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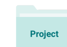

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CHAPTER 8

# Giddens, structuration theory and strategy as practice

RICHARD WHITTINGTON

## Introduction

Anthony Giddens' (1984) structuration theory has an obvious appeal for strategy-as-practice researchers. Of course, Giddens is a practice theorist himself; for him, understanding people's activity is the central purpose of social analysis. Giddens makes a direct appeal, therefore, offering concepts of agency, structure and structuration that have intrinsic importance to practice research. His conception of human agency affirms that people's activity matters: practice needs studying because it makes a difference to outcomes. At the same time, his notion of social structure allows for both constraint and enablement: to understand activity, we must attend to institutional embeddedness. And the concept of structuration brings together structure and agency to give them flow – continuity, but also the possibility of structural change.

All these features of structuration theory are attractive to SAP researchers in themselves. Giddens has an indirect appeal as well, however, for his central concepts can help connect strategy as practice to other streams of organizational research too. The structurationist sense of flow builds a bridge to the important process tradition in organization theory, which has long drawn on structuration theory to analyse change over time (Pettigrew 1985; Floyd *et al*. 2011; Langley 2009). The importance of people's activity complements the growing appreciation of the role of individuals in the emergent micro-foundations stream of strategy research (Powell, Lovallo and Fox 2011; Barney and Felin 2013). Finally, and constituting an important theme in this chapter, structuration theory's concern for institutional embeddedness offers an obvious platform for recent efforts to encourage strategy as practice and institutional theory to work together (Suddaby, Seidl and Lê 2013; Vaara and Whittington 2012).

My task in this chapter should be an easy one, therefore. In exploring the various ways in which Giddens' structuration theory may contribute to strategy-as-practice research, I shall be pushing at many open doors. Structuration theory is not easy to apply empirically, however, and there are alternative approaches that can do more or less similar kinds of job. My advocacy of structuration theory will not be monomaniac. Accordingly, I intend to investigate how management researchers have already tried to apply structuration theory in empirical research, including within the SAP tradition. I also compare structuration theory with two quite close alternatives, both similarly concerned for the relationship between structure and agency: the practice-theoretic approach of Pierre Bourdieu and the critical realist approach associated with Roy Bhaskar and Margaret Archer. I argue that, while each has its merits, those strategy-as-practice researchers already using structuration theory are at risk of conceding too much ground to these rival theoretical traditions. While for followers of Bourdieu and Bhaskar constraints loom large, structurationist-inspired researchers have tended to neglect Giddens' own emphasis on social structural context, as something that both constrains and enables.

It is this appreciation of social structural context that provides my main theme in this chapter. An important opportunity for SAP researchers is to exploit structuration theory more completely in order to understand the larger social structures, or institutions, in which strategy takes place and of which strategy is itself a part. Such an understanding can thereby connect strategy-as-practice researchers to institutional theory, at the same time as reinforcing the resistance of micro-foundational

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researchers to reductionism and extending the range of process scholars beyond the merely organizational. Structuration theory mandates full-spectrum research: the wide-angled analysis of institutions, as well as the microscopic study of praxis.

My approach in this chapter will be mostly practical. By and large, I leave aside the theoretical debate about the fundamental rights and wrongs of structuration theory (see, for example, Parker 2000; O'Boyle 2013). This chapter is more in the spirit of a users' guide. Accordingly, the next section introduces structuration theory's key concepts, notably *social practice*, *social systems*, *agency*, *structures*, *rules*, *resources*, *duality*, *structuration*, *institutions* and both *institutional analysis* and *analysis of strategic conduct*. The chapter goes on to consider structuration theory's advantages and disadvantages by comparison with the rival theoretical approaches of Bourdieu and Bhaskar, indicating circumstances in which structuration theory may be more applicable. It continues by reviewing some key empirical operationalizations of structuration theory both generally in the management literature and specifically in the strategy-as-practice tradition. This review brings out some common themes, many with considerable ongoing potential, but also raises the striking neglect of the strategy field as an institution in and of itself. For a structurationist approach to practice, the institution of strategy is just as much natural territory as the analysis of conduct. The chapter concludes by reaffirming the continuing and part-exploited value of structuration theory to researchers of strategy practice.

## An outline of structuration theory

Giddens developed structuration theory as a sociology lecturer and later professor at the University of Cambridge. He was also co-founder of the successful social sciences publisher Polity; director of the London School of Economics between 1997 and 2003; and, during the 1990s and the first decade of this century, an influential political thinker, pioneer of the 'third way' associated with reformist politicians Tony Blair and Bill Clinton. These practical involvements are relevant because – a point that I shall return to – Giddens is not just an armchair theorist but somebody who actively intervenes in the world, engaging in issues of major change (Stones 2005).

Structuration theory specifically was developed in a series of books that began with Giddens' *New Rules of Sociological Method* (1976), continued through his *Central Problems of Social Theory* (1979) and culminated in the most extended and systematic statement, in which he outlines his theory of structuration: *The Constitution of Society* (1984). The leitmotif of these books was an endeavour to overcome the traditional dualisms of social theory. In place of such divides as between voluntarism and determinism, individualism and structuralism and micro and macro, structuration theory offers a bridge, consistent with Giddens' conciliatory 'third way' thinking in politics.

The central span of this structurationist bridge is 'practice'. Giddens begins *The Constitution of Society* by placing practice right at the heart of his concerns: 'The basic domain of the social sciences, according to the theory of structuration, is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor any form of societal totality, but social practices ordered through time and space' (Giddens 1984: 2). Contemporary commentators on practice theory (such as Schatztki 2001; Reckwitz 2002; Denis, Langley and Rouleau 2007; Caldwell 2012; Nicolini 2012) accordingly nominate Giddens as a leading practice theorist, alongside Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault. For structuration theory, though, the social practice concept is particularly useful for its bridging role. Thus, practice is obviously about activity, but through this lens such activity is neither merely individual nor simply voluntary. For example, religious practices are shared rather than idiosyncratic, and they constrain as much as they inspire. The practice concept links the micro and the macro likewise. A snatch of play on the football pitch is both a local moment of practice and the expression of institutionalized sporting rules, formal and informal, that are accepted worldwide.

Giddens (1976: 81) himself defines *social practice* as an 'ongoing series of practical activities'. This definition carries with it both the sense of

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regularity and continuity and a respect for the day-to-day work involved in getting ordinary but necessary things done. Regular activities bring together people into *social systems*, which are reproduced over time through continued interaction. These social systems exist at various levels – a particular national society, an industry, an organization or a strategy project team, for example. For Giddens (1984), it is important that these systems do not bind their members into some kind of deterministic homeostatic loop. Rather, systems are typically somewhat overlapping, contradictory and precarious. As employees, family members and citizens, most of us participate in several kinds of social system: work, home and polity. We are constantly struggling between the divergent demands of these social systems, and we are rarely as good as we would like to be at managing any of them. Although somehow our collective interactions are usually enough to keep them going, these systems suffer plenty of local failures, and none is likely to have sufficient empire over us to enforce complete obedience. One day work gets priority over family, the next day the other way round.

Indeed, it is this participation in plural social systems that underwrites the human potential for *agency*. System contradictions pose sometimes awkward, sometimes opportune choices for our conduct: work late or just go home? For Giddens (1984: 9–10), it is important to recognize the potential for agency in just about everyone, by virtue of their participation in multiple social systems (domestic, economic, political, and so on). Agency here is the capacity to do otherwise: to follow one system of practices and to refuse another; thus, to work late is to prioritize the economic system over the domestic one. Such agency makes a difference to the world, in small ways or large, as it contributes to the reproduction or negation of each particular system. Choosing to go home may not only protect one's own family life; in some tiny way, it contributes to the preservation of the family as a general system within society at large. In this sense, everybody has some sort of social power.

