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Do You Want Some Sauce on That? Factors influencing Dietary Habits Among The Irish Construction Workforce

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Have your cake and eat it? Combining structure and agency in management research

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This paper presents an explanatory logic and an empirical illustration of how Stones's strong structuration theory, specifically the methodological brackets of agent's conduct and agent's context analysis can be applied within case study research. The value of strong structuration theory, and the methodological bracketing tool, is its proximity to empirical research and the provision of robust guidelines which enable researchers to resolve the methodological challenges of combining structure and agency within research designs. We demonstrate the application of methodological bracketing as a tool for analysing structure and agency interactions within management research. The contribution of the paper is its explication of strong structuration theory as a credible, flexible, and evolving research approach which is suitable for a range of research questions in the management domain. The explanatory logic of the duality of structure will appeal to researchers interested in exploring and developing novel theoretical insights and fresh perspectives from case study data.

KEYWORDS
context analysis, methodological bracketing, strong, structurationconduct analysis, structuration

INTRODUCTION

Much of the research on organisational outcomes is theorised in terms of *either* the decisions and actions of (rational) managers, *or* in terms of institutional and contextual factors that constrain and shape managers. This dichotomous framing of agents *or* structures is reflective of differing ontological positions with respect to the recursive nature of agent–structure interactions (Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 1975; Giddens, 1979, 1984), differing emphasis on the constraining role of institutions (Jackson & Deeg, 2008), and the under socialisation of strategy (Golsorkhi et al., 2010). Examples of the dichotomous framing of theory are widespread, including for example, agency *or* structure (Cardinale, 2018), strategy making *or* social forces (Vaara & Whittington, 2012), individuals *or* processes (Lamb et al., 2011), and entrepreneurs *or* opportunities (Sarason et al., 2006). This bifurcation underpinning management and organisational theory is recognised as limiting, with calls for greater recognition of the role of context in management research (Johns, 2006), the development of more "contextualised knowledge" (Tsui, 2004), and more nuanced approaches to understanding. "how institutions influence and shape" firms (Aguilera & Grøgaard, 2019:21). More ambitiously, some scholars have called for research to explore the interdependence, coexistence and co-evolution of managers and their context, and how this interdependence influences managerial and firm behaviours and outcomes (Cardinale, 2018; Contractor et al., 2019; Stones, 2005).

Structuration theory provides a theoretical lens to address these calls as it can, through the concept of the duality of structure, capture the interdependent relationship between structure and agency (Giddens, 1984). The theory has informed a seminal body of research within a broad range of disciplinary domains (den Hond et al., 2012). However, given that the original codification of structuration theory is now over 35 years old, it is no surprise that there has been significant criticism of the theory including that rules represent an oversimplification of

structures (Thompson, 1989), that there is inadequate consideration of external structures (Archer, 1995), that the duality of structure and agency are seen to only exist for routine matters (Mouzelis, 1991, 2008) and that undue emphasis is placed on the action of an individual (Thrift, 1996). Furthermore, the lack of attention to matters of epistemology and the abstract level of theorising, have made the application of structuration theory to empirical research difficult (Langley et al., 2013; Pozzebon & Pinsonneault, 2005). Stones (2005) wanted to ensure that the critical and undoubted merits of structuration theory were not discarded in the face of these challenges to in situ empirical application. The aspiration to provide epistemological guidance and clarity was the genesis for the development of strong structuration theory.

In this paper we argue that Stones's strong structuration theory (Stones, 2005, 2015) offers management researchers a credible, well developed yet still evolving, theoretical foundation for a range of research "problems at hand" (Jack & Kholeif, 2007; Stones & Jack, 2016). The aim of this paper is to set out and illustrate how researchers can use Stones's (2005) strong structuration theory to organise and guide data collection and analysis (Coad et al., 2016; Stones & Jack, 2016) to create accounts of, and explanations for, the knowledgeable actions of agents by allowing for the recursive nature of agent–structure interactions. In doing so they can build "better," or at least "different," theories from their data. Reflecting the focus of EMR's *Research Methods* papers (Lee, 2018, 2020), we focus on how strong structuration theory can be used in an empirical context, concentrating specifically on how it can be used as part of a case study research strategy.

The paper proceeds as follows. We briefly introduce structuration theory before setting out in detail how Stones's (2005) strong structuration theory can be used to approach empirical work. We demonstrate how the theory, and more specifically the methodological brackets of agent's conduct and agent's context analysis, can be applied within empirical research. We then illustrate, by providing an example of a case-based research study, how the methodological bracketing tool can be applied to explore and understand the recursive nature of structure and agency interactions within a single organisation. The paper concludes with an overview of the key features of extant empirical literature that has drawn from strong structuration as a conceptual foundation and highlights the theoretical opportunities it presents to scholars engaging with this perspective within case study research and analysis.

