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# Reconciling structure and agency in strategy-as-practice research: Towards a strong-structuration theory approach

Tamim Elbasha ● Alex Wright

**Abstract.** An overwhelming focus of research on the micro agency of strategic actors has led to the literature being characterized as demonstrating a micro-myopia, resulting in a micro-isolationism. This means we know little about how the micro interrelates with the macro in strategy work. We address this problem in our conceptual article which adopts a structurationist stance to explicate how strategy-as-practice (SaP) research could be enhanced and extended by paying equal attention to both agency *and* structure. Specifically, we advance strong structuration theory (SST), a promising development from Giddens' seminal work on structuration theory, to show how strategic activity can be understood as an ongoing process of structuration unfolding over time. We argue for the use of both types of methodological bracketing (context and conduct analysis), advocating systematic attention to the interplay between macro-societal and micro-local levels of analysis. Our discussion concludes with guidance for researchers inviting them to undertake empirical fieldwork that overcomes SaP's current micro-myopia, creating a more balanced corpus of work.

**Keywords:** micro-isolationism, structuration, strong structuration, strategy-as-practice.

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## INTRODUCTION

One criticism recently leveled at SaP studies is that empirical research has failed to effectively account for how macro-structures are recursively interrelated with micro practices (Carter, 2013; Carter, Clegg & Kornberger, 2008; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). This situation has arisen in part because the sociological turn (Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015; Whittington, 2007) encourages researchers to focus and reflect on individual and collective agency in strategizing, placing managers and their strategic agency at the heart of strategy research (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). Our motivation for writing this article is that we believe that theorizing this relationship will be enhanced if SaP researchers are more fully aware of current developments in sociological thinking. Specifically, while structuration theory has been readily employed in strategizing research (e.g. Jarzabkowski, 2008; Mantere, 2008), its use has not always helped theorists to develop convincing descriptions and explanations of how the macro and the micro interrelate in strategy work. We address this issue in our conceptual paper and argue that a development of Giddens' Theory of Structuration (ToS)—namely, Robert Stones' SST—offers strategizing researchers a comprehensive social theory that, if drawn upon, could enhance SaP empirical research by

accounting for how macro-structures and micro-agency interplay and cohere.

A preference for focusing on the micro at the expense of the macro has resulted in several so-far unheeded calls for SaP researchers to integrate macro-structures when studying strategizing (e.g. Seidl & Whittington, 2014; Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Whittington, 2006). The failure to do this has seen the SaP literature labeled as exhibiting "micro-isolationism" (Seidl & Whittington, 2014) or "micro-myopia" (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). where empirical investigators are solely concerned with what managers are observed to do, and less interested in what and how macro-structures bear down and influence their situated doing. This tendency limits the knowledge and insights that researchers are able to craft, as they examine practices and praxes in segregation from their wider institutional contexts. Micro-isolationism hinders SaP researchers from demonstrating how mundane practices matter, in that they both constrain and enable strategic agency, and consequently have a significant impact (Vaara & Durand, 2012). It also results in a form of SaP scholarship that is mainly concerned with studying managerial practices and praxes, and how they contribute to strategy in isolation from societal issues (Carter, 2013). Our paper is needed because without the theoretical sophistication and methodological means that SST provides, SaP researchers are limited in the options available to them to avoid this micro-isolationism, resulting in its perpetuation. Consequently, our paper poses the following research question: How might SaP scholars take a (strong) structurationist stance to overcome micro-isolationism and advance strategizing research?

Our decision to focus on structurationism is motivated by two factors. First, in management studies, structurationism has aided attempts to challenge dominant "functionalist" views of organizational structures, emphasizing how managerial agency itself demanded attention and was not just the unthinking causal effect of some rigid higher order. Pioneers in this area drew upon ToS to highlight the importance of practitioners and their conduct (e.g. Riley, 1983; Roberts & Scapens, 1985). ToS has given rise to some remarkable developments in management and organization studies. For instance, Barley's (1986) seminal work, which mobilized ToS, initiated management studies that looked at technology as a social process rather than as a mere physical object. Also, Feldman's influential work on organizational routines (Feldman, 2000; Feldman & Pentland, 2003) relied heavily on ToS to describe how recursive organizational routines carry within them the potential for change. More recently, den Hond, Boersma, Heres, Kroes and van Oirschot (2012) explained structurationism's important role as a process theory to explain both intra- and inter-organizational change.

Second, structurationism has had a durable impact on SaP research and its development. Whittington and Melin (2003) deployed a structurationist stance to invite scholars to move away from studying strategy as a fixed "thing," and to consider strategizing as an ongoing process (also see Whittington, Molloy, Mayer & Smith, 2006). Pozzebon's (2004) work revealed how strategic-management researchers combined ToS with other theoretical perspectives to challenge traditional dichotomies between voluntarism and determinism, pursuing a more integrative approach. Structurationism is a foundational basis for Whittington's (2006) SaP framework of: practices, praxis and practitioners, acknowledged as a cornerstone of the field (Jarzabkowski, Balogun & Seidl, 2007; Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009). This framework depicts strategizing as an intermingling activity process, where strategists utilize certain tools, approaches, and concepts in acts of strategy work (Whittington, 2006).

Giddens' notion of duality of structure is fundamental to this framework, as strategists are understood to draw upon and reproduce social structures in their conduct.

Other theoretical lenses have also been utilized in the attempt by SaP researchers to link the micro and the macro (Seidl & Whittington, 2014). For example, Herepath (2014) used Archer's morphogenetic cycle to illustrate how macro-political structures can exert pressure on the strategizing praxes of managers in the Welsh National Health Service. She concluded that the morphogenetic cycle is reserved for researchers with an active participant role in the strategizing research they are undertaking and, when compared to structurationism, the Archerian approach lacks the sensitivity to analyze nuances in social interactions (Herepath, 2014: 875). Smets Jarzabkowski, Burke and Spee (2015) employed the notion of institutional logic to discuss how historical trends going back 300 years are drawn upon in actions and interactions at Lloyd's Insurance. Here, it is less obvious how immediate macro-structures—such as gender, race, and professional experience—influence their interactions. A social theory that enables SaP researchers to systematically consider historical and local forces ones in strategizing practices and praxes has the potential to add significant value to this emerging research stream.

