Giddens’ Structuration – Problems and Prognosis in Management Research

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Abstract
There is a growing body of work in management, and related areas using Gidden’s structuration as theoretical framework for their research. Several review papers have been published which appear to conclude that empirical work shaped by Giddens should continue to grow. However there are a number of fundamental issues with structuration which are not included in the review papers which often concentrate on the utility not the fundamental theory. This paper critically reviews structuration as well as providing some alternatives for researchers engaged in the critical and interpretive space.

Keywords Giddens, structuration, management research, Elias

INTRODUCTION
It is hard to disagree with the notion that Antony Giddens has been a dominant figure in British sociology in the 20th and 21st centuries; although Whittington’s (2006, p.116) conclusion appears a little strong, that: “To some extent the basic idea of structuration has become a conventional wisdom of organization studies, as it is now of sociology more widely”. Willmott (1997, p.66) writes of a “generic endorsement of Gidden’s structuration theory” in organizational analysis. There is little doubt that there is a significant body of literature in business and management literature that uses structuration as a theoretical framework or ‘sensitizing device’ (Giddens, 1984, p.326-327). There are some useful reviews and critiques of Giddens in the broader business research literature in management and organization studies (den Hond et al, 2013), organizational discourse (Heracleous, 2013), human resource development (Veliquette, 2012), strategy (Pozzebon, 2004; Whittington, 2010) and in other areas of business research like accounting (Englund, Gerdin and Burns, 2011) and information systems (Jones & Karsten, 2008). However, they produce an unnecessarily timid review of Gidden’s structuration theory; a more robust critique of the underlying theory is necessary. While some interesting insights appear to have come from the use of structuration in management, more powerful insights may have come from alternative frameworks. The focus in this paper is on the inherent problems within Gidden’s sociology which translate into how his theory is developed and used.
Many of these critiques in the management literature delimit the fundamentals of Gidden’s sociology from their analysis and therefore produce an unnecessarily timid critique. Den Hond et al. (2012) identify three issues in the use of structuration in management research: the critique of the fundamentals of the theory, its “specification and comprehensiveness” (ibid, p.240) and the use of structuration in empirical research. They do not engage with the conceptual critique and only engage with their last point, the empirical issues. Similarly Whittington (2010, p.109) creates a demarcation of his explanation of structuration and strategy as practice as being essentially practical and delimiting the “fundamental rights and wrongs” of Giddens theory. This paper turns back to explore the foundations of structuration and its fundamental problems. Indeed I start by identifying its virtues, but in the middle section I tackle its fundamental weaknesses, under the heading of fundamental concerns. The third section explores the prognosis – how structuration research might develop in the future and viable competing alternatives in the research of management and organizations.

THE CASE FOR STRUCTURATION
In an early review paper of Giddens in management and organization studies, Whittington (1992) noted the developing work in the 1980s mainly in Journal of Management Studies and the work of both Andrew Pettigrew and Hugh Willmott in using structuration. He notes the earlier paper of Ranson, Hinings and Greenwood (1980) paper in Administrative Science Quarterly which drew Giddens into management and organization studies. Since then there has been a significant trend to use Giddens.

Advocates of structuration in strategy research like Pozzebon (2004) see it as advancing the understanding of how structure impacts on the setting of strategic goals but allowing for human agency and choice; it also helps to address the levels of analysis in strategy research. Whittington (2010) has specifically reviewed the use of Gidden’s structuration in the strategy-as-practice literature and identifies eight papers, not claiming that this is comprehensive. None of these papers used structuration as its only theoretical lens. A particular advantage in this work (Whittington, 2010) is to understand the position of middle managers who do have some agency to influence upwards.
Structuration has been viewed as useful in organizational discourse and communication because it accounts for the practical consciousness of agents which sustain organizations and give rise to institutional norms (Heracleous, 2013). Language is important for Giddens (1984) saw it as an “apt example of the duality of structure” (Heracleous, 2013, p.600). Nevertheless, only six studies were found by Heracleous that use structuration as the main methodology in organizational discourse or communication studies.

