

## **The bridge between ontological concepts and empirical evidence: an interview with Rob Stones**

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose:** To share interdisciplinary ideas about the purpose of social theory in empirical research.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The formal interview took place in front of an audience at the Strong Structuration Theory and Management Research workshop at IAE de Paris, Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne, on 10 May 2016. A recording was made, transcribed and then edited. Elements from a recorded lecture on the same day are also included. A conversational format is retained to enhance the sense of interdisciplinary dialogue that characterises our research project.

**Findings:** The use of strong structuration theory as a conceptual methodology is explained, and the use of agent's conduct and agent's context analyses is elucidated providing pointers regarding how accounting research can be developed further by basing our analysis in an understanding of the status and adequacy of knowledge on which people act to produce and reproduce structure.

**Originality/value:** The value of the interview is to provide insights into the process of empirical research and conceptualisation, which are likely to be particularly helpful for early career researchers.

**Keywords** strong structuration theory, empirical research, ontology, agent's conduct and context analyses

**Paper type** Research note

### **Acknowledgement**

We would like to thank Professor Frédéric Gautier of IAE de Paris for organising the workshop 'Strong Structuration Theory and Management Research' which allowed researchers from several countries to meet with Rob Stones for extended discussions.

*Interviewer (IV)* You've said today that all social researchers become social theorists in practice but how did you become drawn more clearly into being a theorist and into developing strong structuration theory?

*Rob Stones (RS)* I need to start right back with my postgraduate research. I actually did four dissertations for the Master's degree in an intellectually outstanding but very eccentric political sociology course at the University of Leeds, in which all the empirical research I chose to carry out was on Thailand. At the end of the 70s, beginning of the 80s, the choice was either dependency theory or development studies in relation to a country in Thailand's position within the world economy. There was also articulation of modes of production and shades of Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar. These masters' dissertations were on the twentieth century history of the Thai economy and on Thai politics and military – adapting Nicos Poulantzas' work on the crisis of military dictatorships in Europe in the 1970s (Portugal, Greece and Spain) into a Thai context. Then, my PhD thesis was on the Labour government in the UK in the 1960s, looking at the room for manoeuvre this Government had, as a social democratic government within the international financial system – and also, given sterling's use as a major international currency, examining how this affected this room for manoeuvre.

Both of these overall projects were dealing with empirical issues, and I was thinking theoretically about them both. So, for whatever reason, I was always drawn to looking at the rich complexity of real life, as it were, in relation to questions that interested me. Congenitally, my habit is to think theoretically but it was never enough for me to just think theoretically. It was never enough for me to think about the empirical without the theory. Through the Master's degree and some of the PhD, I engaged with a number of different theories: Marxist state theory and Weberian state theory were at the centre of what I used in the doctoral thesis. But then I got to wanting to look at cabinet meetings and what was happening with the Bank of England and to use the memoirs, of which there were many, of politicians in the 1960s. I also interviewed the permanent secretary of the new Department of Economic Affairs, and the Governor and Deputy Governor of the Bank of England.

At that point, I found that when I wanted to look at real life flesh and blood people, these macro theories didn't help me, so I was drawn to Giddens at that stage. What structuration theory allowed me to do was to link really macro historical political forces to flesh and blood people around tables like this and in the bar, in cafés, wherever – at home, soliloquies, as shown in the memoirs as well. Actually, it took me a while to realise that Giddens wasn't using his theory in the same way that I was using it. I'd already started adapting structuration theory to empirical issues in a way that Giddens wasn't. It took me a while to realise this. As a general lesson, I think if you start using a theory for your own particular purposes and you think and worry at it, then you will necessarily start developing the theory. It's not you thinking 'I want to improve on this'; it just happens.

*IV* Why do you think new researchers find it so difficult to bring social theory and empirical work together?

*RS* I think a quick and easy answer to why people find it difficult to do this is because there isn't a literature on it, and there are no courses devoted to it. There are

fragments of literatures on fragments of the process, but it doesn't exist as an area, as far as I can see. If you think of the traditional approach to sociology, we have theory courses, and of course theory courses use illustrations from everyday life, but they're just that. They're illustrations to illustrate a general point. They're not about developing theory to inform – theoretically inform – qualitative case studies. There's that whole area between the abstract and the empirical that isn't thought of, or isn't identified as, something that needs to be considered in terms of what I call conceptual methodology.

IV You've said elsewhere that researchers should really get to grips with the research purpose in hand.