AN INTRODUCTION TO STRUCTURATION THEORY

The genesis of structuration theory lies in Giddens' (1984) response to the perennial objectivism-subjectivism debate amongst social theorists. He saw an absolutist adherence to either as a trap and that both schools of thought were "pernicious misconceptions" (Stones, 2005, p. 13). He rejected the idea that either objectivist or subjectivist positions could explain society or usefully facilitate its analysis. In structuration theory, Giddens (1984) brought together these apparently irreconcilable points of origin. The theory proposes that there is an inherent interdependency between structures in society (for example, rules of language, forms of monetary exchange or expected norms) and human agency or action (essentially "what people do"). Human action is made possible by social structures, but such action, in turn, sustains or alters the social structure itself. In other words, structure and agency are "mutually constitutive" (Coad et al., 2015, p- 156), forming a duality in which the "structures become both the medium and outcome" of social life (Giddens, 1984, p. 25). Structuration itself represents the "dynamic process whereby structures come into being" (Giddens, 1976, p. 121). The mediating feature of this approach is that it draws on structures and agency (i.e. objectivism and subjectivism) but defines them in such a way that the distance between them is eliminated in the duality of structure and agency.

Structuration theory contains many important insights and concepts. However, the ontology which Giddens provided was pitched and positioned at an abstract level, with Giddens seen by many as a meta-theorist with little concern for empirical research (Coad & Herbert, 2009). In many ways this was intentional. Giddens did not propose structuration theory as a blueprint for an empirical research programme, instead viewing it as providing "sensitising devices, nothing more" (Giddens, 1984, p. 327). Therefore, the theory did not develop into a form that was easily translated to in situ empirical application. This left scholars with a critical challenge—how to employ Giddens' structuration theory for empirical enquiry given the necessity to move from philosophical theorisation to the ontic level, dealing with the specific practices, dispositions, and structures of individual agents (Jack & Kholeif, 2007).

Bridging such a substantial void, between abstract theorisation and in situ empirical application, exposes researchers to issues of misapplication and misinterpretation of theory. What is required is an ontological shift from "ontology in general" to "ontology in situ"; the required level at which it is possible to gain purchase on specific, situated flesh and blood agents (Stones, 2005). Structuration theory is not alone in presenting researchers with significant difficulty in the move from theory to application. Indeed, in his more recent musings Stones referred to the failure of sociology in general to convert its' "enviably rich and diverse palette of understandings" into "strong and defensible empirical accounts" as an unspoken weakness (Stones, 2017, p. 730). Stones coined the phrase "strong structuration" to describe his attempts to formulate a solution to the

difficulties of applying structuration in an empirical setting, to form a bridge, "between the philosophical and the substantive" (Daff & Jack, 2018; Stones, 2005, p. 75).

STRONG STRUCTURATION THEORY

Stones constructed strong structuration theory around four "analytically separate" (Coad et al., 2015 p. 157) components illustrated in Figure 1. These represent the core ontology of the theory with each interrelated dimension capturing an aspect of the interplay between social agency and structure. Stones saw the duality of structure and agency as quadripartite in nature, encompassing, external structures, internal structures, active agency, and outcomes (Stones, 2005). In specifying this quadripartite, there are two critical ontological clarifications. First, the ontology should not be interpreted as having four consecutive stages or steps. Instead, the four elements should be conceptualised as interwoven and together constituting a cycle of structuration. Second, the bifurcation between external and internal structures can give rise to confusion. While internal structures are conceptualised as *within* the agent (Stones, 2005), external structures represent the agent (or researcher's) perception of the context for action of the field in which they are embedded. Notwithstanding their autonomous existence from the agent, we always perceive them through the agent or social researcher's eyes and as such they are never be thought of as simply "external" to the agent.

The framework encapsulates the essence of a structuration cycle. Faced with a critical event or decision, the agent-in-focus draws upon internal structures and, in conjunction with the external structures which they face, produces action which can then be observed (Greenhalgh & Stones, 2010). Such action leads to structural reproduction and transformation. These outcomes then feed into further cycles of structuration. The dimensions of agent's conduct and agent's context analysis, represent the centrepiece of Stones's work and are considered further below. Active agency can be thought of in two forms (Stones, 2005). The first is the agent consciously making a choice or decision to act. The second is routine, conventional decisions, a sense of just acting and reacting, doing it even in the absence of a conscious decision. In our opinion, this does not preclude interpreting action on a continuum between the two, consistent with Giddens (1984). Consistent with the ontology of structuration, outcomes may be intended or unintended, agents may be successful or unsuccessful in their endeavours, and structures may be sustained or altered (Stones, 2005).

