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Introduction: Structuration Theory

This book is intended, in part, as an introduction to structuration theory. At the same time it aims to provide a revised, stronger, framework for structuration theory. This framework is a synthesis that draws from and builds upon criticisms, debates, defences and refinements within the field of structuration, whilst also drawing lessons from the many applications of the theory at the substantive level. The resultant 'strong' project of structuration should thus be seen as a bringing together of the insights and contributions of a formidable group of intellectuals who have engaged with structuration at both the theoretical and empirical levels.

The reader will doubtless be aware of the crucial part played by social theorist Anthony Giddens in the creation and development of structuration theory as a distinct analytical and conceptual resource. Whilst responding to, and incorporating, significant criticisms of Giddens's seminal version of structuration into the stronger structuration project, I have also made a point of hanging on to the core strengths of his presentation of the theory. I have only relinquished elements where the case against hanging on to them was more powerful than any argument I could muster in defence. I have looked for the chance to modify, refine and develop aspects of Giddens's theory much more often than I have relinquished them completely. On the other hand, I do argue in the course of the book that many dimensions of Giddens's early and middle period writings that were presented as aspects of structuration bore little relationship, in fact, to the core defining features of structuration. One needs to be clearer, tighter and more systematic than Giddens has been about structuration theory's distinctive and defining characteristics. The revised project of structuration I argue for here thus incorporates central elements of Giddens's original exposition, and continues the spirit of that project, but it also advances and consolidates that spirit: by more carefully delineating the scope of the structuration project; by developing and reconfiguring some of the older concepts that fall within these parameters; by adding a substantial number of new complementary conceptual categories; and, finally, by thinking more systematically about the relation of each of these elements to questions of methodology, evidence, and the specificity of research orientations.

Structuration theory has reached a decisive point in its trajectory, a point that could see it fade as a distinct approach or, alternatively, establish itself more strongly than ever as an integrated perspective able to offer invaluable kinds of systematic explanatory power and critical insight to social theory. There has been a certain paradox or irony in the fate of structuration in recent years, at the theoretical level it has been the negative target of sustained and detailed criticisms, whilst at the empirical level its history, at least on the surface, has been one of overwhelming success as scores of researchers have found that its concepts have allowed them to gain critical purchase on empirical phenomena in fields as diverse as accounting systems, archaeology, demography, organisational and political culture, the sociology of technology, the management of inter-firm networks, migration studies, the analysis of sport and leisure, and of gender and patriarchy (see Bryant and Jary, 2001b, pp. 43–61).¹ A central reason behind structuration's uneven fortunes has been the absence of any concerted and systematic attempt to respond to criticisms at the theoretical level. The person one might most have expected to undertake this task, Anthony Giddens, defied any such expectations. Structuration theory was drawn together from a number of influences and crystallised by Giddens in a whirlwind of production that lasted for a long decade from the mid 1970s to the late 1980s. During these years, he wrote a string of books, some in the form of systematic and sustained book length arguments setting out the major tenets of structuration, others in the form of collections of one-off engagements with individual authors or themes that were given the 'structuration treatment'. After this period, Giddens turned his hand to other things, to broad questions of modernity and globalisation, and to issues of politics and the 'Third Way', moving from his position as Professor of Sociology at Cambridge to the post of Director of the London School of Economics, and for good measure self-consciously styling himself anew as a 'publicly engaged intellectual', being vaunted not only as Tony Blair's 'guru' but also as an influential voice in the development of political agendas from South Korea to Brazil.² Perhaps one should not be surprised that during this period of transformation and change the amount of energy that Giddens had to devote to demanding and nuanced questions of social theory in general, and to structuration in particular, was less than it had been.

Giddens had, in any case, often complained about the ways in which most of the authors who have drawn on structuration theory for empirical research had employed his concepts (see Giddens, 1989, p. 294; 1990b, pp. 310–11). He complained that they tended to import his concepts *en bloc* into their research in a way that merely served to unnecessarily burden and clutter studies with an excess of abstract concepts. The works applying concepts from the logical framework of structuration theory that Giddens approved of were those that used them more selectively, 'in a spare and critical fashion' (Giddens, 1991b, p. 213, also see 1991b, pp. 213–16; and 1989, p. 294).

