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Cultural models in anthropology

Abstract:

Anthropological models aim to solve the same fundamental problem about the relationships existing between reality, representation and imaginary. It is a characteristic of these models to be always the result of the experience of two continuously present partners: the native and the ethnographer. The creation of different models by natives and ethnographers is the anthropologists’ key point, as it is clearly evidenced by the examples which are mentioned here. The aim of explanatory schemata is not limited to render clearer what we observe, but also to construct mental objects so that we may analyse them by comparing the different ensuing representations. So the anthropologist can also construct a sensory model of a society on the basis of the cultural body, as the senses are present in whatever aspect of knowledge.

Keywords:
construction of cultural models, cultural representations, the native and the ethnographer, social structures, sensory order

1 Introduction

Social patterning recalls an activity used unconsciously by us all when we attempt to understand something. In human sciences the creation of models often consists in the reduction of the object’s complexity obeying scientific ends. The synthesis and abstraction which also ethnographic models undergo, inevitably entail an impoverishment of ‘reality’, but they both help to point out the relationships linking the various elements and in finding new connections.

Above all, anthropological models allow one to face the paradoxical situation, described by Franz Boas and reconsidered by Claude
Lévi-Strauss (1952), due to the difference existing between the model constructed by the observer and the model constructed by the observed. It is more difficult to capture the deep structure of a culture in the presence of conscious, self-assured ‘local’ models, or ‘preconceived’ interpretative models, of an ‘illusory’ nature. They induce a deformed interpretation of the data collected by anthropologists.

C. Lévi-Strauss describes the famous example regarding the Bororo of Central Brazil, who are aware of the interlinkage between their marriage rules and the space structure of their villages, divided in two exogamous halves: the members of the eastern clan are supposed to get married to members of the western one. However, the anthropological enquiry discovered a more complex model, not indicated by the Bororo themselves, including the presence of three internal sections in either clan: a ‘higher’, a ‘middle’ and a ‘lower’ one. In addition to the obligation to marry a member of the other clan, both marriage partners should belong to sections at the same level. Sometimes, the informant’s unconscious models are more useful than the conscious ones.

Important issues related to the construction of anthropological models focus not only on the formal treatment of the data concerning the subjects/objects of inquiry and the various, possible levels of analysis, but also on the actual meaning one attributes to some concepts, like ‘structure’ and ‘model’. An anthropologist creates a representation of the collected data just as they themselves come out of the object of his research and observation. This characteristic shows how ethnographic models are a product of anthropological theory itself and how data reading is different according to the theoretical model used. This situation created by various interrelated issues is at the origin of the fact that models in anthropology are paraphrased (M. Izard, 1991), except when they apply to those enquiry fields – kinship and sometimes language – for which formalization problems hardly exist.

Another difficulty is due to the fact that the notion of a model designates both a research ‘tool’ and a research ‘object’ (U. Fabietti, 1999), since the explanations given by natives about actions and theories concerning their own societies as well as their behaviours are to be regarded as models too. The aim of explanatory schemata is not limited to render clearer what we observe, but also to construct mental
objects so that we may analyse them by comparing the different ensuing representations.

2 Social structures, social relations, mental structures

The ambiguity of the ties linking different concepts, sometimes regarded as synonymous, such as ‘social structure’, ‘social relations’ and ‘cultural model’ requires some reflection since many debates have arisen on this subject between the representatives of different theories.

Social structure does not coincide with structural relations and models. According to C. Lévi-Strauss, the notion of a social structure does not refer to empirical reality but to the models constructed upon it. He shares Meyer Fortes’ (1949) analysis, in that it is not possible to find a structure in ‘concrete reality’ because, metaphorically, structure may be defined on the ground of grammar and syntax but not of spoken language.

Nor are ‘social relations’ synonymous with social structure, as they provide the raw material for the creation of models rendering this structure explicit (C. Lévi-Strauss, 1980). Some anthropologists have made the mistake of analysing the conscious models of indigenous culture as structures whereas they can only be of assistance in discovering the structures of that culture, as in the above example regarding the Bororo.

In addition, structures belonging to different orders are present in a society. For instance, kinship systems have set an order among individuals according to some rules, claims C. Lévi-Strauss, while social organisation is based on different principles and economy on still other precepts. The common characteristic of these examples is to belong all to ‘lived orders’; that is, they are functions of an objective reality. They may be faced from outside even without knowing the representations made by the very persons who are being enquired.

It may thus be asserted, together with M. Izard (1991), that with regard to the structural analysis, social relations are the basis for the creation of models putting in evidence social structures. Through a
‘transformation’ operation it is possible to pass on from one model to another.