With this recognition of distributed power, Giddens expresses a fundamental respect for human potential. There is a dignity to Giddens' characterization of the person. Certainly, people may have unconscious motivations; yes, they may not be able to account fully for their actions; and of course such actions are liable to have unintended consequences. Nevertheless, Giddens (1984) insists that people typically have high levels of 'practical consciousness'. Practical consciousness exceeds discursive consciousness, the ability actually to articulate the motives for activity. Thus, although they may be unclear and they often make mistakes, people are more knowledgeable about their practice than they can actually tell, and they constantly monitor and adjust this practice in order to achieve their purposes. It is this semi-conscious practicality that allows actors to make choices that may finally be effective.

The potential effectiveness of human agency is what makes people's activity worth close and penetrating observation: not wholly predictable, and variably skilled, people make a difference to the world through their choices, refusals or failures. From a Giddensian point of view, simple social position is an unreliable predictor of actions and outcomes. To return to the organizational domain, the analyst should not assume that managers are exhaustively defined by their class position in society or their hierarchical position in the organization; family, moral or political concerns may be implicated as well. The family business patriarch (or matriarch) has more at stake than just profit. Nor should they expect a smooth translation of managerial tasks into action: managers can be either more or less skilful – or dedicated – in carrying out their roles. Managers may be distracted, half-hearted, self-interested or simply not fully competent. As such, their activities need to be understood in their particularity, and it is important to study motives and interpretations intimately from the inside, not just remotely from without.

Agency is more than a matter of individual will and skill, of course. For Giddens, agency is enhanced by control over *resources*; it is exercised through the following, or rejection, of *rules*. These rules and resources are the structural properties of social systems, in which *structures* are relatively enduring and general principles of system ordering. In structuration theory, rules have a wide

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meaning, to include not just those that are legislated in some sense ('The strategic plan must be approved by November') but also less formal routines, habits, procedures or conventions ('We usually do a SWOT [strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats] analysis; SWOT analysis means looking at strengths and weaknesses; of course we put it on a flip chart'). Resources, on the other hand, are of two types, allocative and authoritative. Allocative resources involve command over objects and other material phenomena; authoritative resources concern command over people. Strategy, of course, is all about resources – both the material resources that are the subject of strategy and the authoritative resources that grant decision-making power over these resources. For Giddens (1984), people have more capacity for agency the more structural resources they hold and the more plural the rules they are able to negotiate. Resources give power; plurality affords discretion. Thus, Giddens is able at once to resist individualism and to reject the 'hard' or deterministic notions of social structure previously prominent in the social sciences: structures are not inimical to agency, but essential to it.

Giddens (1984) highlights three characteristic forms of interaction in which this agency is performed: communication, the exercise of power and sanction (see Figure 8.1). These three forms of interaction are analytically associated with three corresponding structural dimensions of social systems-signification, domination and legitimization. Signification refers to a system's discursive and symbolic order – that is, rules governing the types of talk, jargon and image that predominate (see also Vaara, this volume). Legitimization refers to the regime of normatively sanctioned institutions; these rules extend from formal legal constraints and obligations to the kinds of unwritten codes that are embodied in an organization's particular culture. Finally, the dimension of domination concerns material and allocative resources; these concern political and economic institutions, most obviously the state or the firm. It can be readily seen that these three dimensions connect structuration theory directly with issues of discourse, power and institutional legitimacy that are prominent throughout organization and management theory.

The middle part of Figure 8.1 refers to 'modalities', the means by which structural dimensions are expressed in action. Thus, in communicating, people draw on interpretive schemes that are linked to structures of signification; in exercising power, they draw on what Giddens calls 'facilities', for example rights defined by the dimension of domination such as those pertaining to organizational position or ownership; and, in sanctioning, they draw on norms of appropriate behaviour embedded in the structures of legitimization. To illustrate, a manager's action may be shaped by the strong norm of improving organizational performance; it may simultaneously be guided by an interpretive scheme that trusts in the efficacy of 'strategy' as a means to achieve that objective; finally, it will be empowered by facilities such as a sufficiently senior position within the organizational hierarchy. As the horizontal double-headed arrows in

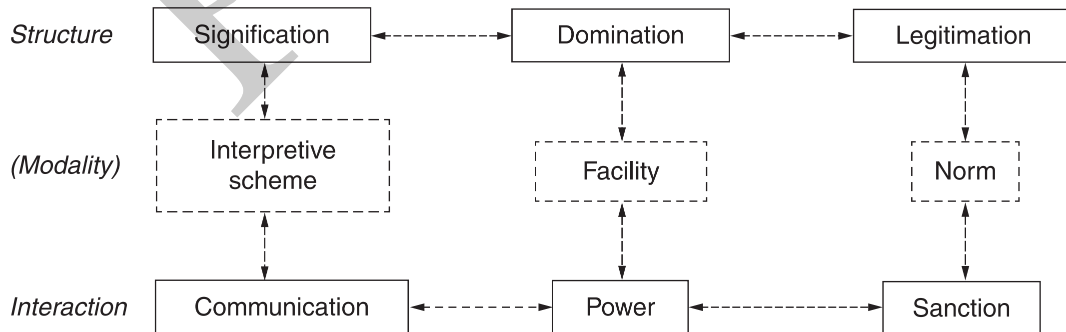


*Figure 8.1* Forms of interaction in structuration theory
*Source:* Giddens (1984: 29, fig. 2). Used with permission from Polity Press and University of California Press.

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Figure 8.1 imply, however, the three dimensions are analytic distinctions that do not rule out interweaving in practice. A theme that is very important for Giddens is reciprocity; for example, norms that analytically belong to the dimension of legitimization can also, by the very giving of legitimacy, reinforce the facilities that originate in the dimension of domination. Thus, managerial powers gain from the fact of their legitimacy.

This regard for reciprocity takes us to Giddens' (1984) key notion of the the 'duality of structure'. Through this *duality* he means to replace the traditional dualism (opposition) between structure and agency, by an assertion of their mutual dependence: '[T]he structural properties of a system are both the medium and the outcome of the practices they recursively organise' (Giddens 1984: 25). In other words, these structural properties are essential to action, at the same time as being produced or reproduced by this action. Structure does not have just the sense of constraint implied by social theories that emphasize ideological hegemony and the unequal distribution of resources. Structure is also enabling, as it furnishes both the resources that make action possible and the rules that guide it. Managers are powerful agents by virtue of their control over allocative and authoritative resources and their command of the rules by which to apply them effectively. Their power is both enhanced and inhibited by norms of appropriate conduct, as more or less shared by colleagues and subordinates within their system.

The concept of *structuration* embodies this mutual dependence of structure and agency. The neologism adds to the static word 'structure' a sense of action over time: structuration implies an active historical process. Structuration happens as agents draw on the various rules and resources of their systems; as they do so, they either reproduce or amend the structural principles that organized their activities in the first place. Thus, structuration theory admits structural continuity while allowing for deliberate innovation and change. Structures typically work like language: at the core, sufficient stability to allow the effective storing of knowledge over time; at the margins, the creation of new words and usages to accommodate changing needs and circumstances. Managers, then, can be seen as constantly drawing on past arrangements as they repeat, tinker with, bend or challenge what worked for them previously. Returning to Figure 8.1, the vertical double-headed arrows reflect both the 'downward' influences of structure on action and the 'upward' influences of action on structure.