A second objection Giddens had to the attitudes taken up by both researchers and critics to the relation between structuration theory and empirical research was that they seemed to want ‘detailed guidelines for research procedure’. He, on the contrary, felt that the concepts of structuration theory should only be seen as ‘sensitising’ devices for research purposes or as helping to ‘provide an explication of the *logic* of research’ (Giddens, 1990b, pp. 310–11, my emphasis; and 1989, p. 296). One could agree with Giddens on the first point about selectivity and parsimony whilst disagreeing with his preference for the abstract concepts of structuration to be used only as rather loose conceptual orientations rather than as ideas that should be closely integrated with issues of methodology and empirical research. This is a point I will return to frequently during the course of the book.

For a time Giddens retained an interest in defending structuration at the theoretical level, with aspects of the theory supported and upheld as part of lengthy replies appearing in influential collections devoted to the exposition and analysis of various aspects of his work by respected theorists and commentators in an array of relevant fields (see Held and Thompson, 1989; Clark *et al.*, 1990; Bryant and Jary, 1991). As late as 1993 in a preface to the second edition of *New Rules of Sociological Method*, originally published in 1976, Giddens also engaged directly with Nicos Mouzelis’s criticisms of structuration. This could have heralded the beginning of a renewed interest in developing those parts of structuration that either hadn’t stood the test of time or had never quite been adequately developed in the first place. But what might have looked like a new beginning in fact turned out to be more of an ending. In more recent times Giddens has shown little interest in defending the theoretical aspects of structuration against critics. Moreover, he has at times been quite negative about his previous association with structuration theory, comparing it on one public occasion to one of those youthful indiscretions that follow people around wherever they go in later life.³ Of course, it would be unfair to read too much into an off-the-cuff remark, but what I think we can quite safely infer from such a comment is the absence of a profound continuing engagement with structuration.

Nobody, of course, can do everything, and it is quite understandable in some sense for Giddens to have left some of his earlier preoccupations aside as he has moved on to other things. He has after all left a valuable legacy behind him. On the other hand, I believe that the impression Giddens sometimes gives of dismissing structuration is a misjudgement. If one is tied up with other things, engaging with practical demands and writing about other more substantively oriented subjects one can well see the temptation, as structuration came under critical fire from some very heavy guns, to dismiss it as a youthful indiscretion. Yet, one can decline to immerse oneself personally in the challenge this time around whilst still acknowledging that there is indeed a challenge to be met and that the target of that challenge is something worth defending. To deny the latter is to do an injustice to the quality of

conceptualisation and critique produced by the youthful (and, it should be said, by the not so youthful) Giddens, and also to the intrinsic power and value of structuration.

Structuration theory is certainly worth defending. Having said this, however, it remains at a crossroads nevertheless. In his original remit to the *Traditions in Social Theory* series to which this volume belongs my late and much missed friend and colleague Ian Craib asked authors to outline ‘the distinctive contribution of (their) approach and its likely future value’. It is clear to me that for structuration theory, the latter half of this request is closely related to the first half. The likely future value of structuration theory will depend heavily on what its distinctive contribution can be said to be. It will also depend upon whether a framework can be produced that can integrate or defeat the various criticisms that have been aimed at structuration, and that can convince readers of its attractions as an explanatory and critical perspective of significant power.