**FUNDAMENTAL CONCERNS**

The key issues to investigate are drawn from two review papers that address the central issues in Giddens theory, being den Hond et al. (2012) in organization studies and Englund et al. (2011) in accounting. While both Gregson ((1989) and Loyal (2003) are critical of the use of Giddens for empirical work, especially as Giddens had doubts, the on-going flow of papers suggests that this critique is redundant. From these are drawn four key sketched below.

**Duality of structure**

Both den Hond et al. (2012) and Englund et al. (2011) see the introduction of the duality perspective as a major support to the contribution of structuration based studies. Pozzebon (2004, p.250) asks “What would be the best approach for overcoming dichotomist logic (if ‘overcoming it’ is desired) …?” My argument is that ‘overcoming it’ is not desired for as Loyal (2003) argues in detail, Giddens view of the duality is a significant problem. To attempt to find out how agency and structure can be bridged is a misdirection of effort. Both agency and structure are historical constructs “preceded by the dualism between subject and object and between the ‘individual’ and ‘society’” (Loyal, 2003, p.175). Exploring the genesis of these concepts reveals that this a relatively modern idea emerging into Western philosophy from Descartes onwards. In the days of ancient Greece there was no separate words for individuals and society (Frisby & Sayer, 1986). Up to the sixteenth century the individual could not be distinguished from society as their position such as commoner or nobility locked them into a position in society. There was however a dramatic change in social relations in the sixteenth century with individuals being distinguished by class, nationality, occupation and so on (Sayer, 1991).
Over time this led to the development of the rise of the idea of the individual and hence agency, and the separate abstraction of society.

This dualism between subject-object and individual-society “underpinned the basis for a range of other dualisms: agency and structure, determinism and freedom, thought and action, synchronism and diachronism” (Loyal, 2003, p.178). These dualisms, which became entrenched in much sociology from the mid-1960s, as an unfortunate turn. Rather than trying to span the agency-structure dualism, management researchers should recognize that such dualisms have always been difficult to defend. Van Krieken (2002) points out that a bridge by definition leaves both sides still there, and each with their standpoints entrenched. Giddens is exposed to the assertion that he ends up on one side, for example Callinicos (1985, p.144) claims that he is “stuck firmly at the pole of agency”.

Earlier 20th century sociology in the writings of Norbert Elias recognized the impossibility of *homo clausus*, the self-contained individual able to be seen separately from society. Elias’ figurational or processual sociology was built on a conception of historically produced and reproduced inter-dependent networks which he called figurations:- ‘a structure of mutually oriented and dependent people” (Elias, 1978, p.261). He moved beyond the view of individuals, and by extension organizations (Dopson, 2005), as *homo clausus*; self-contained and individual people. He saw the person as *hominis aperti*, dependent and networked with others in such a way that it is not possible to talk about ‘individual’ in ‘society’ as if they were separate.

Rather than resolving the dualism using the conjectures of Giddens, management researchers would be better to recognise the very difficulties of these dualisms as constructions of sociological thought and move back to more powerful conceptions which predated Giddens. Mennell (2010, p.125) argues that we need “an escape route from the endless circularity of agency-structure debates”. King (2010, p.258) identifies “a new consensus … globally… which no longer understands social reality in terms of structure and agency but in terms of networks”. In particular he identifies Actor-Network Theory, ritual chain theory and Castells (1998) theory of social networks as we move from a “dualistic to a network centric ontology” (King, 2010, p.259).

Englund et al (2011, p.504) acknowledge this and posit that Actor-Network Theory and practice theory are ways to address “the agency/structure divide by not making the distinction in the first
place”. Unfortunately then they reinforce the divide by claiming that it has “theoretical value and methodological clarification” (Englund et al, p.504) and proceed to explore how this dualism could be used. Rather than Giddens’ view of duality, management researchers move towards a concept that individuals are the social world (Goldman, 1977). Abandoning the duality between agency/structure and individual/society and start with “the category of social human beings” (Loyal, 2003, p.183) in which there is not an individual sitting outside the social world but in which human beings are the social world. The work of Elias with his “starting point, in the dynamic configurations that people form with each other, allows Elias to sidestep the fruitless individual vs society or structure vs agency debates (e.g. Giddens, 1984)” (Quilley and Loyal, 2005, p.813).