We argue that SST offers strategizing scholars an operational theory that can shape and guide empirical SaP research. Its mobilization can lead to a systematic and rigorous examination of how macro structures are drawn upon in the strategizing practices and praxes of organizational members. Theoretically, SST offers a "structuration cycle" model that makes the processual unfolding of structuration over time explicit. Methodologically, SST insists on distinguishing different ontological levels, and encourages the employment of two types of temporal bracketing, namely, actors' conduct analysis and actors' context analysis, both of which are necessary if macro-/micro-data is to be made sense of. While we acknowledge that SST is not the only possible solution to the micro-isolationism exhibited in the current literature, SaP scholars' existing interest in structurationism indicates that a structuration-based response is needed to the present criticisms of micro-isolationism and micro-myopia.

Our argument for SST is not intended to dissuade researchers from combining a structurationist lens with other theoretical stances, as we see creative possibilities in such integration that could produce novel insights and astute theorizing. Rather, and in the spirit of theoretical pluralism (Floyd, Coprneelissen, Whright & Delios, 2011), we see the currently neglected theory of SST as a coherent framework that could stimulate and support the study of strategizing practices and praxes in a wide range of empirical settings. If adopted, it could foreground some aspects of strategizing that are currently passed over, and consequently address major theoretical challenges and facilitate knowledge accumulation in the field (Rouleau, 2013).

## **EMPLOYING GIDDENS' TOS TO OVERCOME MICRO-ISOLATIONISM**

Giddens' ToS was developed from the 1970s through to the mid-1980s, and is distinctive for its notion of the "duality of structure". His critical confrontation with other social traditions was based on how dualism in sociology was accounted for (Giddens, 1979, 1984). By "dualism", Giddens referred to the dominance of either micro-human agency or macro-social structure in social theory that led to their being presented as two opposing aspects of social existence (Giddens, 1979, 1984). His idea

of duality on the other hand blended agency and structure, emphasizing their mutual co-dependence (Giddens, 1984). ToS has been effectively summarized and criticized elsewhere (e.g. Archer, 1982; Cohen, 1989; Parker, 2000; Pozzebon & Pinsonneault, 2005; Stones, 2005; Whittington, 2015), and our paper does not seek to give an in-depth review of the theory in its entirety. Rather, we advance SST as a means to reconcile macro- and micro-organizational forces, emphasizing and restoring the balance between agency and structure that has been lost in most studies on strategizing (Rouleau, 2013; Seidl & Whittington, 2014; Vaara & Whittington, 2012).

If ToS is acknowledged as a promising theoretical avenue for SaP researchers (Pozzebon, 2004; Whittington, 2015), this is because its core premise invites scholars to balance the focus on both micro-sociological detail *and* macro-institutional-level structures. In particular, Giddens' "duality of structure" stresses the interdependency between structure and agency, where "*structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize*" (1984: 25). Agents are said to draw upon structures in their conduct, and this "drawing upon" involves the agents' reflexive knowledge of the structural contexts they engage with (Giddens, 1991). Indeed, Seidl and Whittington (2014) argue that ToS has a strong but largely unrealized potential to account for and help explain the relationships between macro-sociological structures and local micro-practices, and thus is potentially able to move SaP theorizing on from an exclusive concern with micro practices. They (Seidl & Whittington, 2014) argue that ToS is a tall ontology, i.e. an ontology to help researchers consider higher-level social phenomena as these bear down upon micro-practices. Yet, while structurationism has been extensively adopted in SaP empirical research, insights into how broader social structures shape local strategizing practices in ongoing cycles of structuration have yet to be made.

## USING TOS TO BRING THE MACRO INTO STRATEGIZING PRACTICE AND PRAXES

To appreciate why strategizing research is charged with neglecting macro structures through an over-focus on micro-practice, we show how SaP scholars have drawn from structurationism in their studies. We proffer and reflect on ten empirical studies identified by Whittington (2015) as exemplifying how ToS has been employed in SaP research: Balogun and Johnson (2005), Howard-Grenville (2007), Jarzabkowski (2008), Kaplan (2008), Mantere (2008), Paroutis and Pettigrew (2007), Rouleau (2005), Salvato (2003), Fauré and Rouleau (2011), and Paroutis and Heracleous (2013). The ten papers can also be mapped with den Hond et al.'s (2012) three characterizations of how management scholars use structuration theory in empirical research; these are (den Hond et al., 2012: 247):

- *Giddens in passing* : texts that refer to Giddens, the social theorist, without actually engaging with ToS
- *Giddens à la carte* : studies that selectively engage in one or two sensitizing concepts from ToS
- *Giddens full monty* : the rare studies that draw on all ToS concepts to theoretically underpin their research .

As Table 1 reveals, the ten SaP empirical studies we examine in our paper cover the whole range of den Hond et al.'s three characterizations. This signifies that SaP's mobilization of ToS, together with Whittington's list,

reflects common research practices unearthed by den Hond et al. (2012) in the broader management literature. We reviewed subsequent SaP research published since 2015 to ascertain whether we should add any further literature to Whittington's list, but our search found no additional papers that fulfilled the criteria of exemplifying ToS while adding new insights.

The selected articles have undoubtedly added perspective and novel insights to our knowledge and understanding of strategic management. Our appreciation of this body of work is not an evaluation of its contribution, but an examination of how ToS has been deployed to connect the macro with the micro. Our analysis responds to calls by numerous scholars inviting and mobilizing a more critical stance on SaP (e.g. Carter et al., 2008; Carter, 2013; Elbasha & Avetisyan, forthcoming; Rouleau, 2013). Table 1 offers an overview, detailing the author(s) of the paper, the structuration-like (Sminia, 2009) theory used and any other combined theory, the main insights, the unit of analysis, which of den Hond et al.'s (2012) three characterizations applies, and how social structures are presented. Our examination is framed around two axes: a methodological approach concerning the structure/agency balance in terms of the analytical focus, and additional theories integrated into the research to address a perceived shortfall in ToS.