The Distinctiveness of Structuration Theory

A characterising feature of structuration theory is that it goes beyond just looking at structures or just looking at agents, or of giving an *a priori* primacy to one or the other. It emphasises both. This is one of its characterising features but it is not, by itself, what makes structuration distinctive. Its distinction lies in the particular way that it conceptualises structures and agents. Firstly, it places phenomenology, hermeneutics and practices at the heart of the interrelationships and interdependencies between the two. These provide the hinge, if you like, between structure and agency. Secondly, it is not only that the hinge between external structures and agents is affected in large part by these things, for phenomenology, hermeneutics and practices are always also at the very heart of both structures and agents themselves. Social structures almost always either have agents within them and/or are the product of the past practices of agents. And agents, for their part, have social structures within them, not least in the guise of particular forms of phenomenological and hermeneutic inheritance. Social structures are not reified entities denuded of human beings and their irreducible qualities, just as the views and experiences that prompt the thoughts and actions of social agents are not those of beings who are islands unto themselves, secreted away from social currents. The phenomenology and hermeneutics of practices play an indispensable role in structuration’s conception of social structures, just as social structures play an equal role in the understanding of the phenomenology, hermeneutics and practices of agents.

Giddens captured this emphasis in his conception of the ‘duality of structure’ which I will treat, along with Giddens and a range of

commentators, as constituting the very core of structuration theory (Giddens, 1979, p. 5; 1984, p. 25; and see, for example, McLennan, 1984, p. 126; Sewell, 1992; pp. 12–13; Sydow and Windeler, 1997, p. 462). Giddens argued that structure enters into the constitution of the agent, and from here into the practices that this agent produces. Structure is thus a significant *medium* of the practices of agents. There is a complex and mediated connection between what is out-there in the social world and what is in-here in the phenomenology of the mind and body of the agent. Structure is also, however, the *outcome* of these practices of agents, whether one is talking about the knowledge produced by reading books, the reproduction of a living language through speech, the convening of a regional Parliament, the building of a house, or the institution of a national tax system. Giddens calls this notion a ‘duality of structure’ in order to indicate the dual role of structure as both medium and outcome. Taking a lead from McLennan (1984, p. 126), I would argue that it often makes things clearer to emphasise that both the moment of medium and the moment of outcome in fact contain ‘a duality of structure-and-agency’ (see p. 16). Either way it is presented, the notion of duality draws attention to structuration theory’s distinctive focus on what I call a ‘structural-hermeneutic’ core in its characterisation and understanding of social processes, practices and relations.

Limits to Structuration Theory

Giddens himself sometimes underestimated the significance of the duality of structure for structuration theory. As I indicate in chapter 1 this was behind his overestimation of the appropriate and effective scope of the theory. In arguing for a ‘strong’ project of structuration I want to distinguish quite rigorously between theoretical approaches that pay little attention to duality’s structural-hermeneutic core and structuration theory itself. Thus, for example, I will follow John B. Thompson and others in arguing that structuration’s conceptualisation of structure as the medium and outcome of practices needs to be distinguished from more conventional notions of social structure (Thompson, 1989; Jary and Jary, 1995/1997). These more conventional notions of structure tend to eschew or radically minimise the role of phenomenology and hermeneutics. They typically use the term to refer to macro and meso clusters of institutional, group or systemic properties and practices; their distribution, inter-relations and tendencies. These are conceptualised at a greater or lesser level of abstraction or concretisation, and refer to a range of types of phenomena from entities as broad as ‘the capitalist system’ through class structures and structures of inequality, poverty, income and such like, to specific sets of functionally specialised institutions within the spheres of, for example, the family, education, the military, politics, culture or big business.

Whilst these conventional notions of structure are to be distinguished from structure as medium and outcome, they are still important to the structuration project. This is because, to use and deepen C. Wright Mills's invaluable rendering of the task of the sociological imagination, these conventional structures are able to act as framing devices that can help to situate the biographical experience of individuals and groups at the intersection of the forces of history and of social structure. Structuration theory itself is focused directly on the processes and practices involved at the point of this intersection. It is focused on the structural-hermeneutic nexus of immanent circumstances in which – now to paraphrase Marx, with an amendment from the structurationist geographer Allan Pred – people make history and produce places, not in circumstances of their own choosing, 'but in the context of already existing social and spatial structures which both enable and constrain the purposeful conduct of life' (Pred, 1990, p. 119). Giddens has noted that this Marxist theorem about praxis is 'simple to set out but extremely complicated to elaborate' (see Gregory, 1984/1997, p. 28). Taking up this challenge structuration theorists, and those engaged in debates around it, have fought, successfully in countless areas, to elaborate, refine and develop the basic insights of Marx's maxim. But it is essential to recognise not only the strengths of structuration theory but also its limits, and the way that it relies on other theories and approaches. Thus, framing structuration case studies of the immanent moments of circumstance and agency, of medium and making, in terms of wider, more conventional, macro and meso structures allows one, not least, to retain that invaluable sense of how these processes intersect with the greater forces and movements of history, geography and social structure. Structuration theory needs other theories and perspectives to provide such frames, just as other theoretical approaches would often do well to call on the resources of structuration.