RS Yes, the research purpose at hand is what I was just talking about. There are two dimensions of this to start with. One is the ontological dimension, and the other is that of conceptual methodology - how do you use those ontological concepts in the research process? There are particular ways that strong structuration talks about these terms, which are an attempt to identify and characterise particular aspects of the social world. When structuration generally is dealing with agency, for example, it will talk about the knowledgeability of the actor. That's part of the characterisation of the kinds of things that are in the world, that the kind of thing that is an actor- an agent- has more or less knowledgeability and that they are motivated to act.

So that concept tells you to look for motivation, but if you then look at the research purpose at hand, you might say, well, actually, do I need to look at motivation for my particular issue? You might not. It depends what the problem is. So you need to go backwards and forwards between the problem-at-hand and concepts, the exhaustive array of concepts that are produced by a particular theory or a combination of theories. I add 'combination of theories' here because I'd like to say that strong structuration is ecumenical. There's no reason why it can't be used with other theoretical approaches if those can, together, better address the research problem at hand.

But you might find for your research purpose at hand that the key concepts are, say, power and time. You have to keep going backwards and forwards and asking yourself about what are the most important concepts, the most relevant concepts for your problem at hand as it emerges in the process, the dynamic process, of the research project.

These various aspects of ontology characterise the world in various ways and in real life, these concepts point to aspects of the real world that interweave with each other. Whenever we're thinking about how to identify our particular interests in the research process, we're selecting certain aspects of that fluidity, that flow of going on in everyday life, of the structure-agency process. We're focusing on those aspects and leaving others out, because the ones we're focusing on are the ones that are most relevant to the problem at hand.

IV Then conceptual methodology is this bridge?

RS It's the bridge between the ontological concepts and empirical evidence. And again, I would say that contemporary social theory doesn't look at these kinds of things. There is little literature on what the relationship is *between* the technical

methods of interviews, observation, surveys, and so on, *and* ontological concepts about the character of the world. And that's something that needs fixing.

There are different levels in thinking about the bridge between ontological concepts and empirical evidence, thinking about the concepts and combinations of concepts you need, that are relevant, and then thinking about the relationship *between* those concepts and combinations of concepts, the shapes of the concepts *and* the bits of evidence you attach to these, as it were. You'll find that once you are clear about the ontological shapes, the bits of available evidence will be seen to be fragmentary. You won't be able to cover your ontological shapes with empirical evidence most of the time. In terms of reflexive conceptual methodology, reflexive epistemology, we need to know what we know and what we don't know. How much is covered in the shapes and how much is not covered? And it's not just the shapes. It's the shapes *in process* if it's a causal account. It is as important to know what we don't know as it is to know what we think we know..

At this point in undertaking research in this way, you might well be having doubts about what your contribution will be. I think often we just have to suspend our disbelief about what the final contribution will be. The fact that you are using a set of concepts with a question, to look at this thing in depth, and you're seriously training your mind on that for this amount of time, means that it is inevitable that something good will come out of it.

IV In *Structuration Theory* (2005) and in *Why Current Affairs Needs Social Theory* (2015), you draw on fictional examples in the form of novels, films and TV drama. Is there a particular reason for that and what can we learn from fiction?

RS Yes, I do use a lot of fiction as examples, taking from literature, films, documentary films, and so on. Literature is extremely useful for respecting the hermeneutic dimension of social life, because novels look inside the heads of people. Not all novels, but a lot of novels follow people's streams of consciousness, their internal life, what Margaret Archer would call their internal conversations, their emotions, their reasoning, and the interweaving of these. They're *in situ* – you know a lot about these people's lives in quite some depth, and then you have the interaction between different characters in the contextual field. Because of this, the depth of hermeneutic-structural purchase that you have from novels is much greater than you can get from almost any social science literature.

Once you've used fiction as a benchmark, as it were, you know what you're not getting in the social science literature, but you know it must be there. Talking about the ontology from social theory in relation to fiction enables one to identify the real complexity of what happens and the richness of what happens. This is very difficult to get at through technical social science methods – the nearest you get to it is in various psychoanalytic methods, oral history methods, biographical methods, but you often don't quite get there. Also, in fiction you're often focusing on maybe one person or two people, whereas often in our research projects, we want to focus on several people or more, and groups as well.

One of the main points I was making in my first book, *Sociological Reasoning* (1996) was that we need to try to cultivate a greater degree of humility in relation to what we know. One of the things that I wanted to take from post-modernism was greater

humility, and fiction would help here by providing a benchmark. I didn't want to imbibe post-modernism's weakness, which was its relativism. But I wanted to take one of its great strengths, which is that we can't know everything and need to keep asking questions about how we are, and what we know, and from what perspective.

