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## **Claude Lévi-Strauss Reconsidered: Cognitive science, epistemology, and the (not so Savage) algebraic mind**

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Reconsidering Lévi-Strauss' work – on the eve of his 100th year of life – that the structure of cognition is algebraic and analogical as indicated by his analysis of preliterate myths, along with a brief review and analysis of mathematics and cognition, structuralism, and epistemology, the paper suggests that critics of his work (a) were only partially correct, (b) approached his material from an inappropriate epistemology, and (c) while, in application his structural method is problematic, (d) being a pioneer his value is to have posited a novel conceptualization that merits further research. Finally, (e) based on related findings, it is suggested that his notion of an algebraic/analogical mind, which allowed him to illustrate a novel mathematical framework in his structuralist project, can be modeled and tested.

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### **Introduction**

Reminiscent of a bygone era, Lévi-Strauss' anthropology is synoptic in its scope, covering mythology, linguistics, cognition, philosophy, history, and methodology. More specifically, Lévi-Strauss (1963, 1966) saw himself as investigating how the mind works and was thus engaged in cognitive anthropology and psychology. With a near singular exception (see Gardner below), however, cognitive psychology has not been disposed to examine Lévi-Strauss' work. On the other hand, he seems to be held in considerable esteem by some anthropologists, by researchers and theorists outside the discipline's North American boundaries, and by many in the humanities as well as in the field of semiotics.<sup>1</sup> Why he is so esteemed by non mainstream anthropological factions is not entirely clear as most anthropologists, at least, agree that his structural

1 For a view of Lévi-Strauss' relations to the humanities, see Haskell (2008).

methodology applied to preliterate myths, and his algebraic formulae applied to kinship systems are, respectively, either problematic, or superfluous.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, on this eve of his 100th year of life, Lévi-Strauss continues to be regarded by many as a significant intellectual figure in the history of ideas.<sup>3</sup>

This paper will reexamine five major areas of Lévi-Strauss' work which continue to be seen as divergent from mainstream frameworks. It is suggested that his divergence is fivefold: (1) an algebraic basis to the mind, (2) the empirical data used (e.g. myths), (3) a structural epistemology, (4) methodology, and (5) an analogical basis of mind. Each of these divergent areas will be addressed, in order to suggest reconsideration of his structural anthropology. In doing so, however, the paper will not address the myriad of related issues in the anthropological literature, e.g. universalism vs. particularism. The final section will suggest that his work can be modeled and tested.

Lévi-Strauss has attracted a host of critics. Most critics – even so-called friendly ones (e.g. Leach 1974) – agree that he does not adequately demonstrate his claims. I suggest, however, that critiques of Lévi-Strauss' method tend to be only partially valid, approaching his material from an inappropriate epistemological framework. Due to space considerations as well as for convenience, Leach (1974) will be considered the paradigmatic critic. While, in application, his structural method is problematic, his value is to have posited a novel conceptualization and to have pointed in a new direction, a direction that diverged from the knowledge-base of his time and from standard empiricist frameworks.<sup>4</sup>

2 For example, even with regard to Lévi-Strauss (1969) findings of a kinship algebra in his *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, which was provided with an imprimatur by renowned algebraist Andre Weil, others (e.g. Cargal 1996) have maintained it does not add anything to the understanding of kinship relations. From the perspective of this article, however, the point is his demonstration of an algebraic structure undergirding kinship relations.

3 Lévi-Strauss seems to have taken on the negative status in academic anthropology that Freud has in academic psychology and cognitive science. Another parallel between the two is that Freud, like Lévi-Strauss, is cited widely and held in high esteem in the humanities and the pop culture.

4 While the term 'empiricist' has merited volumes, for purposes here the two sections below, *Verbal Narrative and Empirical Data*, and *Epistemology: Empiricist and Structuralist*, will serve as shorthand explanations.