#### STRUCTURE/AGENCY EMPHASIS

Our first observation relates to the unit of analysis. The main focus of the studies is on the agency of middle and senior managers, either as individual agency (e.g. two actors in Rouleau, 2005) or as an aggregate agency (e.g. middle managers in Balogun & Johnson, 2005), and how this draws upon broader social structures, such as role expectations or shared beliefs *within* organizations in their strategizing praxes. Overall, the ten exemplar papers reveal how under certain conditions, strategizing activities change or support established social structures within organizations.

All but one of the papers limit their discussion of social structures to the organizational level: What Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009) label the "meso". SaP studies marshaling structurationism have thus far struggled to grasp structural elements outside of the organization (see Rouleau, 2005 for an exception). We know little about how familial, political, social, economic, ethnic, and structural elements shape micro-strategizing, or how this activity scales up and changes or reinforces such macro-structures. Rouleau's (2005) study stands out for recognizing the importance of broader societal structures, and for integrating them into the research. Her findings show how middle managers adapted their rhetoric when sense-giving a strategic change. The managers were observed to alter their discourse depending on the social background of their audience (francophone or anglophone), drawing upon their own cultural background. Her insights demonstrate a hitherto-passed-over aspect of strategizing: how sociocultural and gendered heritages shape strategy work.

Paper	Theoretical backbone	Structuration inspired insights	Main unit of analysis	de Jongh, et al.'s (2012) characterization	Social structures
<b>Balogun &amp; Johnson (2005)</b>	Barley & Tolbert (1997)	Intended and unintended consequences of actions emerge from a cyclical sense-making process	Sense-making processes of middle managers	In passing	Shared meanings and interpretive schemas within the organization
<b>Howard-Grenville (2007)</b>	Issue selling, Feldman (2004), and Barley & Tolbert (1997)	Issue-selling moves draw on and reconstruct personal schemas	Issue-selling practices of managers	In passing	Not explicitly articulated, seem implicit in the schemas of issue recipients
<b>Jarzabkowski (2008)</b>	Giddens (1984), and Barley & Tolbert (1997)	Different strategizing behaviors have multiple consequences on altering or supporting established institutional structures	Strategizing behaviors of top managers	Full monty	An accumulation of beliefs, norms, and interests about organizational strategy
<b>Kaplan (2008)</b>	Mainly Goffman (1974), but also Orlikowski (2000)	Cognitive frames are both constraints and resources for individuals' scope of action. They shape strategizing practices and outcomes	Interactions of individuals in the strategizing process	In passing	Not explicitly articulated, but referred to when discussing individual and collective cognitive frames
<b>Mantere (2008)</b>	Floyd & Wooldridge (1992), and Giddens (1984)	Middle managers' agency is constrained and enabled by expectations (the structural contexts they draw upon)	Middle managers' activities	À la carte	Role expectations within the organization

<b>Paroutis &amp; Pettigrew (2007)</b>	Jarzabkowski (2004), and Orlikowski (2002), both inspired by Giddens	Change and continuity during strategizing processes are achieved through adaptive and recursive activities	Strategizing activities of different strategy teams	In passing	Not explicitly articulated
<b>Rouleau (2005)</b>	Gioia & Chittipeddi (1991), and Giddens (1984)	Managers rely on macro-structural elements to sell change to external actors, and by so doing they reproduce these structural elements	Routines and conversations conducted by middle managers	À la carte	Sociocultural tacit knowledge
<b>Salvato (2003)</b>	Dynamic capabilities, and Sewell Jr. (1992)	Adaptive organizations engage in the restructuring of their organizational structures	Routines in long-term strategic change processes	In passing	A historical set of routines and repeated organizational behaviors
<b>Fauré &amp; Rouleau (2011)</b>	Communication as constitutive of organizations (e.g. Cooren, 2004) and Giddens (1984)	Practical knowledge is drawn upon, shared and created during routine conversations of managers and accountants	Conversations between middle managers and accountants	À la carte	Not explicitly articulated
<b>Paroutis &amp; Heracleous (2013)</b>	Discourse, institutional and practice theories	Senior managers reflexively and actively participate in structuring the organization's strategy	Managers' discourse	In passing	Statements about strategy employed by strategists

Table 1 – Ten strategizing papers utilizing ToS



## THEORETICAL BORROWING TO SUBSTANTIATE STRUCTURATION THEORY

Often, without specifically saying that Giddens' ToS is lacking in detail, many authors have felt the need to complement and substantiate it with a theory or theories drawn from elsewhere within the social sciences. Specifically, ToS is considered to be inadequately concerned with how practice unfolds over time (Archer, 1995; Thrift, 1985; Urry, 1982). In consequence, many studies that adopt a structurationist stance have drawn from alternative literatures to help them account for the processual nature of organizational life (e.g. Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Jarzabkowski, 2008). Typical of this approach has been Balogun and Johnson's (2005) move to build on Barley and Tolbert's (1997) seminal work, which calls upon institutional theory, to help them illustrate structuration as an iterative movement between the realms of the institutional and the individual. Rouleau (2005) also found ToS insufficient to explain how broader structures make a difference in strategic interactions. To overcome this gap, she infused structurationism with the notion of sense-giving as developed by Gioia and colleagues (e.g. Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).

Previous reviews have suggested that ToS lacks the necessary detail needed to carry out empirical work (e.g. Gregson, 1989; Pozzebon & Pinsonneault, 2005; Stones, 2005). This has led to efforts to combine it with other theoretical lenses (den Hond et al., 2012; Pozzebon, 2004; Whittington, 1992). The approach has been problematic for SaP scholars wishing to undertake empirical research who, directed to the theory by the work of others, find it insufficient for their needs. The promise it holds, the reconciliation between structure and agency so attractive to those driven by a sociological understanding of strategizing, has remained unfulfilled. The positive impact that structurationism has had on management and organizational studies, and on the SaP research presented earlier, should not be dismissed, but improvements and developments in structuration thinking in sociology should also be taken into consideration. Rather than dismissing ToS for its imperfections, we argue that what is needed is a developed ToS: one that addresses its shortcomings while building on its strengths. We believe Robert Stones' (2005) SST provides this.