METHODOLOGICAL BRACKETING— AGENT'S CONTEXT AND AGENT'S CONDUCT ANALYSIS

Methodological bracketing refers to omitting certain aspects of a phenomenon under investigation from analysis to allow the researcher to focus more sharply on one
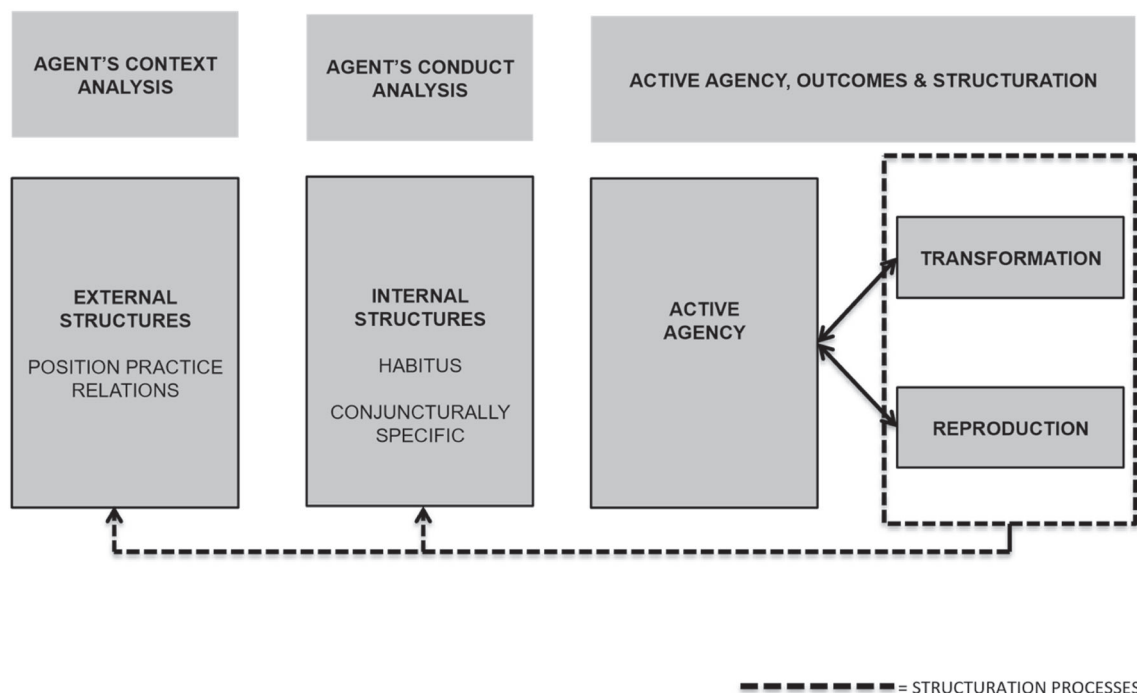
Source: Adapted from Stones (2005:85)

FIGURE 1 Quadripartite model of structuration

part of the problem. The researcher may then return to the de-emphasised area in the next phase of bracketing. Giddens (1984) recommended employing methodological bracketing when undertaking structuration studies. However, Giddens' form of bracketing, specifically institutional analysis, effectively "brackets out the way that agents perceive and draw upon their structural context" (Stones, 2005, p. 44). In other words, under this form of bracketing, if a researcher is focused on institutions then agency can be ignored. However, in so doing, it reopens the door to the analytical dualism surrounding structures and agency, the avoidance of which is a central tenet of structuration theory. To deal with this criticism, Stones (2005) developed an alternative approach to bracketing which maintains a bridge between structure and agency irrespective of whether context or conduct is being investigated. This approach also embraces the double hermeneutic—the researcher is interpreting the involved actor's own interpretation of their situation (Stones, 2015).

Agent's context analysis

All agents are rooted in a structural context and inevitably draw on their knowledge of this as they act (Stones, 2005). Agent's context analysis entails a researcher's interpretation of the perspective and understanding of the agent-in-focus regarding the contextual field. The agent is never entirely held in abeyance, consistent with the duality of structure and agency. However, an initial, rudimentary understanding of the contextual field can be established without resource to the interior worlds of actors (Stones, 2015). Stones (2015, p. 27) suggests that these elements include a range of factors such as "mapping of the primary institutional and individual actors, networks, forces, pressures and dynamics relevant" in the position-practice relations network. However, to attain adequate empirical evidence to apply strong structuration does require scholars to engage directly with the actor's interior world and Stones (2015) also identifies a range of factors, such as agent's stocks of knowledge about the contextual terrain, which require extensive engagement with agents. These more subjective factors form important connecting tissue between agent's context and agent's conduct analysis. External structures present a difficulty for structuration processes as there is a need to reconcile structuration theory's emphasis on the relative autonomy of the agent, while also giving recognition to structural influences on the agent's life that are beyond their control. Stones (2005) addressed this by delineating two types of external structural forces; independent causal influences, which were beyond agent influence in any meaningful way and irresistible causal forces. Stones (2005) recognised that with adequate power, knowledge and critical distance, an agent *might* be in a position to consider resistance to this second form of structures.

Agent's conduct analysis

The other form of bracketing is agent's conduct analysis. This entails looking "inwards" at the process by which the agent-in-focus tries to reconcile their habitus and specific situated knowledge with their understanding of the contextual field (Stones, 2005). In what Coad and Herbert (2009, p. 180) termed one of the most significant "conceptual elaborations" Stones made to Giddens' structuration theory, Stones (2005) disaggregates internal structures into two categories: the general-dispositional and the conjuncturally-specific. The general-dispositional refers to "generalised worldviews, principles of action, habits of speech and gesture, methodologies for adapting generalised knowledge to a range of particular practices in particular locations in time and space" (Stones, 2005, p. 88). It is typically conceptualised as existing, for the most part, in a taken for granted unnoticed state, undiscussed and undisputed (Stones, 2005) and draws heavily on the work of Bourdieu and his notion of habitus. The second category, conjuncturally-specific, represents knowledgeability around the particulars of the conjuncture or situation under investigation. In addition to their role as stocks of knowledge within the agent, conjuncturally-specific structures provide an important "hinge" between the general-dispositional structures within the agent and the external structures facing the agent (Stones, 2005). This latter concept corresponds with Stones's later writings on the subjective elements of contextual analysis outlined above (Stones, 2015).

RECURRENT RESEARCH STEPS IN APPLYING STRONG STRUCTURATION THEORY IN EMPIRICAL WORK

Stones's (2005) analytical framework broadly follows the quadripartite structure and employs context and conduct methodological bracketing. It entails addressing the recurring issues set out in Figure 2.