Between large historical, spatial and social forces, on the one hand, and the situated practices of individual agents, on the other, it is useful to identify meso-level networks of relations and practices. It is about the causal significance of such networks that Pierre Bourdieu writes when he argues that television's coverage of current affairs displaces newsworthy events from the networks of social relations in which they are embedded, denuding them of any context in which they could be adequately comprehended. The 'litany of events' that we see on television are 'reduced to the level of the absurd ... cut off from their antecedents and consequences' (Bourdieu, 1998, pp. 6–7). Without the framework afforded by such networks, argues Bourdieu, television news cannot:

make events (say, an outbreak of violence in a high school) really understandable, that is, they cannot reinsert them in a network of relevant relationships (such as the family structure, which is tied to the job market, itself tied to governmental hiring policies, and so on) ... This vision is at once dehistoricized and dehistoricizing, fragmented and fragmenting (Bourdieu, 1998, pp. 6–7).

Although this is specifically about the forms of knowledge offered by television, the same points could apply to all forms of social knowledge. These ‘networks of relevant relationships’ can be researched and investigated more or less ‘conventionally’, or more or less on the basis of the structural-hermeneutic diagnostics at the heart of structuration. Whether or not the latter strategy is necessary will depend upon the nature, depth and detail of the understanding required, and whether it is possible will depend on practical questions to do with the existence of relevant evidence and the exigencies of gaining access to it.

Ontology-in-General and Ontology-in-Situ

Giddens’s own very particular orientation to structuration theory meant that he could not help much with a number of issues that are central to the way I have introduced the promise and the distinctiveness of the approach. His conception of structuration was pitched very much at the philosophical and abstract level. He failed to dwell sufficiently upon the distinction between the philosophical and the substantive levels, and upon the logical implications of the distinction. The absence of clear links to substantive circumstances meant that structuration theory was too free-floating. Depending upon where the emphasis was placed, structure or agency, it could be presented as either an overly voluntaristic theory – one that overestimates the knowledge and power of agents and their consequent ability to ‘make a difference’ – or an overly fatalistic and deterministic theory, where the structures make all the running. Giddens’s treatment of the key concepts of structure and agency, and of other related concepts such as time and space, was overwhelmingly at the abstract and generalising levels. He was concerned with understanding what social structures and agents, for example, can be said to be at the abstract level. He wanted to know what their characteristics are, what sorts of things or entities they are, what features they have and what features they don’t have. He developed his notions of them in abstract terms so that the conceptual definitions he settled for would encompass all structures and all agents, the very nature of time and space. In other words, he wanted to capture the general characteristics of these entities so that the concepts would be useful to the widest possible set of circumstances across times and places. They would be ‘trans-situational’. The concepts he produced were ‘ontological’ concepts – concepts about the very nature of social entities over and beyond any particular empirical manifestation of them in specific social circumstances, time and place.

As I see it, a key advantage of the strong theory of structuration that forms the framework for this book, is its refusal to remain focused upon only the philosophical level, to the neglect of the conceptual and methodological links between the abstract and the particular. Instead, strong structuration is

determined to develop bridging concepts between the philosophical and substantive levels of structuration, to develop not only what we might call ‘ontology-in-general’ but also ‘ontology-*in-situ*’, ontology directed at the ‘ontic’, at particular social processes and events in particular times and places. This commitment rests on the belief that structuration theory contains within it a deep mine of untapped potential at the empirical, substantive level, and that it is only by shifting focus that this potential can be exploited.