**Management as structures of signification, domination and legitimation**

Given the concerns with the endeavour of Giddens it is that there is such considerable concern with using Giddens’ sensitizing device of the three parts of structures. Indeed there is a strong push back in the sociology literature against Giddens’ view of structures as structuring action through social rules and relations; the alternative is that structures are patterns of social relationships which constrain the actions of agents (e.g. Craib, 1992; Layder, 1985). Sewell (2005) puts in considerable energy trying to clear up Giddens’ “muddle” (Lizardo, p.672) by seeing resources as the outcome of structure and not bound up within them through rules-resources. However, many of these thinkers are still working within the paradigm of the duality of structure and agency.

**Actor’s knowledgerability and freedom**

Agents, from Gidden’s perspective are knowledgeable, reflexive, and purposive. They have reasons for their behaviour and by their behaviour can alter the structures in which they live. Craib Structuration is based on “the freedom of the acting subject” which is the ability to choose a different course, the ‘could have acted otherwise’ (Giddens, 1976; Giddens, 1984). Giddens argues that Foucault stripped the actor of any freedom to act. Callinicos (1985) points out that Gidden’s critique of Foucault is ahistorical and that we as knowledgeable human agents have power gives insufficient attention to the historical reality of “different modalities of resistance in different social formations”. There are circumstances
in which the actor has virtually no freedom for which Callinicos cites the case of a slave in the Athenian silver mines as a case in point. The deeper issue, suggests Callinicos (1985), is that Giddens sees structures being “interiorized” while Foucault sees them as constitutive and creating the individual.

So there is a certain desire, in Giddens, to believe that individuals have a level of freedom as actors in organizations and society, and in society individuals are held accountable as having had freedom to act. While den Hond et al. (2012) support these concepts of the knowledgeability and voluntarism of the actor, these ideas of Gidden’s are highly disputed in sociology.

The position of the agency is so vexed in Giddens’ theory that he is attacked for being overly deterministic by some and by being unnecessarily voluntaristic by others (Loyal, 2003). Within Giddens’ liberal socialism and the ‘Third Way’ he appears to be more voluntaristic. Yet as Willmott (1997, p.84) argues, there is always a degree of involuntarism; we enter organizations with “structural-cultural relations which are not of their making”. However, within sociology an action may be deterministic or voluntaristic; so Loyal and Barnes (2001, p.523) therefore point to the irrelevance of agency as a red-herring in sociology: “the choice between voluntarism and causation … to sociological concerns”. From their perspective, agency is socially constructed, based on the attribution of responsibility among individuals and therefore “a matter of status rather than state” (Parker, 2006, p.123).

Ian Craib (2011) provides a more fundamental critique of the actor in Giddens’ theory drawn from his view that Giddens has misused psychoanalysis. In particular, he explores more thoroughly the concepts of ontological security and routines. Routine is not simple, and significant concentration on routines may well be seen as unhealthy. In complete contrast to Giddens, the concept of ontological security derived from psychoanalysis, “involves the ability to deal with change and to recognise the routine as both necessary and comparatively ephemeral” (Craib, 2011, p.118). The actor, in Giddens’ theory is created by routines and feels security in routines, which Craib identifies as a very shallow version of the person.
Power
It is argued that there is an advantage of extending critical research beyond power (domination) to
signification and legitimation; one of the disadvantages is that Giddens’ conception of power is too
weak to provide rich analysis based as it is on ‘transformative capacity’. Callinicos (1985) identifies
three steps to the concept of power in Giddens’ exegesis. First power is associated with action – it is
transformative. Second it is domination based on the allocation and authorization of resources. Third
is to see both power as domination is central to the human experience. Both Barbalet (1985) and
Layder provide strong critiques of Giddens understanding or power. To Barbalet (1985) the two-way
nature of power is to deny a state of “powerlessness”, as noted previously from Callinicos (1985), and
to strip it of the social relationships in which it operates.

PROGNOSIS – POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVES
There seems to be some momentum to increase the use of Gidden’s structuration in management,
broadly defined, and organization studies. There is a superficial attractiveness of Giddens. While so
much research endeavour into management using structuration may have produced some interesting
insights there is room to shift directions; not fine tuning and building on Giddens.