Crucially, the order of priority for the four steps outlined above can be changed, and the steps can be combined to suit the nature of the research question (Elbasha & Wright, 2017). A reconfiguration of the order, for example such that context might be addressed first, does not mean the agent has been ignored. On the contrary, in undertaking context analysis, the study draws upon an agent's knowledgeability in interpreting the agent's understanding of their context. The agent is ever present in all of the analysis, as Stones requires (Stones, 2005). Agents experience external structures and position-practice relations through their internal structures and the contextual realities of the field impinge on any discussions of internal structures. In a similar way to agent's internal structures playing a role in agent's context analysis, the field inevitably enters into the fore as an analysis of conduct is undertaken.
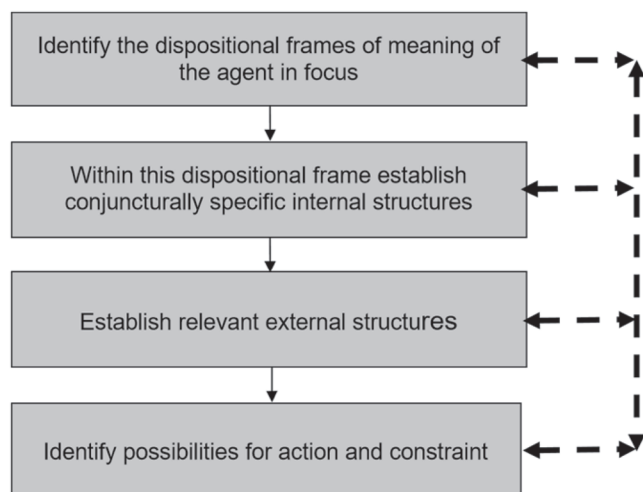
Source: adapted from Stones (2005:123-125)

FIGURE 2 Recurrent research steps in the application of strong structuration theory

A particular attraction for management scholars is the scope and range of empirical settings within which strong structuration has the potential to operate as an effective theoretical basis for a study. For example, Jack (2017, p. 51) argues that strong structuration theory is suitable for a broad range of empirical work, dealing with questions that examine issues such as "what routines are in place, how people interact with each other, the distances between them and the nature of the institutions in place" approached with an explicit interest in the structures that condition and constrain. Stones (2005) suggests the use of the theory to explore the histories of structuration cycles that have resulted in, inter alia, a particular decision, the emergence of external structures or dispositional frames. Many organisational studies can be framed around this type of investigation.

CONDUCTING EMPIRICAL WORK USING STRONG STRUCTURATION THEORY: AN ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE

In this section we illustrate through an empirical example, how strong structuration theory and more specifically the methodological brackets of agent's conduct and agent's context analysis can be used in case study analysis. In the study our research question focused on *exploring how the recursive relationship between structure and agency within the firm shaped the organisational practices that support the firm's international activities*. In terms of background facts about the case, the organisation is a software SME "Epsilon." With a head office based in Ireland, and sales offices in the UK and the US, the firm employs 70 people across three countries. The agent-in-

focus is a co-founder of the company and managing director (MD). Key agents in context include the UK and US vice presidents (VPs) and the director of programme management who is a member of the senior management team. Drawing on case data the analysis illustrates how we as researchers have been able to empirically explore the complex relationships between agency and structure. The case analysis is informed by the recurrent research steps illustrated previously in Figure 2 (Stones, 2005). However, in the context of this paper, and the empirical data set available to us, we limit our presentation to two themes that emerged from the empirics of the case: the role of the tendering process within the firm; and the interactional dynamics between identified agents.

Identifying the dispositional frames of meaning of the agent-in-focus

The MD of Epsilon has accumulated 20 years' experience operating in the sector. Over time, organisational values have become embedded within the firm culture as the MD describes "while we are always actively pursuing opportunities for growth in the business, maintaining control and independence is one of the main company priorities." When pursuing business opportunities, the MD and the company are relatively risk averse as defined by the MD himself who suggests that "I wouldn't be that great on risk myself … we can't afford to take huge risk decisions because most of the decisions that we make have to come off to some extent." The decision to diversify into the US market and appoint a US VP was seen as a necessary risk for the company as its' main UK market stagnated in the late 2000s. As the US market project advanced the agent-in-focus describes that in order to fund the position of VP in the US; "each of us [management team] took a pay cut for the US VP to come on board … so that was a little bit of personal risk … each took a personal hit for something that we thought we could have a go at."

Establishing conjuncturally specific internal structures

As the business grew the company developed a competency for winning tenders bids. Business in both the US and UK have been built on clients won exclusively through the tendering process. The agent-in-focus indicates that in his view the terms of the tendering processes between the three core markets are "fundamentally the same, it's the same business, the same behaviour, the same thing." Entry into the US market was facilitated for the management team by continuing to use this familiar process "it [tendering process] looked very similar … there are similarities there [in the US] between when we were getting started into the UK market, it's the same

tendering and procurement." The agent-in-focus is knowledgeable in terms of his strategic terrain and has built up stocks of conjunctural knowledge of tendering over the years. He applies this contextualised knowledge to screening business opportunities and selecting markets for international growth. For example, he has excluded potential business in some smaller European markets suggesting that "what we probably picked up without doing an awful lot of research on it was that country to country in Europe is quite different … and you're not going to find a country with the scale of the US whose [tendering] requirements are all broadly similar." For the MD pursuing business in countries such as Scandinavia is not seen as a viable option as it "would be a new way of doing business" where the procurement process would need to be modified or replaced completely by an alternative customer acquisition process. The MD also passes over potential business opportunities within Europe that would require new and unfamiliar ways of operating for the firm, such as working with partners or forming alliances. This reflects his disposition towards firm independence expressed earlier. Within the US market the MD has chosen not to pursue business tied to federal contracts where supplier obligations would require changes to the firms established procurement approach and processes.