## STONES' STRONG STRUCTURATION THEORY

While ToS developments can be discerned in sociology via the work of Sewell Jr (1992) and Mouzelis (1991)—and in information systems research through DeSanctis and Poole's (1994) adaptive structuration theory and the work by Orlikowski (2000, 2002), and Barley and Tolbert's (1997) widely adopted model of structuration—we agree with Parker (2006) that, considerable as these enhancements are, none provides the full-scale revision of ToS offered in SST. Indeed, Parker (2006) believes that Stones' discussion of agency and structures offers researchers the means to investigate the interplay between them. He (2006: 122) considers it "*the most serious attempt to date to give structuration theory a new lease of life.*" Edwards (2006: 911) echoes this, seeing SST as a question-led outlook compared to Giddens' concept-led approach.

Along with colleagues, social theorist Rob Stones has presented and continues to develop a reinforced version of ToS, namely SST (Greenhalgh et al., 2013, 2016; Greenhalgh & Stones, 2010; Greenhalgh, Swinglehurst & Stones, 2014; Stones, 2005, 2012, 2014; Stones & Jack, 2016; Stones & Tangsupvattana, 2012). SST has recently been employed to theorize empirical research in such diverse fields as education (Aldous, Sparkes &



Brown, 2014), immigration (O'Reilly, Stones & Botterill, 2014; Stones, 2012), accounting (Coad & Glyptis, 2014; Englund & Gerdin, 2016; Jack & Kholeif, 2007, 2008), information systems (Greenhalgh & Stones, 2010), healthcare management (Greenhalgh et al., 2014, 2016), and political affairs (Stones & Tangsupvattana, 2012).

Stones remains loyal to the core concept of Giddens' ToS, the duality of structure, but takes into consideration major critiques by Archer (1982, 1995), Mouzelis (1991), Parker (2000), Sewell (1992), Thrift (1985), and Urry (1982). Stones develops the abstraction around the duality of structure found in ToS (what he calls the "ontology-in-general"), arguing for an ontology that relates to specific social processes and events in particular times and places ("ontology-in-situ"). In other words, he moves from an "all and every" approach to "who did what, where, when, how and why?" (Parker, 2006: 122). We argue that SST is an important and attractive development in structurationism equipping researchers with an improved set of tools to link macro- and micro-levels. This is achieved in three ways. First, SST analytically details how structuration unfolds in recurring cycles, where macro-structures are considered as a cornerstone of the process. Second, it provides the necessary methodological details by suggesting suitable research questions and calling for the use of both types of methodological bracketing context (macro-) and conduct (micro-) analyses. These two approaches address the theoretical shortfall and the methodological imbalance shown to be present in the exemplary SaP papers considered earlier. The third way that SST achieves this is via a novel theoretical development in the structuration camp related to the way it develops a linking meso-level ontology that locates social practices—the core interest for SaP and other practice scholars—within a web of relations, which are themselves embedded within historical and institutional forces.

#### PLACING SOCIAL PRACTICES WITHIN A WEB OF STRUCTURAL FORCES

Stones (2005: 77) sees three levels of ontology relevant for empirical analysis. The most abstract level provides broad guidance for researchers, while the ontic level is filled with substantive empirical details informed by particular practices in time and space. Between these two, Stones argues, a third meso-ontological level can be constructed to connect the ontic and abstract levels. The meso-level is of particular interest to researchers as it accommodates variations and relative degrees of generalized (abstract) knowledge. The meso-level acts like a bridge between ontic (micro-) and abstract (macro-) level analyses, and offers a vocabulary for a more relational, structurationist perspective that is sensitive to SaP research tenets.

Stones (2005) contends that research is a "drilling down" process, investigating phenomena in ever greater detail, and necessarily involving the study of both hermeneutics and broader structures. Stones (2005) refers to Parker's (2000) "intermediate temporality" as an appropriate approach to examine the interplay between structure and agency in structuration cycles. Parker (2000: 120) argues that structuration unfolds in an intermediate zone of reality, situated between historical social systems and individual actions. He (2000: 107) further specifies that to study the interplay between agency and structure, one should investigate the temporality of practices, i.e. their temporal occupation of and within historical processes; Parker's "intermediate temporality" invites Giddens to develop ToS in a way that links individual agency with specific historically

embedded contexts. To study intermediate temporalities empirically, Stones draws on Bhaskar's (1979/1998) position-practices to combine the social structure position (such as function, rule, task, duty, and right) with actors' individual practices: They are "*slots...in the social structure into which active subjects must slip in order to reproduce it*" (Bhaskar, 1979/1998: 44).

Position-practices can be understood as "*institutionalized positions, positional identities, the sense of prerogatives and obligation*" (Stones, 2005: 63). Expanding on Bhaskar, Cohen (1989: 211) draws attention to the complexity of relations existing between position-practices and how actors embody them in their conduct. Stones (2012) goes on to develop this, arguing that events (and practices) are better understood within a flow of position-practices and their networks of relations. Specifically, one can build up a "theorized contextual frame" (Stones & Tangsupvattana, 2012: 223) of these position-practice relations directly relevant to specific research questions. For instance, a strategy director is a social position that implies certain responsibilities, obligations, powers, and norms of conduct that are recognized as commensurate with how strategy directors are socially perceived. This social position emerges over time, as previous incumbents establish practices—the behaviors, actions, duties, and conducts—that mark the position out as that of a strategy director, resulting in actors who step into this position having to reproduce certain obligations associated with the role.

Position-practices are social in the sense that specific positions have to establish relations with other social positions. Strategy directors enjoy multiple, complex social relationships: both vertically with CEOs and chairs upwards, and with other strategy staff and middle managers downwards; and horizontally, with fellow directors, external stakeholders, and strategy consultants. Such relationships comprise position-practice relations. However, although positions are made sense of socially, they are experienced individually and are subject to the pressures and influences of specific contexts. A strategy director has to take the specific and distinctive set of position-practice relations for a particular organization into account, as well as the socially recognized practices that go with the role. Each set of position-practices, therefore, is located within a complex web of position-practice relations, both historical and local. By studying these position-practice relations, an SST approach builds a contextual framework relevant to the agent-in-focus. This is possible because actors within position-practices, such as strategy directors for example, are assumed to be reflexively knowledgeable regarding their specific social positions and the network of practices surrounding them, and to be a source of knowledge concerning how agency is carried out and how structures are reproduced. As a construct for SaP researchers, position-practices "*can serve as a more robust link between structure and institutionalized modes of conduct*" (Cohen, 1989: 209) and address the absence of an institutional link in ToS identified by Thrift (1985).