When you compare my way of going about things with positivistic ways of knowing the world then it can perhaps seem complicated. But if we push aside the issues that I'm arguing should be placed centre-stage, we are abrogating responsibility. We've ended up not developing new sophisticated forms of testing and knowing. This means we've almost entirely avoided the important questions about the status and adequacy of our knowledge. This is one of the things that I want the social sciences to try and start to address much more seriously by looking at this bridge between ontological concepts and empirical evidence.

*Question from the floor* It seemed to me that you positioned the researcher as an observer who tries to go inside people's heads and understand the conduct, but at the same time, the researcher himself or herself is also part of this process so how do you reconcile this situation?

RS The external researcher is an observer of the contextual field. Also, within context analysis we have the agents' own context analysis, which means it's the researcher's analysis of the *in situ* agent's perspective and understanding of the contextual field. So you have to put yourself back in there to say that's your analysis of what they know. It's not raw 'what they know'. There's a relationship going on there as well.

When we're characterising context analysis then that form of analysis looks from the actor outwards into the field. It's looking outwards, whereas the other form of methodological bracketing, agents' conduct analysis, is looking inward into the actor, because that's when the researcher is looking at the actor hermeneutically. It's looking inside their heads in a particular way, one that is different from agent's context analysis. It's concentrating on how that *in situ* actor - agent - that you're focusing on, deals with that whole process of understanding the context out there *in relation to* their own values, duties, obligations, orientations to the world and so how they come to act in one way rather than another.

Therefore, context analysis is from the actor looking outwards. Conduct analysis is thinking, once they've got that information from the context analysis, 'what do they do with it'? Think about it this way: what do we do with our personal context analysis when we feel trapped or we've got a plan that we can't put into action: we feel constrained. We can't put this into action. We feel that discourses are against us. The norms are against us. Everybody's stupid. What do we do? How do we deal with that situation? That's conduct analysis.

IV How far does this move away from Giddens?

The spirit of Giddens is there, and the whole tradition that he's drawing from, because he's a synthesiser. Amongst other things, he's drawing from lots of different fields that point towards hermeneutically informed social theory. Think of all the theories from symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, phenomenology, existentialism. They're concerned with what's happening inside the heads of people. However, the key aspect of structuration theory is that what's going on in the heads of people is

never free-floating. It's always embedded in those contextual fields that we're looking at. Strong structuration theory takes more seriously the challenge of this for research practice, which, in turn, has required further development of the theory.

So what is happening inside the heads of people? When, as a researcher, you are interviewing, the words of your interviewees come out... if they're too free-floating, they're not much use. They're interchangeable with anywhere, anytime, anyplace. They need to be rooted in context, *in situ*, for them to have flesh and bone, life and blood, and when they don't that's a real problem. Again, this is pointing out a problem with technical method abstracted from concepts. So much qualitative work, interviewing, observation, and so on, is better seen as occupying a series of small spaces. These spaces need to be connected to larger sets of processes in order for their enormous significance to be properly grounded and truly grasped. If research into what's going on in people's heads is not conceptualised in terms of the structural grounding of those meanings, they will be too free-floating to be of much use. So the technical method needs to be rooted in ontological concepts and in an awareness of needing to establish a relationship between the abstract ontology and the empirical level.

#### IV Can you give an example?

I've been writing about current affairs and social theory in order to try and talk about the public value of social theory (Stones, 2015). In one chapter, I've used one episode from the Danish political drama *Borgen* to show what audiences already know, how literate they already are, because often these things can seem so abstruse and so divorced from everyday life. What I argue is that if the audience are to understand this particular episode of political drama with its international relations and negotiations, then they have to already understand, in their phenomenological background, a lot about contextual fields, different time zones, different power relations, hierarchies, consequences etc.

Nyborg, who's the Prime Minister of Denmark in the programme, is in a position practice relation with certain powers, resources, obligations, duties, ideology, the sort of things you could map out from the outside. She's negotiating with the President from another country, the fictional Turgisia, about wind turbines. There's an environmental dimension to it, but there's also a human rights dimension, which is another storyline. It's quite a complex narrative, and there are lots of actors, lots of processes, lots of time periods involved in this relationship.