It is worth itemising in summary form, including some things that have already been mentioned and some that will be introduced more fully at a later stage, the claims that will be made in this book for the advances made by the synthesis of strong structuration over Giddens’s version of structuration.

I will argue that strong structuration possesses a superior grasp of:

- the implications of the centrality of the duality of structure to structuration
- the need to develop a greater sense of ontology-*in-situ* against an overly exclusive emphasis on ontology-in-general pitched at the philosophical and abstract level
- the many areas of ontology within the province of the duality of structure that have previously been inadequately developed and insufficiently specified.
- the importance of epistemology and methodology to the structuration project
- the scope of purpose and question-types appropriate to structuration theory
- the forms of methodological bracketing (agent’s conduct and agent’s context analysis) necessary to unlock the empirical potential of structuration theory;
- the need for structuration case studies to be framed and mediated by other approaches, something that follows naturally from the acknowledgement of the limits to structuration theory’s scope.

Finally, strong structuration insists that attention to all these factors is required for the formulation of research strategies. The contents of such strategies would build on existing work to lay more systematic foundations for a fruitful and distinctive research paradigm necessary to consolidate structuration theory’s position anew as an essential and invaluable part of the theoretical landscape.

Outline of Chapters

Chapter 1 reviews Giddens’s seminal contribution to structuration theory. Particular attention is paid to what he himself felt he was trying to achieve and to the various theoretical influences on his writings. The most important

concepts in his version of structuration are outlined and some of the strengths and weaknesses of his approach are indicated. There are, by now, several book-length secondary accounts either of Giddens's work as a whole or of his writings on structuration theory, and for more extensive treatments of those aspects that are broached only fleetingly here I would direct readers to one of these sources.⁴ The focus of this chapter is on sifting through those aspects of Giddens's work that could be said to have made an enduring contribution to structuration theory as a distinctive tradition in social theory. Chapter 2, 'Critics of Structuration', looks in detail at, and assesses the arguments of, some of the most widely cited and powerful critics of Giddens's version of structuration. These include the fiercely critical account of Giddens in Margaret Archer's *Realist Social Theory*, and John B. Thompson's and Nicos Mouzelis's incisive but more discriminating assessments. The chapter also reviews and assesses the historian William J. Sewell's influential article from the *American Journal of Sociology* that sympathetically but critically attempted to revise structuration theory. Also included in the chapter are discussions of particular contributions made by Ira J. Cohen and Chris Shilling to the positive elaboration of underdeveloped areas in Giddens's work on structuration. Cohen's notion of 'position-practice relations' is outlined as a basis for giving definition and detail to the conceptual space indicated by Bourdieu's 'networks of relevant relationships', and to do so from a structurationist perspective.

Chapter 3 builds on the lessons drawn from the critics of structuration to conceptualise a more developed, refined and adequate ontology of structuration. The notion of a quadripartite cycle of structuration is introduced in order to elaborate upon and clarify the variety and nature of the elements involved in the 'duality of structure'.

The quadripartite cycle involves:

1. *external structures* as conditions of action;
2. *internal structures* within the agent;
3. *active agency*, including a range of aspects involved when agents draw upon internal structures in producing practical action ;
4. *outcomes* (as external and internal structures and as events).

The arguments for the strengths and advantages of the quadripartite framework are set out alongside a series of important and complementary concepts drawn from Mouzelis's *Back to Sociological Theory* (1991). The detailed elaboration of each of these four parts is carried out in dialogue with writers who have either criticised or applied structuration theory. The second part of the cycle is itself analytically divided into two types of internal structure. One of these, the *general-dispositional*, corresponds closely to Bourdieu's notion of habitus and to Mouzelis's notion of the dispositional. The emphasis here is on aspects of internal structure as media that can be

used by the same agents across different situations. The other type, the *specific-conjunctural*, refers, instead, to agents' more specific knowledge of particular settings and contexts. The chapter ends with a look at the relations between specific *in-situ* agents and external structures. The emphasis here is on the contribution of such situated agents to wider structures and on the extent to which external structures can be said to exert independent causal power over situated agents.