In developing an ontology-in-situ and paying due attention to the position-practice relations network, SST significantly develops the link between the individual and institutional levels by situating practices within their societal and organizational structural contexts. Such theorizing led Stones to re-examine the relationship between structure and agency, and to develop the quadripartite cycle of structuration.

## THE CYCLICAL PROCESS OF STRUCTURATION

At the heart of SST, Stones explains the interplay between structure and agency in what he calls a "quadripartite model of structuration" (Figure 1). Dissecting the quadripartite elements illustrates the similarities and differences between Giddens' ToS and Stones' SST (Table 2).

External structures (Figure 1) are "*independent forces and pressuring conditions that limit the freedom of agents to do otherwise*" (Stones, 2005: 109). This follows on from Sewell (1992) and challenges Giddens' conception of structure as being limited to virtual existence that guides social conduct (Giddens, 1984). According to Stones (2005), external structures are of two forms. The first has independent causal influences, which agents have no physical capacity to resist or control. The second, has "irresistible" (Stones, 2005) causal forces, which the agent feels unable to change or resist, but is able to resist or change in certain circumstances (such as the restraining structures discussed in Mantere, 2008). Stones (2005) argues that agents can choose to resist or change external forces if they possess three properties: adequate power to resist, adequate knowledge of the external structures; and adequate critical reflexive distance from the action.

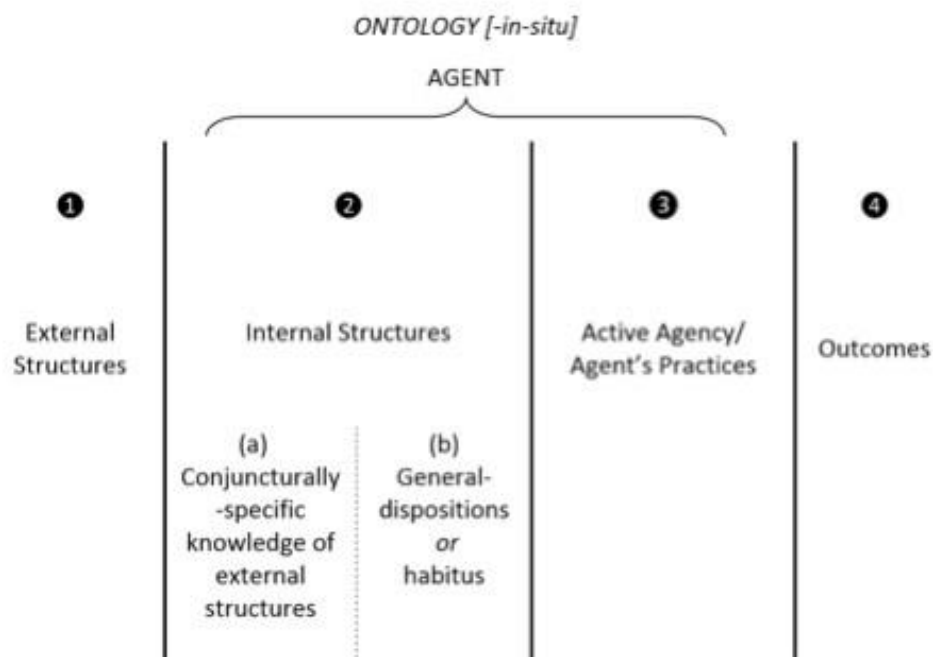


Figure 1 – The quadripartite of structuration (Stones, 2005: 85)

Stones analytically discerns two types of within-the-agent internal structures: first, positional conjuncture-specific; and second, general dispositions (Figure 1). General-dispositional structures (what Bourdieu calls "habitus") encompass:

*Transposable skills and dispositions, [which] include generalized world-views and cultural schemas, classifications, typifications of things, people and networks, principles of actions, typified recipes of action, deep binary frameworks of signification, gesture and methodologies for adapting this generalized knowledge to a range of particular practices in particular locations in time and space.*

(Stones, 2005: 88)

Conjuncture-specific or positional structures denote "a role or position which has embedded within it various rules and normative expectations" (Stones, 2005: 89). This form of internal structure involves the agent's knowledge of the situated, specific contexts of action. Consequently, it incorporates knowledge of Giddens' three aspects of structure: signification, domination, and legitimation. Positional conjuncture-specific internal structures are the medium of structuration, and bridge the gap between external structures and internal structures. Further, the agent-in-focus always operates in a flow of position-practice relations with other agents-in-context.

Illustrations of both types of internal structures are discussed at length in Rouleau's (2005) study. Rouleau (2005) theorized: how external structures are present in encounters between middle managers and stakeholders, and in the general dispositions (or *habitus*) of actors (e.g. being francophone or anglophone), and how internal structures manifest in conjuncture-specific tacit knowledge (previous relevant professional experience) are employed to achieve intended outcomes (selling strategic change to external stakeholders). Identifying both types of internal structure allowed Rouleau (2005) to craft insights into how middle managers meaningfully communicate strategic change by altering their sense-giving discourse relative to the social background of their audience.

Active agency (Figure 1) is the dynamic element of the structuration cycle, where the two internal structures cohere. Agency, Stones asserts, is just as Giddens sees it: either choosing to act or the acting itself. Consistent with Giddens' stratification model of the agent, Stones (2005: 101) discerns five analytical elements of active agency:

1. shifting horizons of action arising from motivated persuasive action
2. creativity, improvisation and innovation within the agent's conduct (it being possible that what is intended to happen materializes differently)
3. degrees of critical distance and critical reflection upon internal structures
4. conscious and unconscious motivations that affect how internal structures are both perceived and drawn upon
5. ordering or prioritizing concerns into a hierarchy of purposes (Giddens' rationalization of action) due to the pluralities of projects attached to different statuses.