Combining these two aspects of internal structures, habitus and conjuncturally specific knowledge, helps in understanding why tendering has become an institutionalised practice within the firm. The MDs dispositional frame of meaning calibrates his interactions with the external structure of the tendering process. His risk averse disposition and outlook provide the perspective by which business opportunities are perceived and assessed. The external structure is also interpreted in the context of the agent's knowledgeability. The MD has substantial stocks of conjunctural or task specific knowledge of tendering processes. This increases the agent's level of comfort and confidence with using tendering processes, creates a manageable level of personal and firm risk associated with international activities, and enables the MD to deliver on the firms' international commitments in selected international markets. Even before exploring external structures, we can see the genesis of structural reproduction as an outcome driven by the risk averse nature of the agent in focus, his determination for independence and familiarity (conjuncturally specific knowledge) with established procurement approaches and processes.

Establishing relevant external structures

Within the case external structures of competitive, economic, and regulatory environments combine to create the "contextual field" of the MD. Stones (2015) suggests that to enrich understanding of the contextual field

evidence on a number of factors such as key actors, individual or collective, embedded in the field needs to be collected. Agents in context (UK and US VPs) are agents within the community of practice who inform the behaviour of the MD in the same way as any other external structure (Stones, 2005). The interactional dynamics between these identified agents is the second key theme analysed within the case below. Combined these external structures provide the MD with his conditions of action (Stones, 2005) and represent the structural terrain in which the MD contemplates action (Jeffries et al., 2017).

Identifying possibilities for action, constraint, and resistance

As mentioned previously the MD has championed the use of tendering which has enabled him to deliver on the firms' international sales objectives. The MD exercises control through the bid approval process. Every potential tender bid, though overseen by the relevant VP, passes through a two-stage business approval process prior to submission. Bid approval rests on the MD's risk assessment as he describes "we put it (bid) through a formal business approval process before you are allowed to commit the company's resources to bids … so you have to do business approval, and there is a second business approval, basically do we agree with the risk we are taking on?" Agents in context have a degree of influence on the bid approval process but lack control over it. When multiple bids are on the table simultaneously the MD prioritises and ranks these opportunities. Through this bid approval mechanism, the MD retains allocative power (over company resources) and authoritative power (over people within the company). Clearly the disposition of the MD with its emphasis on risk aversity and comfort with familiar processes impact his evaluations and the decisions he takes.

We can observe structural reproduction through the repeated use of tendering. However, as we delve deeper into the case potential constraints emerge on the agent-in-focus and other pressures within the structural terrain and position practice relations. For example, an unintended consequence of international expansion is the increasing use of mixed, or crosscountry, teams to prepare joint bids. Team members are drawn from various functional teams, such as sales, technical, quality assurance and implementation, which are predominantly based in Head Office. By their nature, such teams are more dispersed in "time space" and hence may represent a challenge to the hegemony of the MD. For example, creating mixed teams has exposed tensions at several levels of the organisation. A senior manager remarks that "we have really good customer focused people, good individual team processes. They are less good when we join up across (country) teams." This is due to the lack of a formalised approach to allocating resources when joint

bids arise. Indeed, it would appear that the MD's power is derived, at least in part, from the absence of formalised procedures, allowing him to make the final decision in a wide range of circumstances.

Within the firm the tendering process looks different from each agent's perspective and directly influences the quality of interactions. For example, the UK VP highlights the constraints the organisation faces in how the bid process is currently organised internally "in the context that if several tenders occur at the same time, then from a resource point of view the company can't bid for them all simultaneously." The UK VP notes that the company needs to be looking "to increase efficiencies across teams, and to try to get ahead of the game" noting that the future international growth of the firm depends on the "band-with of the management team." As an experienced practitioner there is a conflict between on the one hand his habitus and stocks of knowledge derived from years of experience and on the other hand the centralisation of power with the MD. He recognises that current firm practices will need to be modified or his ability to manage the UK business may be constrained going forward. However, he does not appear to have the agency to "do otherwise" given the dominance of the MD.

The US VP is a serial entrepreneur who has managed several successful businesses in the past. While acknowledging that the bid preparation process could be more efficient within the firm, the US team operates autonomously, drawing on their substantial stocks of conjuntural knowledge. For example, the director of programme management suggests that prequalification and networks are key in identifying future business suggesting that "I think the last thing that you want is for a tender to pop up that you are not aware of." This is a core business principle within the Head Office culture. In contrast the US VP has submitted bids for tenders which have popped up unexpectedly describing "one tender in the state of Oklahoma … I didn't know them and we just responded out of the blue and had no connection to them at all and we won." As the bid was successful the process steps were overlooked. This autonomous attitude also conditions how they have dealt with preparing bids. Originally they took the lead in the process to make things happen suggesting that "in the earlier times I was doing more of the work … it was less formal and I was making more decisions."

