

# The Employment of Structuration Theory in Organizational Discourse: Exploring Methodological Challenges

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## Empirical Employment of Structuration Theory

Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration has been highly influential in the social and administrative sciences, including in the fields of accounting (Englund, Gerdin, & Burns, 2011), information technology (Jones & Karsten, 2008), strategic management (Pozzebon, 2004; Whittington, 2010), and organizational discourse (Heracleous & Barrett, 2001; Heracleous & Hendry, 2000). Aiming to transcend traditional sociological distinctions such as structure and action or subjectivity and objectivity, structuration theory embodies complex concepts, such as the duality of structure, practical and discursive consciousness, recursiveness, temporality, and contextuality of action.

Proponents note that structuration theory can provide substantial guidance to empirical work through providing sensitizing concepts for framing the research, analyzing the data, and interpreting the results (e.g., Jones & Karsten, 2008; Pozzebon, 2004). Giddens (1984) himself has argued that “structuration theory will not be of much value if it does not help to illuminate problems of empirical research” (p. xxix); and was careful to say that he does “not try to wield a methodological scalpel” (p. xxx), because structuration theory would be consistent with a variety of research methods. Concepts

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of structuration theory are often challenging to interpret in more concrete, operational terms, which create methodological challenges. However, in the spirit in which Giddens (1984) intended structuration theory to interact with methodology, as a "sensitizing device" (p. 326) rather than as a blueprint, the rather abstract nature of the concepts also offers scope for viewing persistent conceptual challenges in new ways, and approaching data in a way that can offer insights to these challenges.

## **Structuration Theory and Organizational Discourse**

The concept of discourse can be found in Giddens' work in a variety of ways. One is his concept of "discursive consciousness," the type of awareness and knowledgeability about social conditions and the conditions of their own actions that agents can express in a discursive form. Another is Giddens' (1979) view of discourse as ideology, amenable to manipulation by the dominant classes to further their own ends. A third way is that of discourses as modes of articulating knowledge, which are constitutive of social life, operating through agents' discursive and practical consciousness (Giddens, 1984). Given his hermeneutic streak, Giddens (1984) viewed language not merely as a functional tool but as constitutive of social life due to its role as a medium of social interaction, and its role as a medium of characterization and typification (Giddens, 1993). Language, to Giddens, is an apt example of the duality of structure. Linguistic rules are enacted through daily communicative actions, which through this process reaffirm and sustain linguistic structures. Finally, in a rather more implicit manner, we can see language in operation in Giddens' stratification model of agency. This model includes "rationalization of action" (Giddens, 1984, p. 5) as an essential linkage between the reflexive monitoring of action and the motivation of action. This rationalization is essentially linguistic, employing typifications and frames linked to normative assumptions.

Scholars have been positive about the potential insights that can be gained through the employment of structural concepts in organizational discourse, including its model of agency (McPhee, 2004) and the grounding of organizations in action through the duality of structure (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004). Yates and Orlikowski (1992) provided a compelling view on how a structural perspective can provide insight to the emergence of communication genres through the interaction of individual communicative actions and the institutionalized practices. Finally, structuration theory has provided inspiration for a structural view of discourse. This view suggests that

discourse is composed of a duality of communicative actions (utterances) and deep structures (such as root metaphors, central themes, or fundamental assumptions), interacting through the modality of actors' interpretive schemes (Heracleous & Barrett, 2001; Heracleous & Hendry, 2000).

Despite the promise of structuration theory, while it has been extensively employed in fields such as information systems, accounting, or strategic management, it has not been as extensively employed in empirical studies of organizational discourse or communication. Several studies refer to structural concepts selectively and peripherally (e.g., Banks, 1994; Molotch & Boden, 1985; Tulin, 1997). Only a limited number, however, utilize structuration theory as the lead methodology for framing the study, analyzing the data, or interpreting the results (see Table 1).

The concept of the duality of structure (and associated concepts of the interaction of communicative actions and discursive structures) is by far the most adopted concept. However, other key elements of structuration theory remain underutilized. One of these is the concept of temporality, which is inextricably tied to the concept of duality of structure (particularly if this duality is to be studied empirically). A view of agents as knowledgeable, possessing both discursive and practical consciousness has been employed in empirical studies but not very extensively. In the following section, I discuss the methodological implications and challenges of taking these ideas seriously in empirical studies of organizational discourse and communication.

## **Methodological Challenges: Temporality, Duality of Structure, and Practical Consciousness**

Giddens (1995) identified three aspects of temporality, noting that “the structural practices of social systems ‘bind’ the temporality of the duree of the day-to-day life-world to the longue duree of institutions, interpolated in the finite span of existence of the individual human being” (p. 28). The concept of “reversible time” (Giddens, 1984, p. 35) is also particularly relevant here as it highlights the recursiveness or routinization of social practices, including communicative practices, which constitute structural features of discourse as well as normative aspects of institutions. The interpenetration of temporality pertaining to practices, individuals, and institutions, and the related concept of reversible time remain largely unexplored in empirical organizational discourse studies.