An important implication of structuration, therefore, is that structures are not fixed or given. Of course, there is typically a good deal of continuity in the arrangement of structural rules and resources within society. Giddens (1984) describes the relatively enduring structural properties of systems as *institutions*, which tend to confront each individual as solid and apart (see Balogun, Beech and Johnson, this volume). At the highest level, the capitalist system is an institution, its structural properties stretching over time and space in a way far beyond isolated efforts at change. Ultimately, however, Giddens insists that structures exist only as they are instantiated in action or as people retain them in their memories. In the eyes of critics and rivals (such as Archer 1995), this formulation seems to give structures an ephemeral and immaterial character: the past has only weak influence over the present, and resources are somewhat virtual. Giddens' formulation also points to important truths, however. Rules that are forgotten have no purchase; there is little value to resources unless rights over them are recognized; left unused, rules and resources soon fall into desuetude. The structural properties of a system are ultimately only reproduced, therefore, to the extent that its members continue to draw on them in action.

The methodological implications of duality and structuration may seem dauntingly holistic. Strictly, duality implies equal attention to both structure and agency, while structuration charges us to understand the past at the same time as engaging intimately with the present. Despite his theoretical orientation, however, Giddens (1984: 281–354) is sensitive enough to practicalities to provide a thorough and realistic discussion of structuration theory's implications for empirical research. Most important here is his concept of 'methodological bracketing', whereby the researcher can concentrate on one theme while putting the rest on hold. In particular, Giddens

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(1979; 1984) proposes a distinction between the *analysis of strategic conduct*, the means by which actors draw on their structural rules and resources in their social activities, and *institutional analysis*, which suspends interest in conduct for the understanding of institutional context across space and time. Strategic conduct analysis typically calls on anthropological or ethnographic modes of 'thick description'; it might apply, for instance, to the study of a group of strategists at work on the creation of strategy in a particular organization. Institutional analysis, with its larger horizon, is more likely to draw on a range of macro-sociological approaches, including the historical and the quantitative; this would be relevant to understanding the spread of particular strategy practices, such as strategy consulting, over time and across different sectors or countries. In the interests of practicality, it is quite legitimate for the researcher to focus on one or the other, rather than risk being overwhelmed in the attempt to grasp the whole. What is critical, though, is that the researcher should explicitly recognize this bracketing, and acknowledge the place of what is being left out. In summarizing the separation of the analysis of conduct and the analysis of institutions, Giddens (1979: 80) insists: 'It is quite essential to see that this is only a methodological bracketing: these are not two sides of a dualism, they express a duality, the duality of structure.'

## Attractions and alternatives

Structuration theory offers strategy-as-practice researchers several attractive elements. I stress three: attention to micro-sociological detail; a sensitivity to institutional context; and openness to change. Nonetheless, as this section will explore, there are some powerful rival perspectives available as well.

To start with, Giddens endorses a fascination with the details of everyday life. Practice is at the centre of his theory, and he respects the skills – the practical consciousness – that people need simply to go on. A favourite reference for Giddens (1984) is Erving Goffman, whose micro-sociology reveals the wonderful accomplishment involved in taken-for-granted social encounters. From a structuration point of view, how managers simply get through apparently ordinary and routine encounters is a perfectly legitimate object of study, and their successes and failures can make a difference, small or large, to what follows afterwards. In Giddens' (1984) methodological terms, this micro-sociological detail is all rich stuff for the analysis of strategic conduct. Structuration theory is ready to appreciate the minute skills with which a strategist performs his/her job – even down to the artful manipulation of a PowerPoint or the apt choice of words in a strategic conversation (Samra-Frederiks 2003; Kaplan 2011).

At the same time, of course, the duality of structure opposes a wholly micro perspective. Giddens (1979: 81) is explicitly critical of Goffman for his neglect of institutions, of history and of structural transformation. For structuration theory, the fascination of ordinary activities lies in part with how they express larger structural principles. Structuration theory's second attractive feature, therefore, is its intimate connection of the micro and the macro, conduct and institutions. Everyday decisions about the inclusion or exclusion of different employees in the strategy process either reinforce or amend established social and organizational hierarchies. Even the minutest instance of strategizing expresses, in its aspiration to shape the future, the power of the firm in contemporary capitalism. A complete understanding of micro-instances of practice requires, therefore, acknowledgement of the structural principles that enable and constrain that practice; equally, the full significance of such instances may stretch far beyond the micro-moment. In short, Giddens will not let us forget that activity is institutionally situated. Structuration theory constantly asks: what made that possible; why did that *not* happen; and how does that reproduce or change what is possible in the future? From this point of view, the triumph in the strategy debate of particular managers may be attributable not simply to the technical appropriateness of their proposal but to their mastery of legitimate strategy discourse, their hierarchical position, their relationship to capital or their social status in terms, for example, of gender or ethnicity (see Rouleau 2005; Whittington 1989). At some

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point, institutional analysis is necessary to complete the understanding of strategic conduct.

While insisting on the power of larger structural principles, structuration theory always admits their ultimate pliability. Giddens is on the side of the political reformers, after all. The third attractive feature that I wish to highlight here, therefore, is that structuration theory allows for innovation and change. Structural principles are only relatively enduring, with the struggles of the everyday liable to amend them. In the classic Chandlerian firm from the middle of the twentieth century, strategy was the preserve of top management; formulation was separate from implementation (Chandler 1962). Today, in many large Western organizations at least, middle managers appear to be winning greater inclusion in the strategy process, as their command over legitimate strategy discourse increases, new electronic technologies facilitate participation and they accept for themselves greater performance responsibilities (Knights and Morgan 1991; Floyd and Lane 2000; Whittington, Basak-Yakis and Cailluet 2011). This structural change is not legislated for at a single stroke, however. From a structuration theory perspective, the emerging principle of middle management inclusion is the outcome of countless individual endeavours to learn new skills, to respond to new technological opportunities and to accept new forms of accountability. Every engagement by middle managers in the strategy process of their organizations is at once an expression of this structural change and, insofar as they are effective, an extension of it. Hard work, multiplied by many times, can make structural change happen.

Some see this structural pliability as going too far (Parker 2000; Reed 2005; O' Boyle 2013). For many critics, alternative theoretical approaches, such as the practice theory of Bourdieu or the realist theory of Bhaskar and Archer, are more persuasive. Both these approaches share structuration theory's recognition of the production of structure by human actors, but they give greater weight to continuity or constraint. It is worth drawing the contrasts in order to understand the sphere in which structuration theory is particularly apt.

As described by Gomez, in this volume, Bourdieu (1990) too advances a theoretical account of constrained human agency. For him, the role of structural rules and resources are played, first, by habitus, the ingrained dispositions that guide day-to-day activity; and, second, by notions of capital (social and symbolic, as well as material). While capital defines the sphere of possibility, and habitus shapes its understanding, they do not constrain outcomes absolutely. Capital and habitus may be relatively set, but these structural conditions are determinant only in the sense of a hand of cards: once the hand is dealt, the cards are fixed, yet the outcomes of the game are still finally shaped by the skill of the players as the game unfolds. The prior distribution of the cards sets limits, but a good player can squeeze out extra tricks from quite unpromising hands. In this Bourdieusian view, then, people are like card-players, seizing chances in the flow of the game, often through intuition as much as reason. For Bourdieu, agency is largely opportunistic.