On the other hand, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1952) writes in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*:

When we use the term structure we are referring to some sort of ordered arrangement of parts or components. A musical composition has a structure, and so does a sentence. […] The components or units of social structure are persons, and a person is a human being considered not as an organism but as occupying position in a social structure. […] The social relationships, of which the continuing network constitute social structure, are not haphazard conjunctions of individuals, but are determined by the social process, and any relationship is one in which the conduct of persons in their interactions with each other is controlled by norms, rules or patterns.

And he correlates structural society with social relationships and behaviour ‘so that in any relationship within a social structure a person knows that he is expected to behave according to these norms and is justified in expecting that other persons should do the same’. However, C. Lévi-Strauss, as is well-known, criticised the above author’s analogy between organic structure and social structure, between the model of family relations and biological nexus and his failure to distinguish social structure from social relations.

The structuralism of Lévi-Strauss, in contrast with that of Radcliffe-Brown, looks for social structure not among the observable social relations that obtain in a given culture, but at a deeper level that is revealed only through an analysis of variations at the observable level. […] The point to stress is that structure is not abstracted from the data but belongs to a model constructed, as it were independently, which under one or another transformation can render immediately intelligible all the observed facts about various domains of social reality. […] The trouble is that the text last quoted by Lévi-Strauss goes on to describe a structure as a kind of model, rather than a model as a kind of structure. (P. Caws, 1974, p. 2).

Instead, P. Caws maintains:

If we adopt the definitions of system as a set of entities mutually interrelated and interdependent, themselves functioning together as an entity at some higher level of organization, and of structure as a set of systematic relations, concrete if embodied in an actual system, abstract if merely specified but not
so embodied, then the notion of a model can be defined as follows: an abstract structure is a model if it stands for a homologous concrete structure, a concrete structure is a model if it stands for a homologous concrete structure differently embodied. By 'stand for' – continues P. Caws – I mean that features of the model are substituted for features of the structure whose model it is, for purposes of presentation, or instruction, or explanation, or imaginative variation, or computation, or prediction. There need be no preferential direction of the relationship model/modelled: a theory according to one familiar view is a model of the aspects of the world with which it deals, in that we can work out the behaviour of those aspects in theory without having to realize them in practice, in the confidence nevertheless that that is how it would happen in practice; but, on the other hand, a perfectly concrete object (an orrery for example) can be a model for a theory, and so can another theory. To make the structure features of the model central reflects the fact that it stands for the relationship between the entities that constitute the system, rather than for the entities themselves. (P. Caws, 1974, p. 1).

After defining the concepts we are now analysing, P. Caws introduces the notion of a mental structure as an abstract structure connected to language:

[…] as a functioning system depends on its embodiment in mental structures. Mental structures, while they have their own autonomy, have evolved as they have because of their modelling relation to structural features of the physical, biological, and social worlds. They are what enables us to respond in the complex ways we do, to remember, to intend, to reflect, to deliberate. But it would be a mistake to say that mental structures model ‘real’ structures. (P. Caws, 1974, p. 1).

We know that there are structures in the anthropologist’s head,

[…] which I have called mental structures […] because they fulfil mental functions (remember that a structure is not a set of entities but a set of relations), and if these structures in turn have the relations of homology and ‘standing for’ to the social reality with which he deals then they can properly be called models. (P. Caws, 1974, p. 3).

Therefore, there is a relation between the data collected on the field and the model that can be constructed by passing through the connections with social structure and social relations. Several are the models that can be thought of since many are the phenomena to be explained.
3 Some examples of cultural models

On the basis of what has been said so far, the problem of the construction and role of models in anthropology is complex and vaguely delineated and it is chiefly dealing with lineage and alliance theories. The debate between anthropologists on this subject has been very lively as is shown by the number of models proposed on the grounds of different theories. Some of the prevailing models are mentioned here.

3.1 Patterns of culture: Ruth Benedict

Franz Boas, the father and founder of cultural relativism, detects a fundamental problem related to the twofold aspect of models in anthropology. This problem will be reconsidered by Lévi-Strauss. Ruth Benedict, a Boas’ pupil, proposes a famous modelling of a psychocultural type in *Patterns of Culture* (1934). She says:

> a culture, like an individual, is a more or less consistent pattern of thought and action. Within each culture there come into being characteristic purpose […] and […] the heterogeneous items of behaviour take more and more congruous shape […]. The form that these acts take we can understand only by understanding first the emotional and intellectual mainsprings of that society.