These issues have exposed differences of opinion in relation to organisational structures supporting the process of tendering, and their impact on associated short terms activities as well as on the firms' longer-term strategic orientation. This pressure point is highlighted by the UK VP who perceives there may be tension going forward over market priorities between the US and UK markets. He suggests "the question will be whether to expend resources on small companies and contracts in the UK or to target larger companies in the US. For example, there may be contention; more so on the

allocation of company resources; if there is a large bid in the US that may need help from the UK team and a large US option [customer] this may be preferable to pursuing a number of small UK contracts?" At this point in time, the process involved in ranking priorities currently lacks a formal codified decision-making process. The MD struggles with resource allocation decisions as he muses "a mid-ranking opportunity in the UK might be worth €400,000 but a mid-ranking opportunity in the US might be worth 10 times that and there are more of them. So, the issue is are we going to resource a sales campaign against an opportunity that is going to generate that for the group [€400,000] or are we going to resource campaigns that are going to generate multiples of that for the group?" Within this context the lack of clarity frustrates the UK VP. These constraints and tensions around resource allocation in the organisation create the landscape within which the UK VP seeks to establish his position, authority relations, and power resources within the company.

Identifying possibilities for resistance

As addressed previously strong structuration theory finds room for two forms of external structures; independent causal influences, which are beyond the influence of the agent, and irresistible causal forces, where the agent may be in a position to resist such forces (Stones, 2005). The dominance of the tendering process and the MD's control over it can be conceptualised as irresistible causal forces. For the agent to be in a position to resist the pressures of external forces they must possess sufficient power and the capability to do so and have adequate knowledge of relevant external structures including alternative avenues of possibility (Coad & Herbert, 2009). Agents also need to have adequate critical distance to take a strategic stance on a particular structure and the situational pressures it presents (Stones, 2005).

In relation to power, the agent's ability to resist the influence of external structures depends on their power resources within their contextual field. This perspective draws attention to the importance of power in social interactions (Coad & Herbert, 2009). The MD has allocative and authoritative power embodied within his position in the firm. However, his agents in context also derive power capacities from their degree of professional knowledge and experience, the associated legitimacy and credibility this carries, and how it is perceived by the agent in focus. These agents in context simultaneously constrain and enable the MD. Whereas the MD recognises how the VPs he has appointed facilitate the company's growth, he also perceives a degree of pressure from having them on board. For example, the MD acknowledges that the VPs have what he perceives as superior business experience to his, referring to the UK VP who has "got the bigger picture the bigger company

perspective. He has run much bigger software businesses than this. He can take something very loose and put a structure around it." Similarly, the MD acknowledges the significant level of business experience of the US VP noting that "his previous company was a much bigger company than this." Increasingly, the knowledgeability of these agents in context is pressuring the MD to address how the teams will be resourced and managed, to codify the process of collaboration between the teams, and to develop a strategy for future development of both the US and UK markets. He perceives that this "big picture perspective" of his VPs places pressure on his leadership role as he states "there is pressure on it (the way the company is organised by country) as every time you want the teams to operate there is always a … I mean the UK VP is pressing me to come up with in principle this is how we work together this is how we do things … he is also pressing me for what's the strategy for the company, are we going to be saying the US is our main market and the UK is fine but its small." The MD's stocks of conjuntural knowledge have increased through his linkages to his networked others. However, there is reciprocity within these relationships where the agents in context can exercise power by shaping and influencing practices within the firm, highlighting the web like nature of interdependencies of identified agents.

As the organisation of mixed teams continues to be unwieldy, the VPs have collaborated to address the perceived problem at hand. The US VP explains "we (US and UK VPs) have started in the last couple of months … what we are trying to do is to get our teams communicating, trying to establish a training department, and sharing documentation … so its slowly getting off the ground." We see the US and UK VPs collaborating and combining their powers in an attempt to take over some of the required allocative and authoritative resources from the agent-in-focus (Al-Htaybat, 2018). These actions could be perceived as a challenge to the MDs leadership as organisational practices are reshaped and evolve in an informal manner, without his input. Such actions potentially create power asymmetries (Coad & Herbert, 2009) within the agent's network.

These external pressures have forced the MD to acknowledge that it is important how his agents in context react to his decisions and that he is dependent on the agency of others to achieve his purpose. He acknowledges that "when you have more senior people joining you have to harness that." Though recognising the need to adjust structures to allow his VPs to make more of a contribution, the MD is unsure of how to move forward. He notes "we have a leader in the UK and a very strong leader in the US … maybe we shouldn't be putting them into boxes, maybe we should be doing something different, something that says those people can lead more than they are currently leading or lead in a different way". Acknowledging these power interdependencies (Coad & Herbert, 2009) we see that the agent-in-focus has come to

appreciate that the outcome of his actions is contingent on how other agents react to his decisions and that he may consider adjusting organisational practices accordingly (Al-Htaybat, 2018; Coad & Glyptis, 2014). The MD has also gained a degree of critical distance though engagement with an executive leadership programme, which has given him the "opportunity to just step back and think, and to think about things in a slightly different way." This opportunity to reflect is valuable as he considers how to redesign organisational practices moving forward. He identifies the key strategic decision facing him as "one of the things we have to decide now is how do we want to organise? How do we want to see the [business] opportunity? Do we want to see it based on countries or do we want to see it in a different way and I don't know yet … it evolves as it goes along."