The critical realist tradition also proposes a 'pivotal' role for practice (Bhaskar 1989; Archer 2000: 154–90; see also Vaara, this volume). Although structures are ultimately derived from human action, however, they are 'harder' in critical realism because – it is claimed – they go both deeper and further back. Structural depth refers to structures' foundational role for action – something that is not directly accessible to scientific observation but that can be retrospectively inferred from outcomes. For example, career success may owe something to the skills of individuals, largely visible, but it also relies on underlying structures (class, patriarchy or whatever) that are less immediately open to view; these structures reveal themselves by the fact that, in many societies, so many successful managers turn out to be male and well-born. To understand causality in careers, the analyst has to dig deeper than just skilful individuals. Structures go further back in the sense that they are preconditions for action, instead of being instantiated in that action. Structures come first: the career successes of today derive from the distribution of resources in the past. This harder sense of structure encourages Archer (1995) in particular to assert a stark dualism between action and structure, as against the conciliatory 'duality' of Giddens. For her, the sharp separation of action and structure,

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and the placing of structure first, helps us to appreciate the hierarchical distribution of opportunities for action, the delay and costs involved in structural transformation and the likely need for collective rather than individual struggle to win change that is against the interests of those starting higher up the hierarchy. In critical realism, agency is not easy.

Both the practice theory of Bourdieu and the critical realism of Bhaskar and Archer have their attractions, and, indeed, have been applied empirically in strategy research (respectively by, for example, Oakes, Townley and Cooper 1998; and Whittington 1989). Here my object is to consider their practical value for research rather than their fundamental theoretical merits and demerits. Bourdieu, an anthropologist of traditional societies and analyst of the 'société bloquée' that was postwar France, is conservative in his expectations. Distributions of capital are so fixed, and habitus so engrained, that by and large the most one can expect of agents is improvisatory skill within tight margins of discretion. A Bourdieusian perspective would probably be particularly illuminating, therefore, in the study of strategy episodes when structural change is both unsought and unlikely, but opportune interventions can still make a difference within certain boundaries. Such episodes might be a tough strategic negotiation, or the competitive 'selling' of a strategic issue to top management, when success or failure would depend in part on how well the actors played the hands they were dealt. On the other hand, a critical realist approach, with its origins in radical politics, might be better for the analysis of structural obduracy in the face of repeated endeavours at change. As radicals have found often enough, structures can be pretty deep-rooted. Critical realism's hard understanding of structures, and its appreciation of hierarchical power and interests, might be particularly insightful in a case in which, for example, middle managers were trying but failing to influence change in an organization's strategy or processes.

This is not to say that structuration theory is oblivious either to deep-rooted constraints or to deft opportunism: Giddens is certainly alive to the skill of the agent, and his structures are a good deal more substantial than critical realists give him credit for (King 2010; Stones 2005: 54–5; Whittington 1992). It is merely to allow that there are circumstances in which Bourdieusian conservativism, or hard realism, may have special things to offer. Nonetheless, in contemporary organizations, structuration theory will be relevant widely enough: most organizations today are undergoing constant change, and for many 'empowerment' is at least a rhetoric, and often a (qualified) reality. Structuration theory has real purchase when circumstances are plural and fluid, when firms enjoy oligopolistic powers of discretion or when middle managers – or others – are confident and knowledgeable enough to exploit their powers. The world offers plenty of scope for Giddensian agency. The task of the next section, then, is to explore some existing applications of structuration theory, both within organization studies generally and within the domain of strategy as practice in particular.

## Structuration theory in practice

To some extent the basic idea of structuration has become a conventional wisdom of organization studies, as it is now of sociology more widely (Parker 2000). The early use of structuration theory in management studies to challenge traditional representations of organizational structure as objective and somehow 'real' (for example, Ranson, Hinings and Greeenwood 1980) hardly seems radical now. As some of Giddens' key insights have become absorbed into the taken-for-granted category, structuration theory might easily have faded from the literature's bibliographies. Novelty or exoticism would no longer be sufficient to justify the trouble of citation.

In fact, Giddens is now the fifth most cited author within the social sciences, ahead of Freud and Marx (O'Boyle 2013). His work continues to be a source of debate and inspiration in the management and organizational literature, with frequent reviews in different specialisms (for example, Thompson 2012; Heracleous 2013). In the management and organization literature, Giddens' citations are on a steadily upwards trend. Thus, a Google Scholar search in journals with 'Management' or 'Organization' in

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their titles and with both the words 'Giddens' and 'structuration' produces ninety-two citations in 2000, 112 in 2005 and 156 in 2012. It might be that the application of structuration theory is often somewhat lopsided (as I argue later), tending to focus at the micro-level of strategic conduct rather than institutional analysis (Whittington 1992; Pozzebon 2004). Nevertheless, it is clear that Giddens remains an important resource for management scholars – indeed, never more so.

This continued use of Giddens has been particularly reinforced by the turn to practice in management studies (Chia and MacKay 2007; Whittington 2006). This section, therefore, examines in some depth two particularly exemplary applications of structuration theory within the practice-orientated organization literature in general, before reviewing some significant pieces within the strategy-as-practice literature in particular.

My focus here is on the articles of Orlikowski (2000) and Feldman (2004). There are plenty of other prominent and influential articles in organization theory that could provide guidance and inspiration in applying structuration theory (such as Barley 1986; Heracleous and Barrett 2001; Boudreau and Robey 2005; Pentland and Feldman 2007; Berends, van Burg and van Raaij 2011). I choose Orlikowski (2000) and Feldman (2004) in particular, however, both because they exemplify relevant themes and because they have made particularly effective use of diagrams to highlight key features of structuration theory. These two articles deserve closer study than presented here, but significant issues of structure, agency and method can nonetheless be brought out.

In her article 'Using technology and constituting structures', Orlikowski (2000) draws on structuration theory to examine the usage of information technology in organizations. Her focus is particularly on Lotus Notes – a software package purporting to promote collaborative working and knowledge-sharing – in a consultancy and a software house. Orlikowski (2000: 408, emphasis in original) takes a 'practice lens' in order to emphasize how 'we often conflate two aspects of technology: the technology as *artefact* (the bundle of material and symbolic properties packaged in some socially recognizable form, e.g. hardware, software, technique) and the *use* of technology, or what people actually do with the technological artefact in their recurrent, situated practices'. Drawing on ethnographic shadowing and interview methods, she reveals a mixture of limited, personal and sometimes improvisatory usage of this purportedly collaborative technology.

For her, structuration theory helps us to understand the improvisatory nature of 'technology-in-practice' because of its insistence that structural principles are not fixed and objective, but only instantiated in practice. In this case, the structures of Lotus Notes technology are emergent in action rather than being inherent and somehow determinant. For example, the customer support specialists in Orlikowski's software house made improvisatory use of Lotus Notes for their Incident Tracking Support System (ITSS). As in Figure 8.2, within a structural context of a cooperative culture, a team incentive structure and a departmental learning orientation, the support specialists were able to express their agency to experiment with new ways of working. In this they were assisted by Lotus Notes' technological facilities, the departments' norms of team play and quality, and a shared interpretive scheme that was optimistic about technology in general and the potential of Lotus Notes in particular. Instead of just using Lotus Notes as prescribed, the support specialists developed new practices, such as entering calls into the ITSS database retrospectively rather than simultaneously and browsing through colleagues' call records in order build up practical knowledge. Structuration theory's respect for human agency thereby alerts the analyst to the possibility of discovering in use technological capacities that were not originally designed.