According to Giddens (1984),

No strip of interaction—even if it is plainly bracketed, temporally and spatially—can be understood on its own. Most aspects of interaction are sedimented in time,

**Table 1.** Studies in Organizational Discourse and Communication That Employ a Structural Lens.

Study	Focus	Structurational concepts	Method
Barrett, Heracleous, and Walsham (2013)	How interaction of rhetorical framing at communicative level and ideologies at structural level shapes technology diffusion	Structures as rules and resources instantiated through practices; mutual constitution of action and structure levels	Empirical illustration through case histories of software diffusion, with focus on associated rhetorical frames and ideologies
Heracleous and Barrett (2001)	How organizational discourse as duality shapes an organizational change process	Duality of structure; structures as rules and resources; practical consciousness	In-depth case study; interviews, observation, documents; hermeneutic and rhetorical discourse analysis
Heracleous (2006)	To explore the nature of modes of discourse, their interrelations, and their constructive effects	Duality of structure; communicative actions and deep structures	In-depth case study; interviews, observation, documents; hermeneutic and rhetorical discourse analysis
Howard and Geist (1995)	Discursive responses of organizational actors to contradictions arising from merger process	Dialectic of control; system contradictions; discursive consciousness	In-depth case study; observation and interviews; discourse analysis of references and responses to merger
Kirby and Krone (2002)	Organizational members' discursive responses to the utilization of work-family benefits	System reproduction through routinized interactions	Interviews, focus groups, documents; software for textual analysis, constant comparative analysis
Witmer (1997)	Personal narratives of Alcoholics Anonymous members; organizational constitution through the alcoholic self	Duality of structure; structures of signification, domination, and legitimation	Ethnography, observation of meetings, interviews, narrative analysis of personal stories

and sense can be made of them only by considering their routinized, repetitive character. (p. 142)

From this perspective, discursive structures are manifested, sustained, or challenged by recursive communicative actions. Empirical research of this mutual constitution would require longitudinal monitoring of both patterns of communicative actions as well as an exploration of their deep structures. One way this has been tackled is through employing the analytical lens of the rhetorical enthymeme (Heracleous & Barrett, 2001), an argument-in-use where one or more of the premises remain implicit and taken for granted. When enthymemes are identified that are diffused in groups of texts constituting discourses, representing widespread understandings and ways of reasoning within these discourses and related organizations, the unstated premises of these enthymemes can be seen not only as structural features of the discourses themselves but also as institutionalized norms, providing a bridge between the action and structure levels.

The empirical challenge for organizational discourse analysis here would be not just to observe the temporal location of communicative actions within the context of a conversation, event, or text, but to track discursive patterns over time and attempt to link those to institutional features. For example, inspired by structuration theory, Paroutis and Heracleous (2013) viewed enduring central themes of first-order strategy discourse (identity, functional, contextual, and metaphorical) as structural features shaping communicative actions and constraining and enabling strategic practices. They found that there was differential emphasis in first-order strategy discourse on these themes, in different phases of institutionalization (shaping, settling, selling) of a new strategy practice.

A similar approach of linking discursive patterns to institutional features could be applied at a more macro level, with reference, for example, to what Giddens (1984) called “episodic characterizations” in the context of “world time” (p. 244), or the analysis of episodes as shaped by historical events and conditions (including prevalent discourses). Combined with the concept of “time–space distanciation,” or the spread of interconnected social systems across space and time, we would have a fruitful means of analyzing important social issues pertaining to globalization and its challenges.

Following the above discussion, the concepts of temporality and duality of structure are intimately related, since structuration processes (the constitution of structure through day to day practices) occur over time. By duality of structure, Giddens (1984) meant that “the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize” (p. 25). To empirically study this process, longitudinal analysis is needed that can track communicative actions as well as institutional context, with a

**Table 2.** Selected Structural Concepts and Their Methodological Implications for Studies of Organizational Discourse and Communication.

Structurational concept	Elaboration	Empirical directions
Temporality	Reversible time; interpenetration of temporal dimensions of day-to-day practices, individual life spans, and institutional processes	Longitudinal studies, with sensitivity on the temporal dimensions of discourse and how these relate to institutional elements
Duality of structure	Structures of signification, domination, and legitimation are mutually constituted through recursive day-to-day practices	Tracking of patterns of communicative actions over time, in conjunction with discursive structures and their shifts over time. Sensitivity to dimensions of meaning, power, and legitimacy
Knowledgeable agents	Practical consciousness, what agents implicitly know about system conditions and the conditions of their own action but cannot express discursively (vs. discursive consciousness)	Employ analytical approaches that enable identification of implicit premises and taken-for-granted beliefs, such as enthymeme analysis or deconstruction. Explore the relevance of these beliefs to the institutional level

sensitivity toward how these might be interrelated through what Giddens called modalities of interpretive schemes, facilities, and norms.

If the taken-for-granted structural features of a certain discourse (such as root metaphors or assumptions about key elements of human existence) are identified, researchers can have access to aspects of agents' "practical consciousness," the implicit stocks of knowledge about system conditions and the conditions of their own actions that enable agents to operate in, and make sense of, day-to-day life. The usefulness of gaining access to these aspects of practical consciousness is that they are in effect institutionalized norms, the types of beliefs that sustain institutions, and can also challenge or potentially change institutions if developed over time in particular discourses in a way that challenging beliefs become structural features of those discourses. Taking seriously agents' practical consciousness in empirical studies can help us bridge the analytical gap between actions and institutions. Table 2 summarizes the above discussion.

In conclusion, the promise of structuration theory in organizational discourse and communication has yet to be fulfilled. While selected studies have employed structural concepts, there is leeway for more extensive use of these and related concepts to accomplish a deeper understanding of the constitutive aspects of discourse and its links to institutions.

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