

When undertaking community discernment and social analysis, the next step after observation is to select and examine the social structure we wish to understand. This process can occur during several prayerful gatherings with your outreach committee or discernment group.

Choose a Social Structure

A **social structure** is not dependent upon individuals but exists as a formal set of rules, relationships, and norms that shape how we interact, often unconsciously. In other words, these structures persist even as people come and go. They can be tangible, like committees, schools, and towns; or intangible, such as norms that shape ethnic cultures, corporate cultures, or global patterns.^[1]



For effective discernment, begin by observing the chosen structure with a prayerful, open heart. Reflect on questions such as:^[2]

- Who are the key players, and how do they interact?
- What physical spaces influence this structure?
- What daily behaviors and experiences define this system?
- What stories capture typical patterns of interaction?
- Who may be marginalized or overlooked, and how does this system affect them?

Framing Incident

During discernment, sometimes a **framing incident**—a specific event/story illustrating systemic behavior—can emerge.^[3] However, it is important not to focus solely on the individual incident but to see how it reveals the broader social structure. Social analysis invites us to explore our context's full picture, considering its history, cultural influences, and underlying assumptions.

Social Analysis of the Structure

In analyzing a structure, consider questions such as:

- What history, values, or past events shaped it?
- What is the structure's stated mission, and how does it align with actual practices?
- What assumptions, roles, and responsibilities are at play?
- How does money influence the situation?

- Who makes the most important decisions around here?
- How do race, gender, and socioeconomic status affect power and influence?

This analysis helps us see the structure's configuration, moving us toward a deeper understanding. In this spirit, social analysis is "the effort to obtain a complete picture of a social situation by exploring its structural relationships, including how it came to have its present configuration."^[4]

Theology Talks Back

The next step, **theological reflection**, brings our analysis into dialogue with our faith tradition, drawing on its wisdom to speak to the chosen structure.^[5] Consider questions such as:

- What Biblical passages, parables, or metaphors relate to this structure?
- What theological themes—like justice, grace, or sin—are relevant?
- What guidance might church tradition offer?

Theological reflection encourages us to sense God's presence within the system, discerning how we might align our actions with divine purpose. This prayerful process deepens our understanding of the structures around us, creating a foundation for meaningful, faithful responses.

In our next article, we will explore how to turn these insights on community discernment and social analysis into concrete steps for impactful ministry.

Have questions about applying for ECF funding for your new ministry? Please [contact us!](#) We are happy to talk with you about your project and how we might partner together to create lasting change!

^[1] Elizabeth Liebert, *The Soul of Discernment: A Spiritual Practice for Communities and Institutions* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 68.

^[2] Liebert, 75.

^[3] Liebert, 78.

^[4] Liebert, 88.

^[5] Liebert, 107.



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