Outcomes (Figure 1) are the effects produced by the structuration cycle on internal and/or external structures. At the end of the structuration cycle, active agency may support and strengthen existing structures, or it

may disrupt, challenge or alter them. Whichever outcomes emerge, they become the basis for the next structuration cycle (Stones, 2005). The four aspects of the quadripartite are interlinked (Stones, 2005); structures are the medium of the conduct (internal structures) and the outcomes of the conduct (both internal and external structures). Active agency is the dynamic aspect that is closely entwined with the other elements and cannot be separated from them.

Stones' (2005) elaboration of the structuration cycle provides opportunities to systematically study different types of macro-structures that social actors draw upon in their local practices. First, external structures include certain types of macro-structures that limit the conduct of social actors. Examples include the healthcare structure in a given state, expectations held by the general public of certain organizations or specific managerial positions (drawn from the position-practice relations), industry structures, and societal rules and norms of behaviors. Second, internal structures contain actors' predispositions that transcend from societal ideology, national identity or cultural schemas. The structuration-cycle framework calls on researchers to systematically and analytically reflect on how these macro-structures are drawn upon, reproduced, or altered in the structuration process.

#### METHODOLOGICAL BRACKETING TO ANALYZE BOTH CONDUCT AND CONTEXT

To overcome a tendency to focus on the macro at the expense of the micro, or on the micro to the exclusion of the macro, Stones (2005) developed the methodological detail he saw as absent in Giddens' ToS. Stones (2005) posits two types of related methodological bracketing: agent's conduct analysis and agents' context analysis. "Conduct analysis" refers to agents' critical reflexive process of action as they draw upon conjuncture-specific structures, ordering of concerns, motives. Meanwhile "agents' context analysis" portrays the external process of structuration, examining the possibilities and limitations offered and posed by institutional position-practices. Context analysis diverges from Giddens' conceptualization, which he calls "institutional analysis" (1984: 288), viewing institutions as chronically reproduced rules and resources.

According to Stones (2005), methodological bracketing can play an important part in the forming of research questions and can guide researchers in identifying the kind of evidence needed to substantiate emerging claims. Appropriate research questions for SST-inspired inquiry can cover the whole, or can be aimed at any one of the four parts of the quadripartite. However, a focus on any single aspect of the quadripartite/structuration cycle should logically and systematically lead to an examination of its relationship with other elements (Stones, 2005). Many research questions, however, will require both types of methodological bracketing, since a "*conjuncture-specific internal structure acts as a 'hinge' between a) external structures, and b) the general-dispositional frames and agent's practices*" (Stones, 2005: 123). Furthermore, structuration studies can benefit from being located within comprehensive historical and societal frameworks, establishing links between broad contexts and the four aspects of the structuration cycle.

For example, to study how management consultants contribute to and shape strategizing practices and how they deploy their knowledge in a specific encounter/context (i.e. their conjuncture-specific internal structure in an SST vocabulary), researchers would need to analyze and describe: a) what is expected of and anticipated from them (their position-

practices and agency), and the way in which their actions are governed and managed in addition to their physical ability/mobility (their external structures); and b) the shared and general tools they use and their generalized methods of engagement in any given project (i.e. their general dispositions), what they actually engage in doing (their social encounters and interactions), and the outcomes of their conduct (i.e. agents' practices). We believe that combining these two types of methodological bracketing is essential to preserve the duality of structure integral to SST, offering a theoretically robust means of reconciling macro-structures with micro-agency.

SST presents four recurring steps for methodological bracketing. These can be prioritized or combined depending on the nature of the research question. They are identifying:

1. the general-dispositional frame through conduct analysis
2. the conjuncture-specific internal structures in terms of: a) how they constrain or offer possibilities; and b) how the agent's perceptions affect the hierarchical order of projects
3. relevant external structural clusters
4. "objective" possibilities and constraints of the external clusters on the agent.

(Stones, 2005: 123–125)

These methodological steps enable empirical research to study organizational practices, while simultaneously focusing on the possibilities of structural modification allowed by external structures and on the constraints on action imposed by external structures. Step 1 focuses on the agent and their general dispositions while step 2 looks at the conjuncture-specific; both steps are constructed from the agent's perspective. Step 3 aims at external structures, and step 4 moves on to how they constrain or enable conduct' steps 3 and 4 are constructed from the researcher's viewpoint. Collectively, these steps facilitate comparison of the agent-in-focus's self-understanding and the researcher's specifications of the structuration.

How do these generic steps bring in locating the agency within its position-practices relations? And how do they help researchers to understand the cyclical process of structuration? First, step 1 aids researchers to establish the general framework, an overarching context, within which agents' conduct is studied. Step 2 zooms in on the expectations placed on agents' roles within that context. Researchers in step 3 reinforce their understanding of the position-practices upon studying the external structures that influence the structural terrain surrounding the conduct. Second, these methodological steps enable researchers to observe the way structuration unfolds over time, allowing them to discern historical forces in the form of established social structures. The existence of these structures is a result of previous structuration cycles. In studying conduct, researchers can observe which of these structures are drawn upon in relation to a particular conduct and can also observe how such structures are reinforced or challenged as a result of the conduct in question, forming new structures or sustaining existing ones. This is particularly relevant to SaP researchers who are interested in studying mundane actions often subsumed within the recursivity of routines (e.g. Jarzabkowski & Wilson, 2003; Smets et al., 2015; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011; Wright, 2016). Outcomes thus become the new structural context for subsequent conduct.

Mobilizing both types of temporal bracketing to make sense of the social world, as recommended by Stones (2005), draws foundational guidelines for researchers to systematically consider the macro-impact on micro-practice when conducting context analysis, and the outcomes of micro-practice on macro-structure when utilizing conduct analysis. It provides a means for researchers to integrate concern for the micro with consideration of the macro in a way that reconciles the two. Such an analysis avoids the over-focus on myopic agency (Carter, 2013) that marginalizes societal structures.

