

Cognitive Anthropology and Structuralism

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Developed in the 20th century, *cognitive anthropology* is a concept concerned with what people from different groups know and how that implicit knowledge changes the way people relate to the world around them. The concept can include subcategories called *ethnoscience* and *symbolic anthropology*. A French anthropologist also dealt with cognitive process, he established a theory that there are unobservable social structures that generate social phenomena. He named the concept structuralism.

As the name suggests, cognitive anthropology has a strong emphasis on human cognition; however, the concept hasn't been universally agreed upon or conventionalized. An anthropologist and structural linguist, Edward Sapir, stated that "cultural behaviour is symbolic behavior shared by culture bearers, and cultures are abstractions of ideas and behavior patterns" with different meanings for each individual. He meant that anthropologists should describe the observable patterns of the society, and from the information gathered, she/he should derive meaning from the people studied, rather than use his own categories to create meaning of his/her data. It was an effort to get at organizing principles that lie underneath the behaviour within a society, and trying to understand the natives categories.

In itself, trying to get the natives view wasn't new, but making an effort to rule out the ethnographer's categories was new. Several anthropologists advanced a movement based on this idea and called it *ethnoscience* that used cognitive anthropology for its theory. They were very interested in the understanding of the thoughts of societies anthropologically. A way to elicit information and not place it in preconceived categories of the ethnographer was sought out. To avoid classification, the linguistic processes were only carried out in the native's language to get their view. Although many other anthropologists found it interesting, it received a great deal of criticism. People said that it didn't have any indication of being remotely useful as it was too relativistic for comparison or establishing generalization of a culture.

Another cognitive or mentalist orientation is *symbolic anthropology*. It is an extension of culture and culture patterning, meaning that *symbolic* systems have preservation functions or psychological functions. For example, a system that has been treated in its own light, and isn't related to a social, psychological or biological system, derive more meaning from biological facts of kinships. The biological facts could symbolize qualities like solidarity and trust. However, ethnographers have developed several different definitions of symbolic anthropology.

Structuralism, like functionalism, is not confined to or can be only be applied to anthropology and it has been suggested that it could be the approach that unites all behavioral sciences. Several other scholars such as Karl Marx, believed universal structures were a production of necessities fundamental to life and these sought universal structures of human nature from different standpoints. Claude Levi-Strauss, a French structuralist, searched for deep, unapparent innate structures psychologically and biologically universal to all people even though they all vary from culture to culture. These structures are hidden infrastructures that subtly show in humans surface (observable) behaviour. Deep structures were difficult to uncover, but apparent behaviour, although conditioned to culture, are easily observable. To find deep structures within societies, you have to discover the rules of behavioral change and put that set into another set of a different society.

Levi-Strauss analyzed forms of social activity as if they were languages, drawing his methodological model from structural linguistics, concluding that underlying languages and relations were structures of the people unconsciousness. He meant underneath the things that people are unaware of, such as language and social relations, lie the social structures of that society. In addition, Levi-Strauss believed that all basic thinking occurs as sets of contrasts e.g day and night, black and white, life and death. All this means that all societies differ from each other, but there is a common structure within all human societies.

According to Levi-Strauss, the basics of sharing features related to all humans, or *commonality*, is mental demand for organization and order. Humans all have an impulse to classify. Naming is an example of classifying perceptions as well as communicating them since all the information is sorted and transmitted through systematization. Those who may not share such systems still participate in the foundations, which is what makes communication across cultural boundaries a possibility.

The idea proposed by Levi-Strauss was met by a negative response from many other

anthropologists. The positivistic theorists were especially against it, who believed that every rational justifiable declaration can be scientifically verified or is capable of logical proof, and therefore rejects metaphysics and theism. They questioned whether he had actually discovered or had just invented universal structures, and whether if there is any value to such work if everyone's results would always be different from each other. Another criticism, was that Levi-Strauss had created a deterministic model, but that didn't seem to be substantially justifiable. A deterministic is a system that ignores chance of elements in transmission or change. Levi-Strauss was not attempting to explain diversity, and on the contrary, recognized its existence, and there were no hints of him thinking that deep structures were determinative. However, he wanted to provide the basis of diversity on the surface of human behaviour. Levi-Strauss said "though there are universal deep structures, human responses are widely dissimilar and the surface structures consequently show wide ranges of behaviour. Like basic biological inheritance of Homo Sapiens, there is also a mental inheritance, Levi-Strauss argued that all cultures are therefore molded by their social and physical environment.

His work on structures of elementary kinship, was the basis on women in marriage and subsequently created a whole new look at marriage. He proposed that elementary kinship systems are first of all means to regulating the exchange of women and creating alliances between groups.

In conclusion, *cognitive anthropology* seeks to explain the patterns of shared knowledge, cultural innovations and transmissions over time, using methods and theories of cognitive sciences. And also examining the ways that people of different cultures classify or categorize items of their everyday world. Using a similar concept for hypothesis, Levi-Strauss developed his own theory. He said that *structuralism* is the mental structures that underlie all the actions of human behaviour, e.g just like we are unaware of grammar while we speak, we are also unaware of the workings in social structure in our daily lives, which means there is a cognitive or mental meaning behind every act even if we are unaware of it.