the slaves and below the *darat*, composed of marriage between free men and slave women.

In modern societies too, elements of such primary stratifications remain. Patriarchy still prevails globally and stratifications based on family, descent and marriage relations are found in the most complex and open societies. For example, even in modern America, descendants of former slaves, the African Americans are marginalised and people still look for connections to powerful families and lineages for superior social status.

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### 10.3 STATUS, ROLE AND OFFICE

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The basic terminologies for understanding stratification are the concepts of status, role and office. Status defines a person's position in relation to others in the same group and in this way status, except in a very simple society is rarely a singular position. Any person may belong to many different groups and in each, her position can be different; for example, a person may be the head of his household but may hold a subordinate position in the place of work. A person may be lowest in the rank of siblings but may head an army. A woman may be subordinated because of her gender, yet be the ruler of a country and rule over men even in a patriarchal society like Queen Victoria ruling over England. It is for this reason that primary stratifications remain complex and only when macro-level stratifications based on an entire class of people is considered one can see a more essentialized structure of strata.

The role is the dynamic aspect of status. Whatever responsibilities a person needs to do and the actions to perform are part of his or her role, for example for a person

holding the status of a priest, a necessary role would be to perform rituals. Those actions that define the status are part of its role. Any other auxiliary actions that a person may perform are not necessarily a part of the role. Like if a priest writes a book, it is not part of his role as a priest. Roles and statuses are usually also understood as an integrated set of rights and duties. A person gets certain privileges and rewards as a sanctioned aspect of holding a status but also has to fulfil the duties that accompany it. The basic structure of any society is made up of all the statuses and roles that can exist in it. The nature of the society is reflected in the range and type of statuses that are found there. For example, in a free democracy, there can be no status as a slave or even as a sovereign. Patrons and clients cannot be found in a free market society.

Office includes both the aspects that it refers to the legitimate position along with rights and duties assigned to a person that is also guided by the norms and rules as set collectively by the society. The concept of the office is always accompanied by the concept of a mandate, a process of legitimacy that is also universally recognised within the society in which it exists. For example, if anyone holds the office of police or a teacher, then everyone in that particular society should know what it entails and what one can expect from them. An office also carries with it a notion of universal expectations. An office is also an abstraction that is viewed without relation to any occupant of that status. In other words, it is a general and not a particularistic concept. It is part of the formal structure of any society.

Individual occupants of any office are judged according to the formal norms and expectations that are attached to that office and which are shared by the members of the society. Some of these may be written and formal rules but there are unwritten and informal rules that lie in the sphere of morality and part of the collective expectations. Although not part of the formal structure, they can nevertheless be quite powerful in judging the performance of the incumbent of any office. For example, sexual misconduct was earlier never spelt out, yet it was an implicit norm and only because of numerous voices raised by women, it is now a part of formal norms for most offices. Similarly, decorum of speech and appearance is also not explicitly mentioned but are expected. In the same way, hierarchical norms are also implicitly recognised though rarely part of written rules. Showing deference to a senior is both expected and executed, but not a part of written rules. The norms dictating hierarchy in any specific situation of structural inequality are also informed by the general character of the society. For example, in Japan, there is an explicit and overt show of deference that is completely lacking in another society like say of America. The same structural relations, for example of teacher and student, although ideally equivalent will be marked with very different levels of inequality in different societies.

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## 10.4 STRATIFICATION IN PRE-CAPITALIST SOCIETIES

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One may refer to the concepts of rank, order or estate to identify these different orders of stratification and structures of relations. Balandier (1970: 89) defines rank as a particular hierarchy that may be descent groups, or of offices within a larger organisation like a state or of socio-professional groups in a society like the relative rank of a barber and a doctor. Order or estate refers to an entire system of hierarchization, a closed and fixed system of hierarchy often defined by historians and which is based on birth and which run parallel to other forms of stratification like the class or caste system.

However, as a wide variety of debates emerging from actual field situations indicate, order, class and caste can be seen as three ideal types of stratification. In the pre-capitalist structures of society, feudal and state societies were studied using these basic notions. The primitive or early states were seen as structured around one central power and feudal were the ones that had more of a pyramidal structure. In the feudal society, power was seen as decentralised with several layers controlling at the lower levels with the king or emperor at the top but with less than totalitarian control. The European middle ages were seen as typical of feudal societies with the serfs or vassals at the bottom, serving the immediate lord of the manor or owner of the land who received rent. This relationship was seen as a patron-client relationship also, with the serfs taking care of all the needs of the manor, like tending the crops, raising the animals and doing various tasks around the estate. The lord of the manor was expected to treat the serfs like extended family, taking care of all their needs. Above the immediate land owners were higher levels of power holders to whom taxes had to be paid and who delegated authority to those at the bottom. The final powerholder at the apex, the sovereign ruler was not directly in control of those at the bottom, who was his/her subjects. Authority and control passed from top to bottom but not necessarily directly from the king but another locus like a prime minister or even the head of the church. In England, in the middle ages, the church head wielded considerable power as did some of the ministers.