In this section, we presented the main premises of SST and illustrated how SST offers SaP researchers a rigorous and systematic structurationist framework to link macro-structures with local practices. First, SST locates social actors and their practices in a web of historical and institutional relations. Second, it elaborates a theoretical conceptualization of structuration as a cyclical process, where structures and agency are afforded equal importance. Third, it maintains the use of both context and conduct methodological bracketing to make sense of the social world, inviting research that examines the effects of structural context and social agency on one another and on their mutually constitutive relationship. SST offers SaP researchers a robust and rigorous structurationist-focused approach to ensure they avoid falling into the micro-isolationist trap identified by Seidl and Whittington (2014).

<b>Summary of some key concepts in ToS and SST</b>		
	<b>ToS (Giddens, 1979, 1984)</b>	<b>SST (Stones, 2005)</b>
<b>Ontology and epistemology</b>	Favors ontology over epistemology Develops an ontology-in-general Lacks methodological details for empirical research	Develops an ontology-in-situ Focus on meso-level ontological concepts Provides a detailed research strategy
<b>Agency/agent</b>	Agency is the capability of doing things, where power is embedded Agents are knowledgeable and reflexive	Active agency is in the choosing to act, or in the acting The agent-in-focus is in the flow of position-practices
<b>Structure(s)</b>	Structure is regarded as rules (signification and legitimation) and resources (domination) Structuring properties that allow the binding of time-space in social system	Two main types of structures, internal and external Internal structures are a combination of conjuncture-specific knowledge of external structures and general dispositions
<b>Relationship between structure and agency</b>	A duality: structure exists only within the knowledgeability of the agent Social practice is mediated by and reproduces structure Structures are the outcome and medium of the social practice, producing social systems	A duality, but external and macro structure exists independent of the agent through position-practices Active agency combines the two types of structures in the conduct, but structures are still the medium and the outcome of social practice The structuration process unfolds through the quadripartite cycle of structuration

Table 2 – Comparison of ToS and SST



In the next section, we illustrate how SST could have informed and shaped a seminal SaP study that drew upon structurationism, and consider how an SST-informed approach would have highlighted aspects of the empirical case that remained under-developed. We follow this up with a discussion of how SST can enhance and extend the existing SaP research agenda.

## **SST-INSPIRED SAP RESEARCH**

Jarzabkowski's (2008) study examines management's strategizing activities at three British universities. This particular study was chosen because, unique in the SaP literature, the paper details how ToS influenced many aspects of the inquiry, from formulating the research questions through to the coding of data and the analysis of the dataset. Yet Jarzabkowski still found the need to adopt Barley and Tolbert's (1997) structuration framework to supplement her theorizing. The data-coding and data-analysis process describes bracketing approach using conduct - analysis methodological; this focuses on actors' strategizing activities. The structural context is fixed at multiple temporal levels that allow the author to consider top managers' strategizing behaviors over several analytical periods (Jarzabkowski, 2008). This approach enables her to draw from her findings to analyze and describe how collective managerial agency (certain patterns of strategic behavior) are more or less successful in changing existing structures at organizational level as a consequence of the prior institutionalization of the desired structural context (strong or weak institutionalized strategic practices). Effective and insightful as this work is, we argue that adopting an SST prism could have extended Jarzabkowski's (2008) theorizing still further, uncovering additional layers of strategizing activity to enhance our understanding of how top managers strategize.

To begin, an SST stance would have located the top management team within a clear societal context. This could have been achieved through studying the position-practice relations within which they are positioned as a result of exposing and comprehending the wider web of institutional and historical forces beyond the organization's artificial boundaries. Some of them, for instance, would relate to the political forces and governmental policies influencing top managers' decision-making at the time. Using the quadripartite structuration cycle framework, the study would have identified these as macro-external structures that mediate and shape the micro-strategizing practices and praxes of top managers. Furthermore, the predispositions of the top managers could also have been exposed; for instance, are they academics or do they come from a commercial background? Do they see universities as vehicles for public good, which are therefore entitled to financial support from the government? Or do they believe that universities should be run as profit-driven enterprises? These issues, though absent, are relevant, as the paper positions the universities as considering whether to adopt a research-led strategy or a more commercially-oriented one. Such underlying structural mechanisms remain hidden, but would have been unearthed using actors' context methodological bracketing (Stones, 2005).

Having uncovered and understood the contextual aspects in greater depth, attention could have been turned to conduct by zooming in on the top managers' strategizing praxes. The researcher gains a fuller appreciation of strategists' strategizing by taking note of which of the macro- structures, or combination of structures, are drawn upon by actors during the strategizing activities, and how these structures bear down on and influence the way the strategizing process unfolds. Actors' conduct

analysis (Stones, 2005) focuses on how what was observed in practice (Jarzabkowski being present during the meetings and conducting interviews with the top-management teams she studied) is combined with an awareness of the structures framing such interactions. An outcome of the conduct analysis is data and knowledge of whether, when, and how the strategizing patterns encountered, reproduced, challenged or altered the macro-structures the field worker identified during the context analysis. This is when the beginnings of structure/agency recursivity are exposed. External structures, such as societal pressures and expectations, interplay with top managers' predispositions concerning the role of universities, which both influence and are shaped by the practices they accomplish. The (re)produced structures become the new structural conditions for the subsequent structuration cycle(s) of strategy formulation. Our argument is that such depth and subtlety of insight is not found in the original paper since an SST approach was not chosen. Indeed, we believe that had SST been used, we would now be better informed of how the macro and micro coalesce, each dependent upon but recreating the other in ongoing cycles of structuration.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In response to the dominance of an economics-based view of strategy, practice scholars have, for over a decade now, sought to articulate a sociologically-informed conceptualization of strategy (Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015; Whittington, 2007). This has resulted in the claim that strategy, rather than being something an organization possesses, is best understood as something accomplished by social actors (Jarzabkowski, 2004). As a result, strategizing researchers have concentrated their efforts on examining the quotidian acts of managers as they accomplish their strategy work. Unfortunately, this re-focusing has been at the expense of developing knowledge of broader social structures, and has led to a charge of micro-isolationism and related calls to address this in our theorizing.