A second empirical study making very explicit empirical use of Giddens is Feldman's (2004) article on organizational processes in a university's halls of residence. Feldman spent four years engaged in 1,750 hours of observation, participation and conversation, as well as gathering 10,000 e-mails. Her theme in the article is 'how changes in the internal processes of an organization can take one kind of resource and recreate it as a different resource' (Feldman 2004: 295). She writes that taking a social practice theory perspective helped

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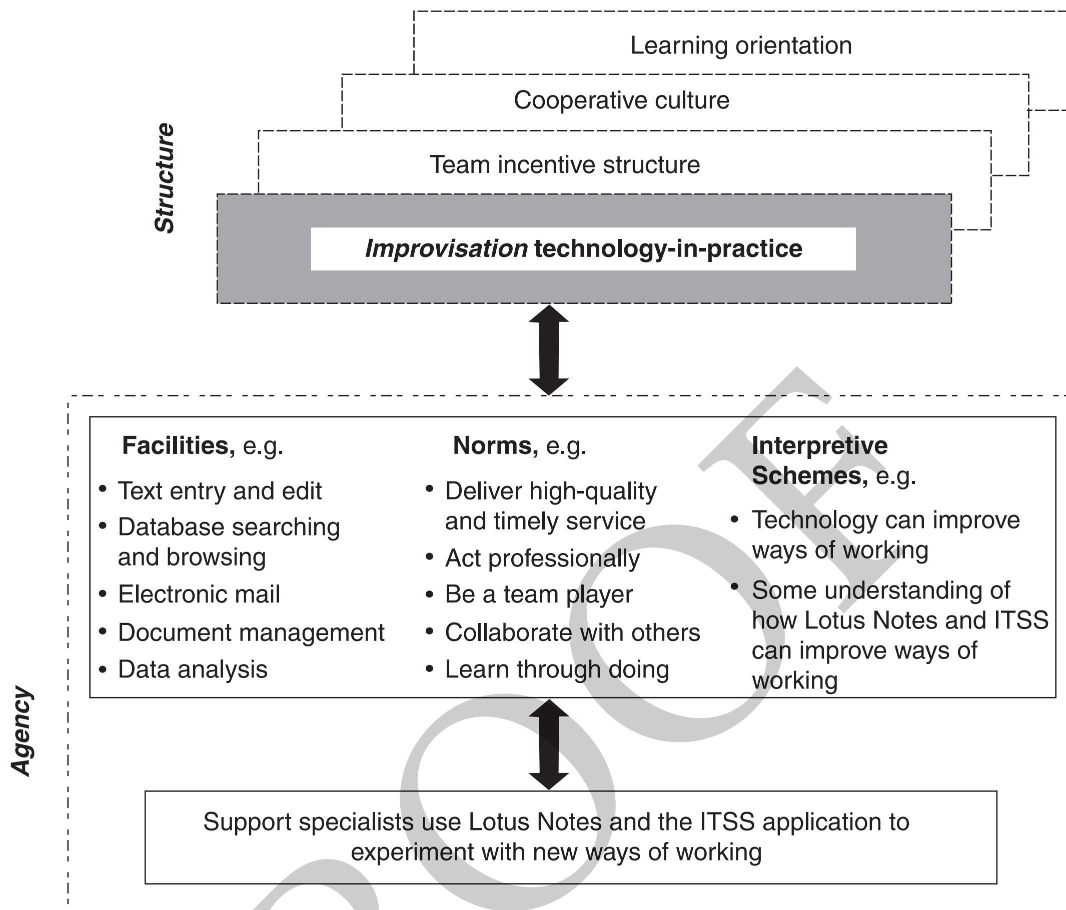


*Figure 8.2* A structurationist *view on technology-in-practice*
*Source:* Reprinted permission, Orlikowski (2000: 420, fig. 9). Copyright 2000, the Institute for Operations Research and the Management Sciences (INFORMS), 5521 Research Park Drive, Suite 200, Catonsville, MD 21228, USA.

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her to understand how these internal processes connect the earlier resources with the later ones – in other words, to understand change over time. The key change here was the centralization of the hiring and training of hall staff, with implications for the building directors (BDs) in charge of each residential hall.

Feldman (2004) takes specifically a structurationist perspective on the relationships between resources, rules (which she calls 'schema') and actions, with each tending to reproduce the others. She demonstrates these relationships by comparing the responses to incidents of student bulimia before and after the centralization of the recruitment and training processes of hall staff. Figure 8.3, taken from her article, has effectively three columns: the first, on the left-hand side, shows the theoretical relationship, with the typical structurationist cycle of reproduction; the second is the empirical relationship *before* the change in process; the third, on the right-hand side, shows the relationship *after* the centralization. Although the empirical resource categories remain the same – networks, authority, trust, and so on, indicated in the bottom oblongs – they change their nature with the introduction of the new hiring and training practices. Hall staff

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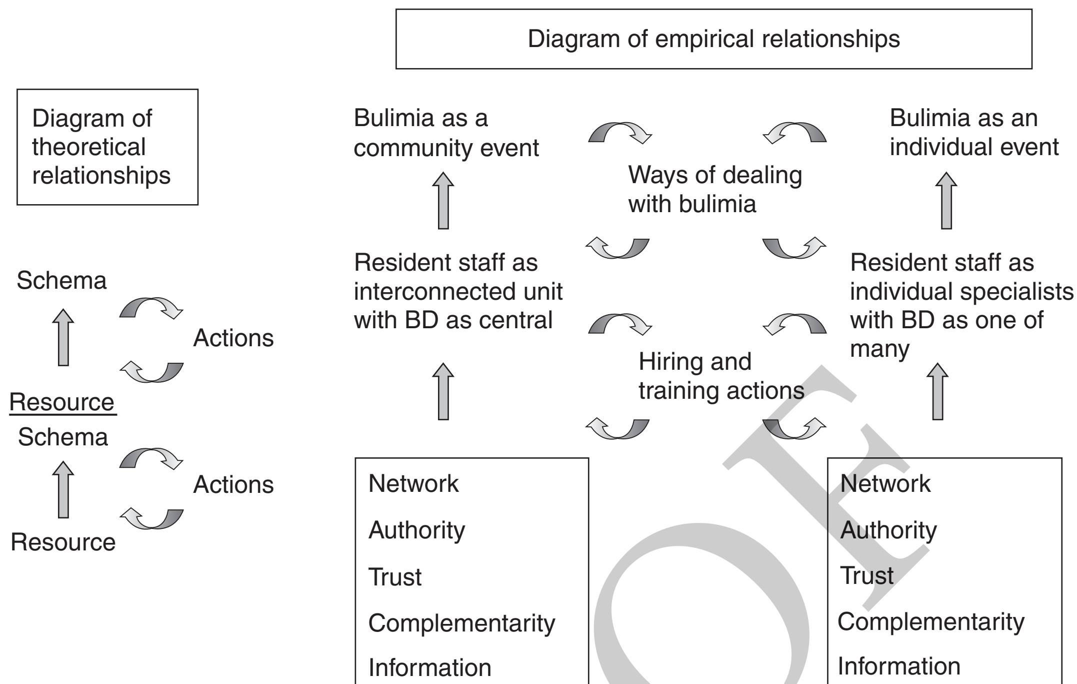


*Figure 8.3* A structurationist *view on organizational practices in a student hall*
*Source:* Printed by Permission, Feldman (2004: 300, fig. 2). Copyright (2004), the Institute for Operations Research and the Management Sciences (INFORMS), 5521 Research Park Drive, Suite 200, Catonsville, MD 21228, USA.