As outlined previously the MD's ability to resist depends on whether he possesses power and the capability to resist, whether he has adequate knowledge of alternatives (Coad & Herbert, 2009), and whether he has gained adequate critical distance to assess situational pressures encountered (Stones, 2005). The agent has adequate power through his formal hierarchical position as MD. However, in addition to having such power to resist he must also be able to do so without endangering the conditions needed to realise his core commitments (Stones, 2005). In this case example, resistance could endanger the MDs commitments to international sales development as agents in context may leave, or may escalate tensions, disrupting business plans.

In terms of acquiring customers the MDs conjunctural knowledge relates exclusively to the tendering process. By-passing opportunities to work with partners or to form alliances to win business limits knowledge of the alternatives available to the firm. The agent's hermeneutic frame of meaning is also influenced by the extensive knowledge and experience of his agents in context, knowledge which he perceives as more extensive than his own. The MD does not appear to have adequate knowledge of alternative courses of action for the firm, or to be in a position to evaluate the consequences of these (Stones, 2005). He has only recently gained a degree of reflexive distance and an opportunity to "step back and think" about his strategic response to external influences. The MD is caught between seeking a degree of security and control by reproducing familiar structures or transforming structures to get the best from his agents in context. Stones (2005) suggests that where the agent is lacking any one of the properties discussed (power, knowledge, or critical distance), structural forces are likely to continue to exert pressure and the agent's ability to resist is lessened. When appraising his options within his contextual field, we speculate that the MD is likely to compromise and modify structures to remedy ongoing situational pressures.

In summary, examining external structures and the situated agent's potential to resist has extended our

understanding of how structure and agency interactions shape organisational practices within the case. It has generated a detailed and contextualised understanding and explanation of why agents act in particular ways, either reproducing or transforming structures, at a particular point in time.

STRONG STRUCTUTRATION THEORY IN RESEARCH PRACTICE

The case presented illustrates how adopting a strong structuration perspective enables a researcher to combine structure and agency within case study design and analysis. The interwoven nature of the quadripartite framework can be seen in that we cannot separate fully context analysis from conduct analysis nor conduct from context. For example, we explore context through the prism of specific agents and so inevitably aspects such as their habitus become commingled with their interpretation of their context. This overcomes the dichotomous framing of structure and agency which has been dominant within the management domain (Cardinale, 2018) and moves the research agenda forward (Contractor et al., 2019). Since the publication of the main tenets of strong structuration theory by Stones (2005) a steady stream of papers have been published across a wide range of disciplines. Lee & Manochin (2021) point out the important contribution that Stones continues to make to the detailed application of strong structuration theory in empirical settings, (see, for example, Stones, 2014, 2015; Stones et al., 2018; Stones & Jack, 2016; Stones & Tangsupvattana, 2012). Additionally, Stones and others have participated in conceptual papers which fine-tune concepts (for example, Stones & Jack, 2016) and matters of application (for example, Coad et al., 2015).

There are two important features of the empirical literature that we wish to highlight here. The first is how the theory has been developed and transformed through its use since launch. Initially, it was applied to previously collected data (for example, Harris et al., 2016; Jack & Kholeif, 2008) but many studies have now integrated the theory into the design of new research (for example, Feeney & Pierce, 2016; Lee & Manochin, 2021; Makrygiannakis & Jack, 2016). Papers have, in the main, situated the quadripartite structuration process at the epicentre of the research. However, this has also started to change, with many papers looking at specific aspects of the theory. For example, Coad and Glyptis (2014), Moore and McPhail (2016), Daff and Jack (2018) and Lee and Manochin (2021) all emphasised contextual field analysis, through the employment of the position-practice relations conceptual tool, as the centrepiece for their studies rather than addressing the full gambit of the quadripartite framework.

The second aspect is the wide variety of empirical settings in which the theory has been employed. For

example these include enterprise risk planning (Jack & Kholeif, 2008), strategic decision making (Elmassri et al., 2016; Harris et al., 2016), capital budgeting in the energy industry (Warren & Jack, 2018), healthcare (Jeffries et al., 2017), information technology projects (Greenhalgh & Stones, 2010), carbon accounting (Moore & McPhail, 2016), information usage in new product devlopment (Feeney & Pierce, 2016), education (Aldous et al., 2014), the networks used by professional accountants (Daff & Jack, 2018) and the interactions of sell-side analysts within investment banking institutions (Lee & Manochin, 2021).

Both of these aspects—the development of the theory through application in empirical settings, as well as the flexibility to apply it in a diverse suite of fields, has revealed a number of theoretical insights within empirical work. Insights into agents and their behaviour (Feeney & Pierce, 2016; Moore & McPhail, 2016; Warren & Jack, 2018) is theorised through the agent's possibilities for action, constraint and resistance within position practices. Resistance has been explored in relation to changes in management practices (Makrygiannakis & Jack, 2016), to adopting new organisational processes, (Jack & Kholeif, 2008), and resistance to adopting and using new technology (Greenhalgh & Stones, 2010; Greenhalgh et al., 2013). For example, in Lee and Manochin (2021) the application of the position practices framework, as defined within the context bracket of strong structuration theory, revealed that certain agents (in this case analysts) sustained relationships with others in the network (equity sales) not only for the direct benefit but also to improve their relationship with other agents in context. The proactivity of agents within intra-organisational networks also emerges as a theoretical insight from the work of Daff and Jack (2018).