Structurationism has been advanced as one promising theory that researchers may draw upon to avoid the micro-isolationism trap and to advance research that reconciles macro-structures with micro-practice. However, as our review of SaP research that emerges from a structurationist stance has shown, this promise has yet to be realized. We argue that the reason for this lies in part with structuration theory itself, rather than in how scholars have drawn from it. Stones' (2005) SST addresses this problem and helps us to answer our research question: How might SaP scholars take a structurationist stance to overcome micro-isolationism and advance strategizing research?

SST maintains structurationism's central idea (the duality of structure) and offers a sophisticated analytical lens to understand how wider macro-contextual factors (such as gender, age, ethnicity, social background, education, professional networks, political pressures and societal norms), which have tended to be ignored or only superficially handled in SaP research (the work by Rouleau, 2005, being a notable exception), bear down on what actors do in practice, and are themselves altered or reinforced by the activities of managers. Specifically, SST provides researchers with the conceptual sensitivity and methodological tools to systematically integrate these factors into the research process. This is necessary because it is only through such efforts that empirical strategizing research can steer clear of the threat of an over-focus on the

nitty-gritty of practice, and can deliver on its early promise of offering a comprehensive and fully developed sociological articulation of strategy.

Our paper focused on explaining how SST can help SaP researchers to overcome an increasing micro-isolationism discerned by some of the leading scholars in the field (e.g. Seidl & Whittington, 2014; Vaara & Whittington, 2012), yet there are additional agenda-setting calls to which we speak. Specifically, we frame our final concluding comments on Vaara and Whittington's (2012) comprehensive and well-acknowledged review of SaP research. After appraising the literature, they identified five future directions they consider important to take strategizing scholarship from growth into a period of academic maturity. We draw from our preceding analysis to show how an SST approach can help ventilate three of the five directions they advance.

Vaara and Whittington call for researchers to investigate "*strategic agency as taking place in a web of practices*" (2012: 310). Further, they propose that studies should elucidate "*how actors adopt and internalize specific practices*" and "*how and why others engage or do not engage in strategy-making in specific contexts*" (2012: 311–312). SST, as we suggested earlier, can help empirical researchers to achieve these three aims. First, strategic agency could be located within a complex web, a flow of position-practices (Stones, 2005). By paying close attention to the meso-level ontology, researchers are afforded the opportunity to study the unfolding of practices while they are embedded in their organizational contexts. They can then make connections between this level and what occurs at the micro- and macro-levels. An SST lens centers position-practice relations in organizational settings, locating strategic agency within its organization-specific context while not forgoing the bearing of macro-structures on strategizing, thereby enabling its multi-layered networks of social relations to be discerned and observed.

Next, SST explicitly addresses how agents internalize practices through the scrutiny of internal structures over multiple structuration cycles. For example, researchers could take note of how middle managers adopt active strategic roles in their organizations by means of the tasks they undertake (adapt new strategic practices) to help make strategies more contextually relevant (change in external structures and position-practice relations). Here, internalizing strategic practices (e.g. strategic sense-making and issue selling) are assumed to occur as a result of multiple experiences unfolding over time. Such experiences (e.g. formal meetings, informal encounters, and "water-cooler talk") can be theorized as recursive structuration cycles, where active agency alters actors' current conjuncturally-specific structure (e.g. their knowledge, as middle managers, of what they cannot do in their organization). Lastly, conceptualizing agency as an "active" component in the structuration cycle emphasizes the key ToS principle that agents have a choice over whether or not to act (Giddens, 1984). For example, one could focus on describing motivations derived from the macro level, such as national cultures, that influence whether actors are active or passive in strategizing practices.

The second future direction Vaara and Whittington (2012) identify relates to how emergent strategies can be more fully articulated. SST's explicit discussion of the outcomes of structuration cycles can help researchers to study strategy emergence. Outcomes of structuration cycles could support and strengthen existing structures or, alternatively, could disrupt, challenge, and alter them. Outcomes in Stones' (2005) theory always feed into and are the foundations of further structuration cycles. Structures can be confronted, distorted, and changed when three conditions are met—namely, when actors have sufficient power to resist,

possess adequate knowledge of possible alternatives and their consequences, and are able to critically reflect on their action (Stones, 2005). Armed with this detailed theoretical framework, researchers are able to investigate how strategy practitioners disrupt and alter existing strategies. Scholars could, for example, study how strategic actors acquire adequate knowledge of social structures and position-practice relation sets (e.g. their experiences, professional networks and information gathering) in order to assess alternatives (e.g. market diversification and product/service differentiation) and consequences (e.g. competitive advantage) of changing existing social structures (e.g. strategic direction).

Their third future direction is to examine the “role of materiality in strategy-making” (Dameron, Lê & LeBaron, 2015; Vaara & Whittington, 2012: 315). The opportunity also exists for SST researchers to contribute to current debates concerning the philosophical underpinning of socio-materiality (e.g. Leonardi, 2013; Mutch, 2010; 2013; Scott & Orlikowski, 2013). Specifically, Mutch (2013) and Leonardi (2013) critique extant theoretical perspectives for presenting an ambiguous relationship between structure and agency; both advocate advancing a socio-materiality research agenda through a stance that offers clear construct definitions for structures, agency, and the relationships they enjoy. As we have argued, SST offers a highly developed and refined operational explication of these that reflects how structuration unfolds over time. Therefore, SST can serve researchers well by offering an empirical framework to explain and describe the so-far neglected recursivity of socio-materiality and strategic practices as they mediate and shape one another.

A recent development of SST adds a technological dimension to the quadripartite of structuration and the meso-level ontology (Greenhalgh & Stones, 2010). In this development, technology’s material qualities and its specific functionality are incorporated as a structure (Greenhalgh et al., 2013; Greenhalgh & Stones, 2010). Incorporating materiality as structures suggests that nonhuman material objects (as structures) can act in the dualist sense Giddens argues for, as they constrain or enhance strategic practices, bridging macro-/micro-divides. The macro bears down on the micro, impacting upon its unfolding through the socio-material agents that influence how human actors accomplish their practice. Specifically, placing the socio-material in a web of position-practice relations can provide insights into how materiality influences practices. One could, for example, focus on how strategy tools (drawn from macro institutional norms), when located in a particular web of position-practices and perceived to have obligations and expectations, affect strategists’ context-mediated conduct.

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