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become more fragmented, and the BDs lose their earlier central status. The result is that the schema for dealing with bulimia, and the actual responses (actions), become less communitarian, more individual. The circular loops in the figure convey the sense that resources reinforce schema; schema shape actions; and actions call forth more of the original resources. For example, acceptance of the new, more specialized responsibilities entrenched hiring preferences for more 'professional' staff, who in turn naturally tended to favour more individualistic responses. This circularity tends towards embedding patterns of response, despite the university's building directors' increasing frustration with the situation.

These two Giddensian studies offer an interesting contrast as well as some shared themes. First of all, the studies show how the structurationist framework can accommodate very different empirical patterns of behaviour: Orlikowski (2000) stresses improvisation, while Feldman (2004) chooses – in this article – to highlight reinforcement. Thus, the structurationist framework can handle both creativity and circularity, agency and structure. Important similarities lie in these authors' recognition of structural context, however, and the intensity of the research method. Orlikowski (2000) and Feldman (2004) alike emphasize the structure of the prevailing resources, schema, norms and facilities. These are set up before the analysis of action, recognized as preconditions for what actually happens. Both authors are also impressive in terms of their empirical commitment: Orlikowski conducted work-shadowing; Feldman engaged in four years of observation. These authors take seriously the structurationist mandate to study practice from the inside.

It is easy to imagine extensions of these two structurationist studies into the domain of strategy as practice. Orlikowski's (2000) sensitivity to the

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improvisatory way in which people use Lotus Notes could be translated into a study of how strategists actually use standard strategy tools, such as Porter's five forces or even simple SWOT analysis. Orlikowski's insights suggest that usage is unlikely to be precisely 'by the book', but that actors will nonetheless find new and creative applications for them – perhaps, for instance, in internal communications or organizational politics. Feldman's (2004) emphasis on circular reinforcement is suggestive too. Her broad framework might, for example, be applied to studying the introduction of a new strategic planning system, opening up its various effects, functional and dysfunctional, intended and unintended.

The emerging strategy-as-practice literature has in fact already taken up aspects of Giddens and structuration theory. Table 8.1 summarizes ten empirical studies in leading American and European journals that have made use of Giddensian notions in fairly substantive fashion, while relating themselves broadly to the SAP tradition. These are chosen as representative rather than absolutely comprehensive, and some of these authors have used Giddens elsewhere as well (for example, Jarzabkowski and Wilson 2002; Mantere and Vaara 2008). Reviewing these reveals at least three common themes.

The most striking theme that emerges from the ten articles summarized in Table 8.1 is the strong emphasis on middle manager activity: Balogun and Johnson (2005) insist on middle manager interpretation and resistance; Fauré and Rouleau (2011) consider the negotiations between accountants and site managers; Howard-Grenville (2007), Kaplan (2008) and Rouleau (2005) concern themselves with middle managers' activity around particular strategy projects or initiatives; Mantere (2008) and Paroutis and Pettigrew (2007) focus on the roles of middle managers in the strategy process. There is an interesting combination in the article by Paroutis and Heracleous (2013), which examines both top- and middle-level management accounts of strategy. Of course, middle managerial activity is rich ground for strategy as practice, interested as it is in uncovering the significance of the everyday in strategy. But structuration theory reinforces this tendency to look beyond top management because of its emphasis on agency – the capacity of nearly everybody to make a difference. From a structuration theory point of view, middle managers can be expected to exercise a crucial shaping role in strategy not only through their creative improvisation in the implementation of strategy but also through their deliberate and potentially skilful attempts at upwards influence. As Balogun and Johnson (2005) and Kaplan (2008) show, top managers – the conventional guardians of strategy – cannot expect to exert effective control because of the distribution of power and the indeterminateness of structural rules and resources.

A second theme is the commitment to intense and intimate research engagement, in line with the endeavours of Orlikowski (2000) and Feldman (2004). For Paroutis and Heracleous (2013), Giddens provides the motivation for sticking close to the data, allowing meaning to emerge from managerial discourse as directly as possible. Ethnographic or observational methods are used by Fauré and Rouleau (2011), Howard-Grenville (2007), Jarzabkowski (2008), Kaplan (2008) and Rouleau (2005). Balogun and Johnson (2005) are innovative in also using a diary method, their research subjects recording regularly their own thoughts and impressions as their organizations changed over time. The remainder rely more on interviewing, but in all cases involve many participants and avoid simple closed questions. The commitment to local understanding is underlined by the typical focus on a very limited number of organizations, typically just one. Mantere (2008) is exceptional in spanning twelve organizations, but his concern is with managers in general rather than the fate or characteristics of particular organizations. Paroutis and Heracleous (2013) offer an intriguing way forward, in combining interviews in eleven organizations with an in-depth case study: here they are able to establish a general institutional template as context for the situational specificity of their main case. In one way or another, all these studies use methods appropriate to the analysis of strategic conduct (Giddens 1984), attempting to grasp actors' activities, their own understandings, their achievements and their skills.

The final column of Table 8.1 points to a third theme: the reliance on additional sources of theory.

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**Table 8.1 Giddens in the study of strategy practice**

| Authors | Subject | Key methods | Structuration theory use | Additional theories |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Balogun and Johnson (2005), *Organization Studies* | Unintended outcomes and middle manager interpretation of change strategies | Case study: diaries and review meetings | Agency, meanings and the dialectic of control | Sensemaking |
| Fauré and Rouleau (2011), *Accounting, Organizations and Society* | Micro-practices of calculation used in budgeting conversations | Case study: interviews and ethnographic observation | Agents' social competence; reproduction and unintended consequences | Communication theory |
| Howard-Grenville (2007) *Organization Science* | Middle manager issue-selling over time | Case study: ethnographic participant observation | Norms, routines and schemas reproduced through practice | Organizational politics and resourcing |
| Jarzabkowski (2008), *Academy of Management Journal* | Types of strategizing behaviour and their effects | Comparative case studies: interviews and observation | Structure and agency; recursivity and change | Institutional theory |
| Kaplan (2008), *Organization Science* | Middle managers' framing contests round rival projects | Observation, interviews and documents | Power as indeterminate and enacted by skilful actors | Goffmanesque frame theory |
| Mantere (2008), *Journal of Management Studies* | Middle managers' expectations regarding strategy | Large interview data set across twelve organizations | Agency and knowledgeability | Middle manager roles |
| Paroutis and Pettigrew (2007), *Human Relations* | Strategy teams' activity in centre and periphery | Case study: interviews | Routinized nature of practice and the knowledgeability of agents | Strategy process |
| Paroutis and Heracleous (2013), *Strategic Management Journal* | The institutional work of changing strategy discourse over time | Case study: interviews | Discourse as enabling and constraining; keeping close to the data | Institutional theory |
| Rouleau (2005), *Journal of Management Studies* | Middle managers interpreting and selling change | Case study: ethnography | Discursive and practical consciousness; social structures | Sensemaking and sensegiving |
| Salvato (2003), *Journal of Management Studies* | Micro-strategies in innovation and design | Comparative case studies: interviews | Agency in using and adapting firm routines | Dynamic capabilities |

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For Giddens (1984), structuration theory is more of a broad orientation or sensitizing device than a precise theory in itself. Structuration theory points the researcher towards certain types of phenomena, such as agency, as seen in many of these papers. Structuration theory rarely has much to say about how these phenomena are likely to behave in particular circumstances, however; nor, as a theory of society in general, does it offer many concepts for organizations in particular. Accordingly, all these ten articles draw upon other kinds of theory, mostly widely employed in organizational studies already: for example, Salvato (2003) relates to dynamic capabilities theory, Balogun and Johnson (2005) and Rouleau (2005) resort to the sensemaking tradition of Weick (1995), while Jarzabkowski (2008) and Paroutis and Heracleous (2013) use institutional theory. Typically, these theories

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provide additional conceptual language, such as sensemaking or framing, or point to strategy-specific phenomena, such as issue-selling or innovative design. Generally these ten articles do not use these additional theories to develop propositions about phenomena in different circumstances – though, as I shall argue in a moment, structuration theory would not exclude this option.