In China, which is a huge country with a large population, the emperor was the titular head and compared to divinity. Yet the power was fragmented and delegated to a large hierarchy of government officials. China was the first civilization to develop efficient bureaucratic machinery of officials known as Mandarins. While in most other countries there was barely any literacy except among the clergy and the religious functionaries, the Chinese Mandarins were highly literate and kept efficient accounts and ruled through meticulously kept written records. China was the first to have an official census and also a class of formal civil servants.

There has been a considerable debate regarding the existence of feudal societies in the non-European world. Scholars like Maquet (1961) have attempted to define feudality as an essential relationship, that between the patron and the client. In a feudal society, the relation of inequality between the governed and the governing is expressed in the medium of patronage, of loyalty on one side and protection on the other. He considers this core criterion of a feudal political regime to be an ideal type of the kind described by Max Weber. According to Jack Goody (1963), the term feudality has two levels of meaning. One, at a generalised level, refers to the dominant mode of political organisation in the specific historical period of the Middle Ages and which is often taken as the base for comparative analysis. At the second and more specific level, one may refer to altogether different sets of social relationships as in Africa, where the personal link between the patron and client indicates a system that may be evolving into a state and whose character may change. Taking the example of the Bunyoro of Uganda, John Beattie (1960), shows that their structure is very different from the feudal structure found in Europe. Here there are several powerful chiefs, yet the central power of the king is almost totalitarian as he directly controls these chiefs who get their territorial rights and rights of collection of tribute from the peasants, directly from the monarch. The ruler also directly connects to his subjects without the intervention of the local chiefs. In other words, whatever decentralisation of power exists, it is directly intervened and controlled by the central authority.

The pre-capitalist state has been viewed as a transition from a kinship-based society to a territory-based society where the rights of belonging and identity pass from kinship to a residence in a territory. Consequently, the territorial state can have a much more complex character and a different kind of stratification than found in a lineage-based segmentary society and also a fragmented feudal society although both can be incorporated within a larger state structure. In essence as summarised by Balandier (1970: 125) a state has three aspects: 1. A territorial aspect, that it is confined to a spatial area, 2. The population living within this area gives consensual legitimacy to the state and 3. An organisation of social relationships that facilitates the central power to make its authority effective. Other scholars have pointed to the inclusive and exclusionary aspect of the state, in other words, to its boundary, its enclosure. Some scholars like Proudhon have opposed the state to society, wherein the former inequalities are finally given the expression of total control or unequal relation between society (the governed) and the governing, the ultimate expression of hierarchy. There is in other words to transition to a situation of complete non-reciprocity, that is antithetical to all social relationships that contain some elements of reciprocity to remain a relationship. Max Weber too defines the state as an instrument of domination having legitimate control over all forces to control. The state is the ultimate form of stratification where a minority, the rulers, have the right to control and dominate the entire general mass of people. Some scholars have compared the state to the Christian church that appropriates all power and legitimizes its totalitarian rule.

The structure of the state is as understood by Leslie White, an expression of the ultimate cleavage between the dominated and the dominant that can be found in all forms of inequality. That between kings, nobles, high priests and generals and the ordinary people, the serfs, the workers and the foot soldiers. One character of the dominated/domination relationship that the dominated produce all essentials and provide all services that are appropriated by the dominating in the process Sahlins had termed as negative reciprocity; is essentialised in the state. Nadel in his classic work, *The Black Byzantium* (1942) had further clarified that the state is a total inclusionary structure that encompasses every other institution and also contributes to their preservation and secondly that it has total control of the legitimate use of force against which there is no redress as it is the ultimate form of legitimacy. For example, if the state decides to execute someone, then it is the ultimate sentence against which one cannot do anything and also it is entirely up to the state to conserve or destroy as it seems fit. It is also in charge of maintenance of law and order for which again it can take any measures it sees fit. The state in other words justifies itself. The state is manifested in the persona of a group of privileged power holders who monopolise and control all the others who belong to the society circumscribed by the state's territory. This is what is meant when one is told that one is governed by the laws of the land.

As we move towards more complex societies there emerge a variety of organisational structures that have their principles of stratification. Since anthropologists had earlier focused on simple societies with the basic forms of structures, sociologists had studied organisational stratification in more complex societies. But at present, anthropologists are equally concerned with urban and complex societies and political anthropologists are greatly interested in structural inequalities and how these manifest in various forms of inequality like gender, class and race-based as well as ethnic and caste-based ones. In the next section let us examine some of how stratification can be studied in complex societies.