Two particular developments of Gidden’s structuration may be of interest. One is Stones (2005)
strong structuration which has been capably argued for in the accounting literature (e.g. Coad &
Herbert, 2009). Coad and Herbert (2009) argue that Stones (2005) provides a more concrete approach
and particularly support the position-practice relations and the quadripartite model that he develops.
Parker (2006) provides a robust critique and the inability of strong structuration to overcome the
fundamental short-comings of Gidden’s position. Greenhalgh and Stones (2010) attempt a
combination of Stones’ strong structuration with Actor-Network Theory; seemingly a possible
confusion of ontologies. The other development of structuration has been in the information systems
literature from Adaptive Structuration Theory developed by Marshall Scott Poole.
Moving away from Giddens are the developments of critical realism to which Parker (2006, p.124) refers when critiquing Stones attempt to defend and enhance structuration: “There is something strange, if not poignant, about the appearance of this project in 2005, given the achievements of critical realist social theory during the last decade”. While Archer may be accused of ‘Giddens bashing’ (e.g. Parker, 2006), her critical realist approach is based on the unbridgeability of agency and structure; reconciliation is not a realistic agenda. However she still maintains the dualism of both structure and agency. Whittington (2010) acknowledges the capability of critical realism which is based on structures being harder and deeper. Yet Whittington (2010) argues that many structures are fluid and Archer’s morphogenetic approach is more appropriate where structures are obdurate to change.

Two particular approaches which are beyond the ‘ontological vacuity’ (Parker, 1996) of Giddens are Actor-Network Theory and the processual or figurational sociology of Norbert Elias. Actor-network theory (ANT) assumes a much flatter ontology. ANT is well-known and will not be further enlarged upon here.

The processual or figurational sociology of Elias has been used in the management and organizational theory literature with some well-developed explanations of figurations (e.g Connolly and Doolan, 2013; Dopson, 2001, 2005; Newton, 2001; van Iterson, 2001; van Iterson, Mastenbroek & Soeters, 2001). Elias, Gidden’s teacher at Leicester, puts up an argument for putting people at the centre: “Why put ‘actions’ in the centre of a theory of society and not the people who act? If anything societies are networks of human beings in the round not a medley of disembodied actions” (Elias, 1972, p.277). The theory is outlined in Elias’ (1978) principal work, *The Civilizing Process*, written in German in 1939, which took many years to permeate Anglo-Saxon sociology and then organization studies¹. Elias figurational or processual sociology was built on a conception of historically produced and reproduced inter-dependent networks which he called figurations: ‘a structure of mutually oriented and dependent people’ (Elias, 1978, p.261).

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¹ Especially as Elias largely remained dis-connected with the body of sociological thought (Featherstone, 1987).
Quilley and Loyal (2005, p.813) sum up the sociology of Elias in a set of “deceptively simple propositions”. Primarily, people are not independently motivated actors but through high levels of interdependency form social figurations engendering emergent dynamics. Second, these figurations are constantly changing over inter-locking time periods; these figurations might commence with external constraints (*Fremdzwange*) and move to self-restraints (*Selbstzwange*). Their third point is that in the case of long-term transformations they are largely unplanned and unforeseen. The simplicity of Elias’ is not reflected in the usage.

**CONCLUSION**

While Gidden’s structuration seems attractive and has increased in its use in management and organization research. While it does have advantages, I have argued that there are serious deficiencies in Gidden’s sociological framework. In particular, I reject dualism of agency and structure as a useful dichotomy. Existing reviews in management and organization research are not generally deep enough to identify these weaknesses.

Attempts to progress Giddens structuration such as Stones (2005) and the Adaptive Structuration do not address the fundamental assumptions. There are better approaches that could be used; including critical realism, Actor Network Theory and figurational analysis. These approaches are built on stronger theoretical bases than found in Giddens. While a significant body of management scholars find Giddens useful, it is useful to understand the viewpoint of his critics in sociology such as Mennell (2010, p.122) who links Giddens with the failed neo-Kantian tradition as “the ventriloquist of the Zeitgeist”. There are better ways forward in management and organizational studies.
References