So far, then, structuration theory has been predominantly useful to strategy-as-practice researchers in directing attention towards middle managers, rather than just the top managers typical in strategy research. It has also inspired a commitment to the intimate research methodologies characteristic of the analysis of strategic conduct. At the same time, these researchers have not relied upon structuration theory alone: quite often, they have anchored themselves theoretically in the mainstream by drawing upon theoretical traditions that are already well recognized within organization studies in general. There are, then, common threads across the ten articles in Table 8.1; this commonality also points to opportunities.

## Opportunities for structurationist research

We can treat structuration theory fairly pragmatically, as just one resource for strategy-as-practice researchers, and its value determined according to the task in hand (Johnson *et al*. 2007). So far, SAP researchers have clearly found it useful for the analysis of strategic conduct, especially for understanding the agency of middle management. This is a rich seam for research, and there is both scope and need for more. Middle managers are a large population, and their skills and futures are fundamental to the mission of the business schools in which most strategy-as-practice researchers are employed. We have only begun to understand their predicament with regard to strategy, and in our MBA classes and executive education courses we have an audience eager to learn more. But here I shall point to three more kinds of research opportunity, two of which are logical extensions, while the third is a more radical departure from prevailing streams of SAP research.

The first extension builds on the existing strategy-as-practice strength with regard to middle managers. Just as structuration theory has helped us to appreciate the role of those outside the top management team, so could it help to uncover other relatively neglected groups of actors in strategy work. Obvious examples of under-researched groups include strategy consultants, strategy gurus and strategic planners (for some suggestive exceptions, see Sturdy, Schwarz and Spicer 2006; and Greatbatch and Clark 2002). Such consultants, gurus and planners are typically in advisory roles rather than decision-making ones, but the structurationist respect for agency would predict an influence for them considerably greater than formally allowed, and probably exercised in subtle ways. Another neglected group, often frustrated consumers of strategy, are lower-level employees (Mantere 2005; Mantere and Vaara 2008). An agency-sensitive perspective would propose for such employees a degree of discretion that required their practical understanding of strategy for effective implementation, at the same time as predicting considerable scope for resistance and reinterpretation. A structurationist approach to the practice of strategy would highlight the likely importance of communications, buy-in and unexpected initiatives and contradictions right down the organizational hierarchy.

A second extension of existing tendencies is to exploit more fully the mid-range theoretical resources (such as sensemaking, contingency theory, and the like) that are already being used in strategy-as-practice work in order to develop more propositional forms of research. A good deal of SAP research so far has been revelatory in nature, uncovering the previously unremarked. This is often fascinating, and consistent with practice theory's ambition to 'exoticise the domestic' (Bourdieu 1988: xi). Now that the practice perspective has exposed the phenomena, however, there is increasing scope for deriving from these mid-range theories formal research propositions about variation in these phenomena or their effects. Such propositional research might take, for example, the form of investigating the theoretically indicated conditions under which some kinds of conduct or outcome are more likely than others. As

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a simple illustration, some kind of contingency-theoretic framework could motivate propositions about the conditions under which strategy tools are more relied upon in strategy-making activity or less. The methodological implication of this kind of approach is typically careful theoretical sampling aiming for structured comparison, such as one set of cases or episodes in which the conditions are present, compared with another set in which the conditions are absent. This kind of move beyond revelatory research towards propositional research promises big pay-offs both in terms of practical guidance and academic publication. Propositions can provide the basis for practical guidelines (for example, this practice is more effective under these conditions than those), and they are the favoured method of many North American journals.

A more radical departure would be to go beyond the analysis of strategic conduct that has prevailed so far and seize the area of enormous but neglected opportunity highlighted by Giddens' (1984) methodological dichotomy, namely institutional analysis. This is thoroughly consistent with Suddaby, Seidl and Lê's (2013) call for strategy-as-practice research to recognize more fully the institutional context in which strategizing is set. Structuration theory's commitment to duality clearly indicates unfinished business for strategy as practice, and there is certainly a large empirical gap to fill. As Paroutis and Heracleous (2013) indicate, strategy is an institution in itself. Strategy has its own tools and language (SWOT, core competence, and so on), its professional societies (the Association of Strategic Planning, the Society of Competitive Intelligence Professionals, the Strategic Planning Society), its learned society (the Strategic Management Society), its authorities and gurus (Porter, Hamel, and so on), its specialized journals (the *Harvard Business Review*, the *Strategic Management Journal*, and so on), its recognized educational and career tracks (business schools and leading strategic consultancies) and both full-time professional practitioners (strategic planners, consultants, analysts) and part-timers – the ordinary managers who get sucked in at various levels to make, communicate or implement strategy. Strategy thus constitutes a field, or social system, with its own structural rules (norms of practice) and resources (authority), upon which its members draw in their day-to-day activities. The strategic conduct that has been so richly observed by previous strategy-as-practice researchers relies in part on strategy's rules and resources, and this same conduct contributes to their reproduction, sometimes their transformation. To work on strategy is typically to know the right tools and language, to have gone through appropriate educational and career tracks and to borrow the authority of legitimate strategic practice. In general, analysts of conduct notice these rules and resources only locally and fleetingly as they are instantiated, alongside all the other kinds of rule and resource, in particular moments of strategizing.

The opportunity for SAP researchers now is to analyse the institution of strategy more systematically as an institutional field in its own right (Knights and Morgan 1991; Hendry 2000). Such institutional analysis would not only inform research into strategic conduct; it would support the regulation and reform of the strategy field itself. The strategy field is prolific of ideas ('stick-to-the-knitting', 'network effects', and so on); these ideas sometimes sweep around the world economies, penetrating new sectors, such as the public sector, and new countries, such as reform economies, with little product testing (Ghemawat 2002). It is not clear that the strategy field's leading bodies (its professional organizations, its learned society and its educational institutions) are adequate yet to the task of regulation (Whittington *et al*. 2003; Whittington 2012). The 'new economy' strategies of the dot.com and Enron era around the turn of the century, and later the 'financial supermarket' diversification strategies of companies such as Citigroup, were offered little critical scrutiny by the strategy field. In retrospect, we now all recognize their fatal flaws. Unlike the accounting profession and the financial markets, however, the strategy field left its economic, professional and educational apparatus largely untouched when these new strategies' enormous failings were finally revealed. For Giddens, both the theorist of duality and a political reformer, this reluctance to reflect on and modify strategy as an institution would seem strangely half-hearted.