## 10.5 NETWORK STRUCTURES

Network theory reveals the underlying structures through which power is exerted and hierarchies are maintained in complex societies. Networks are created through the exchange of goods and information and stratification occurs when some persons or groups get a greater advantage than others. Usually, those in more centralised positions are at an advantage and those in peripheral positions at less. Take for example a business network where the partners are situated in different zones, some with greater access to information such as in city centres with more infrastructural resources and others are in rural or semi-rural areas with less exposure to the outside. Those with more information will control the trade in their favour as often happens with brokers and middlemen dealing with tribals and rural people. But there can be an alternate situation of what is known as a coercive network where some people have more power to force decisions on others. This can be financial power or even military or dictatorial power. Like in military the commanders have the strategic location in the network of commands to make others carry out their orders. It is not necessary that such orders are derived from legitimate sources but maybe because of strong coalitions. A dictator can keep his/her power because not only are there large numbers supporting them but others think that they do.

Thus as Collins (1997:437) puts it, coercion becomes a matter of control of communication. If a person can convince a majority that he or she has actual support (although they may not have) they may be able to keep their superior position. However as soon as the realisation goes around that those in power are not that popular, then there can be a quick movement to the other side. This is what happens when regimes change or governments get toppled as most people wish to be with the winning team. Therefore the pure form of coercion is dependent on a structural skeleton, where most people comply because they believe that if they do not, the majority will be against them. It is up to the coercive agency to keep this illusion alive, to make people believe that it will be too dangerous to disobey. This is how most dictators and coercive regimes keep going.

Collins (ibid) identifies several mechanisms to make this happen. They are: 1) Divide and Rule mechanism, to keep one's power intact by playing the rivals against each other. 2) Direct Surveillance or Vertical Controls, like in highly coercive regimes with a very strong apex of power holders, where frequent commands are sent from the centre and a system of awards and punishments are regularly operationalised. 3) Ritual Focus, using the Durkheimian theory of rituals to use rituals to symbolically enforce the sense of power. Almost all centralised powers in whatever form, surround themselves with such ritual paraphernalia to communicate their legitimacy and acceptance to the extent that they may be elevated to an almost sacred status. They are, though the ceremonials are able to surround themselves with an aura of awe. 4) Communication and Transportation Technology and Ecology, with increased communication technologies and mobility, it is both easier to enforce power as well as to lose it. With more efficient communication technology there is a greater possibility of horizontal communication and rebel groups forming to challenge the authority. For example, Omvedt has shown that the Dalits were able to mobilise as a group in opposition to the coercive power of the upper castes when they came together as labour in the newly emerging industrial sectors in the cities like Bombay and Nagpur. In the villages, they were isolated and divided into individual Jati groups that were not connected. In the city, they were thrown together and could share their common experiences to unite.



According to Collins (1997: 439), there can be four main kinds of structures of power

1. Strong Centralised Power, makes use of large numbers of enforcers to maintain its power base
2. Nominal Power, when although there is no channel for the ruler to enforce power there is no alternative horizontal structure to challenge the central power that continues to rule by default.
3. Fragmented Power, when there is no centralised power and no alternative coalition to challenge.
4. The revolutionary challenge when the system of centralised power is getting challenged by a rival and equally powerful coalition, leading to the possibility of a revolution.

Democracy is an important example of a decentralised or fragmented power structure where rival powers are constantly challenging each other and none gains absolute supremacy. It is a situation always in flux.

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## 10.6 SUMMARY

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In this Unit, the student has been given an overview of the various structures of hierarchy that exist from the simplest to the most complex societies. The discussion has been about the ideal type of structures only as actual societies are not constrained or unchanging and there may be any kind of variation anywhere. Analysis based on social structures has faced criticism for its essentialized nature and post-structural studies now aim for more situation and process-oriented analysis. However, some ideas about structures help to do comparative and provide a skeletal point of reference to study change and process.

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### Sample Questions

- 1) What are the basic structures of inequality? Briefly describe.
- 2) Is there something like “Natural Inequality”, critically discuss.
- 3) What do you understand by status and office? Describe with examples.
- 4) What do you understand by Feudalism? Discuss some forms of feudalism outside of Europe.
- 5) Can lineages be seen as a mode of stratification? Critically discuss.
- 6) How does one analyse sexuality as a means of stratification?
- 7) What is a pre-capitalist state? Describe with suitable examples.
- 8) Are segmentary societies always egalitarian?
- 9) How are social networks used to maintain social stratification?
- 10) Describe the forms that structures of power can take? Give suitable examples.