The first part of chapter 4 draws out in detail the implications of the strong structuration ontology for various strategies of research and for the methodological steps within such strategies. This includes an explanation of 'methodological bracketing' and an account of the roles of *agent's context analysis* and *agent's/strategic conduct analysis* in strong structuration. The second part of the chapter looks at the kinds of 'framing' relationships that can exist between the wider macro and meso structures, on the one hand, and the particular focus of various structuration research strategies, on the other. Studies drawn on to illustrate the ways that such framing can help to position the experience of agents involved in structuration processes at the intersection of wider historical, spatial and social structures include:

- Michael Mann's analysis of the French Revolution in the second volume of *Sources of Social Power: The Rise of Classes and Nation-States 1760–1914* (1993);
- Richard Whittington's structuration account of managerial agency and social systems, originally published in the *Journal of Management Studies* (1992/1997);
- Eamonn Carrabine's account in *Theoretical Criminology* of the effects of changing and competing governmental regimes on micro-interactions in Manchester's Strangeways prison (2000);
- Joan Scott's post-structuralist feminist analysis of the discourses of the Parisian garment workers of 1848 from *Gender and the Politics of History* (1988);
- my own structuration informed analysis of the room for manoeuvre allowed by the international financial system for Harold Wilson's Labour Government of the 1960s (1988, 1990 and 1992).

Chapter 5, 'Two Empirical Case Studies', provides detailed and extended examples of structuration theory 'in action' in ways that embrace many of the different methodological steps outlined in chapter 4. This means, *a fortiori*, that they also involve, and therefore illustrate, aspects of each of the four parts of the quadripartite character of the duality of structure. In each case one can see how a developed structurationist ontology can shape empirical insights, and can also show the researcher what is missing from an account, can point to the limits of what she knows. The first, lengthier, case study, focuses on Ewa Morawska's magisterial *Insecure Prosperity: Small-Town*

Jews in Industrial America 1890–1940, a rich and detailed historical and sociological study, theoretically informed by structuration theory, of the emigration of East European Jews and their resettlement in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. The second case study involves a critical analysis of *A Doll's House*, the late nineteenth century play of Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen, in terms of strong structuration. Whilst Morawska's study deals very much with routines and their relative durability, it is also about change, but this is slow change over years as the migrants gradually blend the socio-cultural patterns of life inherited from the old (Eastern European) country with the traditions and lifestyles of the dominant host society of the USA. Ibsen's play, by way of contrast, is much more about contingency, instability and the unsettling of routines. As such it brings different issues and emphases to the fore than the ones highlighted in the study of Johnstown's Jews.

The conclusion briefly summarises what the book hopes to have achieved in terms of outlining a stronger and more powerful framework of structuration theory. It also draws some lessons for intra-theoretical debate and co-operation, and suggests that the project of strong structuration outlined here is an open one, both corrigible and capable of being extended and elaborated in many directions. Finally, it offers some brief thoughts on the critical relationships that structuration theory can forge with key dimensions of the civic imagination, politics and ethics. From abstract ontological concepts through methodological steps and bracketings to issues of theorised empirical evidence, the account offered here only begins to scratch the surface of what structuration theory promises to those with a mind to take advantage of the resources it has to offer. It provides an array of 'structural-hermeneutic' tools and insights that, used skilfully in concordance with other theoretical approaches, make it possible to significantly increase the sophistication of the sociological imagination. It allows us to make meaningful and nuanced links between large historical, geographical and social forces, proximate networks of social relations and practices, and the sung and unsung phenomenological experiences, opportunities, perceived and actual constraints, sufferings, routines and triumphs of diversely situated human beings.

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