But they can be mapped out. Now, I mapped them out in diagrammatic form in the book just so that you can get a sense of what you know and what you don't know in the process. But in terms of what we're talking about, what's important is that we've got an actor-in-focus here, the Prime Minister of Denmark, but we've also got another actor-in-focus, the president of the other country. If you're dealing with context analysis, the Prime Minister of Denmark has to know quite a lot about him, his position, his power, his relations, and the pressures on him domestically and internationally, plus his room for manoeuvre internationally and domestically.

She has situation-specific knowledge of that, and vice versa. It happens two ways - there's more than one person involved. That's important. They've got context analysis there, but that's still a surface level of hermeneutic structural awareness of what's going on in the contextual field. If Prime Minister Nyborg wants to go deeper, and

this is also something wanted by the political team around her within the cabinet, the permanent secretary etc., then it is because they want to know more about their room for manoeuvre in relation to negotiating with the president. They've got to have a deeper knowledge of the hermeneutic processes at work. They have to start to move into conduct analysis of the president, because they have to know how he's dealing with the various pressures on him from his context and how he's negotiating that with his values, ambitions, aspirations, interests, and so on. A more in-depth hermeneutic-structural analysis is required in order not to have too many unintended consequences.

In effect, what I'm saying is that the context analysis has to include conduct analysis of other actors and a deeper hermeneutic analysis of the actors within the structural context. What you can see that you can't see clearly enough from Giddens' model is that you're looking at a particular structural context, you're dealing with actors in that structural context, and actors *in situ*, making history in circumstances not of their own choosing, structurally embedded actors.

IV I think we still may have a long way to go to capture this form of analysis in our work. Have you been surprised that strong structuration theory has been taken up by accountants and managers?

RS Very, yes. Initially – flabbergasted is the word, but being a sense making animal, and you might have something to say back about this, what it feels to me as if at least two things are going on here. One is that accounting and management is at a meso-level, and the other is about precision, I think. To a great degree, a lot of the meso-level spatial dimension and sense of organisations has migrated to business schools and management schools, and a lot of sociologists have migrated as well, and you don't now find much of this dimension in sociology departments. Giddens's book – his last big book on structuration, *The Constitution of Society*, which came out in 1984, was reviewed by a geographer, Nigel Thrift, who – slightly over the top - said that it's all world empires, on the one hand, and courtroom dramas, on the other hand, and nothing in between. And there's some truth in that.

To move to the second point, I think in accounting and management, also, as would be the case, say, with air traffic control, precision matters and real knowledge matters, and whether your knowledge is adequate or inadequate matters, and even though we've not quite got there yet, I think there's a sense in which knowing about the status and the adequacy of knowledge is probably more important for the sort of world you're in than it is for many of today's sociologists.

Apart from this community, there are two others that I'm involved with that use strong structuration theory. George Washington University in the USA have a Graduate School of Education and Human Development. Their Executive Doctoral Leadership Programme brings in a broad range of people, from NGOs and community organisations, through trans-national companies, to the US military. Under the aegis of David Schwandt, whose own work has combined strong structuration theory (SST) with systems analysis (e.g. 2013), the programme has adopted SST as one of the main theoretical approaches drawn on for the doctoral research, so there have been about probably 15 doctoral theses there that have now used SST.. Another group, this time in primary healthcare, is led by Professor Trish Greenhalgh at Oxford University. Trish has been using strong structuration theory for various projects in healthcare and

technology and we've written together four or five times now (see, Greenhalgh and Stones, 2010; 2014).

Sometimes just one person in an area uses it. For example, Ruth Barley (2014), used strong structuration theory to look at the identity and social interaction of early years children from North and Sub-Saharan Africa in a multi-ethnic classroom in the North of England. Karen O'Reilly (2012) has written an excellent book on *International Migration and Social Theory* which uses strong structuration theory as the guiding approach, and then draws on it to open out international migration in general.

I see strong structuration as the core of my larger intellectual project. Something I'm involved in at the moment is a large-scale project on successful societies. Working with Bryan Turner from City University of New York, we're developing a theoretical paradigm to frame reflection and research on this topic. I will be editing a new short book series for Anthem Press on successful societies, and this will cover multiple countries, from the global south as well as the global north. The project is concerned to bring moral philosophy and political theory to bear on questions about what makes a successful society, both as a whole and with respect to particular domains in a given society. What is a successful domain and an unsuccessful domain? The ambition is to bring political theory, normative political theory, normative moral theory, into the heart of social science, so as to marry this emphasis with social theoretical concerns, and, in this, strong structuration theory will be at the core.

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