Every culture stands out from the others on account of its tasks and configurations of elements (birth, death, puberty, marriage, beliefs, and so on) interacting between themselves and giving a sense to its particular world. The function of a model here is to integrate coherently, after selection, different cultural traits. The three models Ruth Benedict has selected, which refer to the psychological characteristics of the three cultures she had studied – Apollonian, Dionysian and megalomaniaic temperaments – were the basis she departed from to maintain that every person adapts himself or herself to the models which are present in the tradition of his or her community (R. Benedict, 1974).
3.2 Basic or systemic models: Alfred L. Kroeber

Alfred L. Kroeber, another pupil of F. Boas, explains the difference between R. Benedict’s models and his own ‘basic models’. The former are psychical configurations moulding the typical characteristic of a society so as to impart a certain curvature to the culture of society itself, whereas the ‘basic models’ are a nexus of cultural traits which have taken on a definite and coherent structure, functioning successfully and acquiring a greater persistence and a heavier historical weight. He analyses the notions of a ‘model’ and a ‘structure’, comparing them to their use in biology, on one hand, and introducing the role of history on the other. These basic models have two characteristics: they last a short time and show the possibility of ‘cross-breeding’ amidst different cultures. An important difference persists, however, between primary, fundamental cultural models – the basic ones which were later on called ‘systemic’ – and the other secondary models, more superficial and temporary determining which alteration can take place: they are one of the factors which jointly create what occurs (A.L. Kroeber, 1976, p. 93). Clan, totem, potlach, taboo, sacrifice, writing, and so on, are all examples of recurrent and long acknowledged cultural phenomena. In order to find basic models it is necessary, according to Kroeber, to concentrate on the analysis and comparison of correspondences as appropriate for the alphabet in the case of Jewish-Christian-Islamic monotheism, and so on. Basic models represent some inventions and produce important changes.

3.3 Conscious and unconscious, mechanical and statistical models: Claude Lévi-Strauss

Claude Lévi-Strauss points out that both natives and anthropologists devise conscious and unconscious models. This condition does not concern the nature of models. The presence of an unconscious structure makes it possible for the ethnographer to foresee the existence of a model hiding the structure itself. Conversely, conscious models, i.e. ‘norms’, have the function to perpetuate beliefs.
The construction of a model is based on the observation of facts and on the method selected. In addition, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1980) proposes a distinction between mechanical and statistical models. He quotes the example of marriage rules in ‘primitive’ societies (mechanical models) and in ours (statistical models), that is in situations with a different complexity of data. The mechanical model allows one to determine the group of persons who can get married, their social position, their distribution in kinship classes, their future possible partners. A hypothetical model relating to marriage in our societies should be based on statistical data because of the much greater number of unforeseeable factors which should be taken into account, such as the range of possible partners, their social fluidity and so on.

An interesting aspect of structural enquiries is to present structures which can be translated into models with comparable, formal properties and which are independent of the elements the structures are made of.

3.4 Segmentary models: Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard

As stated previously, the analyses about the type and role of models in anthropology has chiefly concerned lineage theory, kinship studies which, in the early stages, had as their central concerns the relationship between kinship and territory, and family as a whole. Subsequently, in British anthropology, lineage came to the forefront as a major unit of social organization. In The Nuer (1940) E.E. Evans-Pritchard postulated a model of social structure based on the interaction of territorial and descent principles. The segmentary lineage system, he claimed, functioned in such a way as to define territorial-political units contextually, according to specific situations of opposition and unity and process of fission and fusion. At the same time, the lineage system provided a language in terms of which political relations were expressed and articulated. As a consequence of criticisms, he himself increasingly stressed that the model was not intended to account for actual social organization or group structure on the ground, but rather as an approximation to Nuer values or ideal models.
of social structure, in terms of which actual social relations could be expressed and interpreted (Seymour-Smith, 1986).

3.5 **Explicit and implicit models: Edmund R. Leach**

The influence of structuralism led to critiques of ‘typologizing’ by Edmund Leach, who argued that rather than prejudge the content of social relations by employing the labels ‘patrilinity’ or ‘matrilinity’ we should seek more value-free or ‘mathematical’ ways of expressing the relations between structural elements. He demonstrated the complex interrelationship of ideal models and political action within a historical context in his *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (1954).

He placed great emphasis on the distinction between empirical levels and models as he sustained that the latter are no direct counterpart of reality. According to him ‘models are logical construction in the anthropologist’s mind’ as opposite to natives’ models. In *Pul Eliya*, for instance, he defined implicit models as ‘jural rules’ with which personal behaviour must comply within a society. To these he opposed explicit models, i.e. the statistical norms anthropologists discover concerning the actual persons’ behaviour.