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There are two clear routes forward for the institutional analysis of strategy. The first is to develop a macro-understanding of the field as a whole, and its evolution over time. Strategy deserves the same kind of historical and sociological analysis that for the other professions – such as medicine, law or social work – have long been routine (for example, Abbott 1988). Here key questions would include how the boundaries of strategy have been defined and managed, the kinds of language that have been used to describe it (from long-range planning to business model engineering), the ways in which knowledge and technologies have been produced and disseminated and the nature and the extent of its membership (both full-time and part-time). Particularly important for informing the analysis of strategic conduct would be understanding the variety and force of strategy's rules and resources in different kinds of contexts. Strategy was born in the United States, but we know little systematically about how its practices translate into on-the-ground praxis in very different contexts, such as Chinese state-owned enterprises or Gulf State business fiefdoms. Important for institutional regulation and reform, on the other hand, would be understanding of how the field of strategy, and its effects, evolve over time. For example, the formalization of strategy attributed to the 1960s and 1970s may have played a large part in undermining US competitiveness (Hayes and Abernathy 1980); by their own accounts at least, it took the combined efforts of iconic managers such as Jack Welch and rhetorical gurus such as Mintzberg and Pascale finally to relax it (Mintzberg 1994; Pascale 1990; Welch 2001). Ghemawat (2002) highlights similarly damaging consequences from the 'new economy' strategies of the dot.com boom, with its overexcited talk of disruption, network effects and increasing returns. By scrutinizing the ways in which strategy as a field may have had dysfunctional consequences in the past, and how the field has previously corrected itself, we can become both more alert to the field's dangers today and more sophisticated in dealing with them.

The second route forward is to better understand the particular products of the strategy field, both its practices and its practitioners. There is an important shift implied here, from the focus on the particular and local common in the analysis of strategic conduct to the more general patterns and trends of institutional analysis. With regard to strategy practices, the analysis of strategic conduct will tend to show that they are typically improvised and reinterpreted in particular moments of praxis, so that their core characteristics are only unreliably deduced from particular instances of use. Strategy practices need, therefore, to be approached also from 'above', to understand them generically as well as locally. For example, the analytical tools of strategy, such as the BCG matrix, are usually well understood conceptually but not very well in terms of what they tend to mean in practice (particular kinds of data-gathering, representation and political negotiation, for example). It is as if pharmacists knew only the chemistry of a particular pill but not its practical usage and effects. In terms of practitioners, the need is for a better grasp of the kinds of people who typically engage in strategy in particular kinds of decisions, organisations, sectors and even countries. Given the heavy focus on middle managers in the analysis of strategic conduct, an important contextual question is the extent to which middle managers are now involved in strategy generally and under what conditions. To fully appreciate a middle manager's success or failure in an episode of strategic conduct, it is necessary to understand how routine and legitimate that middle manager's intervention was in that particular type of context. These kinds of institutional analysis of practices and practitioners lend themselves to the survey and statistical approaches common within the new institutional theory tradition within organization studies (Scott 2000).

This institutional analysis is not, of course, fundamentally separate from the analysis of strategic conduct: as in Gidden's (1984) duality, to focus on the institutional level is merely an expedient but ultimately provisional bracketing. In the end, the goal is to bring conduct and institutions together so that they can be more completely understood as the mutually constitutive phenomena they are. Institutional analysis is necessary to appreciate the potentialities and constraints, skill and clumsiness, involved in particular moments of strategic conduct. In turn, strategic conduct analysis can help us understand how strategy's institutions can

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themselves be changed, by professional bodies and educational providers especially, but also by the sheer effort of managers in general.

## Conclusion

This chapter has introduced structuration theory, underlining the power of its concepts of agency, structure and structuration over time. It has also highlighted several possible implications for strategy-as-practice researchers. In particular, the chapter has identified the work of Orlikowski (2000) and Feldman (2004) as offering inspiring models from outside the strategy discipline in terms of their careful focus on people's activity, studied intimately through ethnographic methods. The chapter has also reviewed ten studies in the strategy-as-practice field in which Giddens' ideas have particularly supported the close examination of middle manager conduct, revealing the scope for constrained agency deep within organizations and the potential limits to the power of those at the top. Given the audiences for SAP researchers, this stream of work has strong potential, especially as it develops more propositional forms of knowledge and extends its reach to others outside the very top of organizations, such as consultants and other employees.

I have also pointed to the potential of structuration theory to make connections to other streams of research, however, both contributing to them and learning from them. Above all, I have underlined the value of understanding strategy as a societal institution in and of itself. Here there are possible contributions both to micro-foundational and process streams of strategy research. With regard to micro-foundations (Barney and Felin 2013), an understanding of strategy practitioners as embedded in their institutional contexts can help guard against individualistic reductionism. The micro-foundational view rightly recognizes the interrelatedness of micro-level actors and macro-level phenomena. Nevertheless, a structurationist sensitivity to institutions would reinforce understanding of how individual actors do not simply interact with societal contexts but are inseparable expressions of those contexts. Jack or Jill may be individuals, yet their identities are essentially social: they are managers, consultants, planners or whatever, and thus infused with capabilities and expectations that are societal in origins, not just personal. Giddens' (1984) notion of methodological bracketing reminds us that considering individuals as 'micro', or focusing on 'micro to macro' links, is to make merely methodological moves, sometimes convenient but always incomplete. In this respect, SAP researchers can contribute to the micro-foundational view by emphasizing a sociological as well as a psychological characterization of individual actors.

The structurationist perspective can at the same time link to the process tradition in organization theory (Langley and Tsoukas 2011), especially to its concern for change over time. As we have seen, strategy-as-practice has been productive of rich ethnographic accounts of strategy processes, providing deep insights into what is going on 'inside the process'. There has been a natural synergy between practice and process traditions here. Where SAP researchers can still make a further distinctive contribution, however, is to draw in more of what is going on outside the processes – the external changes in societal rules and resources that influence strategizing in particular firms. Still exemplary in this respect is Oakes, Townley and Cooper's (1998) study of how the rise of new conceptions of strategy in Canadian public sector discourse impacted the strategizing processes in particular museums. Changes in museum strategizing could be understood only in the light of wider changes in Canadian society.

Finally, there is the potential of structuration theory to prompt research on strategy as an institution. So far strategy-as-practice research has focused largely on activity or conduct; there has been little on the general characteristics of strategy as an institutionalized set of rules and resources that, alongside others, enable and constrain this conduct. This is anomalous theoretically, for Giddens insists that focus on either one of conduct or institution should be merely a matter of methodological bracketing, provisional and self-conscious. His duality of structure implies that the analysis of strategy activity is incomplete without a thorough understanding of institutional context, of which

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strategy as a field must necessarily be an important part. Neglect of strategy as institution falls short also in policy terms, for the strategy field is an influential and inventive one, constantly spinning out new ideas, sometimes (as perhaps during the high tide of formal planning during the 1960s and 1970s, or the dot.com era of the 1990s) with widely damaging consequences. Giddens the reformer would be concerned that the strategy field is not very good at regulating itself – indeed, that it lacks sufficient systematic knowledge of its own internal workings even to try to do so more effectively. It is worthwhile investing in an institutional analysis of strategy. After all, the merit of structuration theory, vis-à-vis more fatalistic theoretical rivals such as those of Bourdieu and Bhaskar, is its confidence in our human capacity to change institutions for the better. With the 'practical' so strongly implied in our field's title, making practice better should surely be a central part of our research endeavour.

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