Within the Epsilon case we theorise how the interactional dynamics between identified agents and the structural properties embedded within the practice of tendering, conceptualised as an external structure, creates conditions for agent's action. Resistance to change in institutionalised practices is theorised in the context of agent's knoweldgeability and identified structural conditions of action. Theorising the capacity of the agent (CEO) to resist change in established firm practices, as a function their power and knowledge resources, enriches our understanding of the agent and their behaviour, as well as to how structures are formed, reformed, or modified. We found that the use of, and reaction to, the tendering process is derived as much from the agent's own dispositions (habitus) and stocks of conjunctural knowledge as it is from the external sturctures with which they interact.

Additionally, adopting a strong structuration perspective within case study research offers scholars an opportunity to explore and build novel theoretical insights into, and develop new perspectives on, management and organisational phenomenon (Coad

et al., 2016; Jack, 2017). In this scenario the case study as a research instrument focuses on embedded agency, elaborated by way of exploring the agent's contextual field (Stones, 2015). This reveals the explanatory logic of "mutual constitutiveness" of relations within social practices, the duality of structure, where recurrent actions constitute structures and enacted structures also constitute the ongoing action (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011, p. 1242). Exploring phenomenon from this perspective delivers an analysis which will differ from studies relying on the dominant approaches to theorising from case studies such as the seminal works of Eisenhardt (1989), Yin (2011) and Gioia et al. (2013). The use of a strong structuration perspective is suited to certain types of research questions (Jack, 2017; Stones, 2005) and studies conducted and theorised from this perspective deliver an analysis sensitised to particular research foci. Theorising from strong structuration informed case studies also allows for the development of casual explanations of phenomenon that take account of context, and as such have the potential for producing "contextualised knowledge" (Tsui, 2004). We acknowledge that theorising from the Epsilon case data using the inductive theory building method of Eisenhardt (1989), the analytical generalisation approach offered by Yin (2011), or the "Gioia method" of capturing informants understanding and interpretation of organisational events (Langley & Abdullah, 2011), would offer valuable analyses of the firm's practices. However, we suggest that the explanatory logic of "mutual constitutiveness," drawing on the duality of structure, is a worthy addition to these dominant methodologies for case research, capable of delivering theoretical insights and novel perspectives of the management phenomenon under consideration.

We position strong structuration as a valuable conceptual foundation from which to theorise from case study research and one which increases the potential for innovation in case research (Jack & Kholeif, 2007) and for theorising (Welch et al., 2011). Exploring how structure and agency interactions coalesced to support activities within the Epsilon case firm represents a novel conceptualisation of firm practices supporting international activities. Theorising practices from this perspective adds an insightful explanation of international activities to extant research and broadens our theoretical understanding of the process. Adopting the methodological bracketing tool within the case analysis has given us as researchers an opportunity to break away from the more standardised approach to case research analysis and reporting (Langley & Abdullah, 2011; Piekkari et al., 2009; Symon et al., 2018) which is dominant within the management domain. As a result, the value of the case analysis presented earlier is its ability to create a better account of, and explanation for, the knowledgeable actions of agents by allowing for the recursive nature of structure and agency interactions. We do not assert that a case study would be better or worse assuming a strong structuration perspective, all that can be said is that it would be different (Jack & Kholeif, 2007). A case study design and analysis which draws on the explanatory logic of duality of structure as a conceptual foundation, can complement extant research in the management domain by contributing to a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of the organisational phenomenon under investigation.

A researcher may encounter challenges when applying agent's conduct and agent's context analysis to case empirics. For example, when analysing case data, the external structures are delineated by reference to where the boundaries between the internal and the external are drawn by the agent-in-focus themselves within the contextual field. In such a situation the researcher needs to keep asking questions until all angles are covered. Researchers need to call on concepts of the general dispositional and the conjuncturally specific to frame questions that will elicit from their subjects their knowledge of themselves, their context, and their boundaries (Jack & Kholeif, 2008), allowing a structural analysis to be completed.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we propose strong structuration theory as a credible, flexible, and evolving theoretical foundation suitable for a range of management related empirical studies. The theory addresses many of the difficulties associated with Giddens' structuration theory including a more detailed conceptual methodology linking concepts to empirics, expanding the meaning of structures beyond merely rules, and explicitly finding a place for external structures and resistance. We illustrate how strong structuration theory, and more specifically the methodological brackets of agent's conduct and agent's context analysis, is a viable and valuable tool for analysing structure and agency interactions within management research. We demonstrate how applying the recurrent steps in Stones' (2005) analytical framework has allowed us as researchers to identify and capture the interactions and interdependencies of structure and agency within the illustrative case data. We also highlight how drawing on the explanatory logic of the duality of structure offers researchers opportunities to explore and build novel theoretical insights from case data. As we have seen, one of the most attractive qualities of strong structuration theory, in addition to its proximity to empirical work, is that the theory is being used, developed, and enhanced not only by its chief protagonist but also by researchers across a wide range of fields. We hope that by showing how to use the theory within empirical research, we will encourage scholars to apply the conceptual foundation of strong structuration within their case study research designs and analyses.

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