3.6 **Operational, Representational and Explanatory Models: Peter Caws**

Peter Caws suggests a first distinction between ‘operational models’ and ‘representational models’: the representational model corresponds to the way the individual thinks things are, the operational model to the way he practically responds or acts (P. Caws, 1974, p. 3). He suggests that it may be helpful to think of events dealt with by the social sciences in terms of the mental structures that determine them (the operational models) and that determine, through reports, one of the sources of our information about them (the representational models) (P. Caws, 1974, p. 4). It can be said that the representational model is conscious and that the operational model is unconscious.
He calls ‘explanatory models’ those representational models that satisfy criteria of scientific rigor. The explanatory model is always one of the scientists’ mental structures; it is never ‘in’ the empirical data nor (unless the native or the informant also happens to be an anthropologist as well) in the heads of members of the social group being examined. The explanatory model has to take account not only of the empirical data but also of the relationships that are held between these and the operational and representational models in those heads, and failure to this will inevitably result in a misunderstanding of the data (P. Caws, 1974, p. 5).

The social structure is not identical with the explanatory model, since the latter is in the scientist’s head and the former is out there among the people who belong to the society in question. Nor is it identical with the representational or operational models in the natives’ heads, since there are many of them and they actually do things – marry and care for one another, use names of special kinds, live in the same place or in different places, and so on. But the structure is dependent in one way or another on these models, since without them the relations that constitute it would not exist. Priority goes, in the end, to the explanatory model, as the only one that is in a position to reflect all the relevant relations and to get them right. (P. Caws, 1974, p. 10).

4 The cultural body: a sensory model

All the above models aim to solve the same fundamental problem about the relationships existing between reality, representation and imaginary. It is a characteristic of these models to be always the result of the experience of two continuously present partners: the native and the ethnographer. The creation of different models by natives and ethnographers is the anthropologists’ key point. They have chosen aspects of culture considered more ‘concrete’ than others: kinship, lineage, alliance, etc. These are ‘visible’ relationships between individuals, which can be checked, translated into genealogic graphic displays and described through language.

Other representations based on the image of the human body are used by many societies as a model. In a study on the geography of
Madagascar, Chantal Blanc Pomard shows how the natives consider the correspondence between body and landscape both as a model and a mirror. In their view, it is the human body that sets order to the outer world. The perception of bodily coherence helps to structure and codify landscape. References to the body strengthen the role of landscape as a support of information. The space is subdivided by a bodily language which contributes to fix things in the heads and minds of people. The human body provides a model ordering and organizing the space: it enables one to translate the environment. At another level it is possible to think of cultures as contrasting in terms of the distinctive patterns to the ‘interplay of the senses’ they present. Or the sensorium. By the sensorium Walter J. Ong means the ‘entire sensory apparatus as an operational complex’. He says: ‘Given sufficient knowledge of the sensorium exploited within specific culture, one could probably define the culture as a whole’. In this case too, formalization is made possible by language because the way the senses are termed and used can reveal a great deal about the sensory model of a culture. We believe that everybody divides the sensorium as we do. The Hausa recognize two senses; the Javanese have five senses (seeing, hearing, talking, smelling and feeling). […] The senses interact with each other first, before they give access to the world; hence, the first step, the indispensable starting point, is to discover what sorts of relations between the senses a culture considers proper. (D. Howes, 1991, p. 258).

The invention of linear perspective vision by Giovanni Battista Alberti in the fifteenth century had a great influence on the sensorium of the western culture because, says Robert Romanyshyn, ‘what originated with Alberti and his times as a metaphor – look at the world through this grid and it looks like a geometrical pattern – has become for us a map’. The ethnographer risks assuming a similar perspective. The only difference is that it is the ‘model of the text’ or the ‘discursive paradigm’ instead of Alberti’s window. The visual and ‘verbocentric’ models of anthropology persist. ‘Thus, the shift from the ocular to the oral must be accompanied by a further shift, which takes in the gustatory, olfactory, and tactile modalities as well’ (D. Howes 1991, p. 8). The changes in the sensory order must be very clear both in the an-
thropological theory – with its audio-visual metaphors – and in the construction of a model of the ‘cultural body’. The anthropologist must be aware of having a sensory model which is different from the native’s one in order to understand a culture.

The anthropologist can construct a sensory model of a culture as the senses are present in whatever aspect of knowledge: because the senses are said, lived, conceived, represented and imagined from cosmology to child-rearing practices, from myth to artefacts, from ritual to proverbs.

A model of the ‘cultural body’ can be created on the basis of the processes by which its image is shaped; of the representations, symbols and imaginaries of the body itself as they are used in a society; of the connections present in the relations between, body, senses and new technologies. It will also be possible to answer some of the questions asked by the ‘Anthropology of senses’ of Howes, Classen, Stoller, Seremetakis and so on, such as the following: ‘Which senses are emphasized or repressed, and by what means and to which ends?’; ‘Is there a natural order of senses?’; ‘How is the sensory experience expressed and ordered by language?; ‘Which are the alternatives to our way of perceiving the world?’; ‘How does the sensory order relate to the social and symbolic order?’

Bibliography


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