The Influence of a Structurationist View on Strategic Management Research*

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ABSTRACT   In this article, strategic management research using structuration theory from 1995 to 2000 is reviewed. I describe and analyse the theoretical articulations adopted to make sense of strategy using a structurationist view. I found that, instead of being applied as the sole theoretical foundation, Giddens' propositions have been incorporated into other perspectives, the effects of which should be known by researchers looking for theoretical frameworks that avoid dichotomist thinking. The paper draws on the effects that structurationist arguments may produce regarding classical oppositions such as micro/macro and voluntarist/determinist. Its main contribution is to show how theoretical complementarities using structuration theory are promising avenues of research in the strategic management field. It also suggests that, although other alternatives of avoiding dichotomist logic exist, making a choice among them is more a question of ontological affinity than of making the 'better choice' among competing accounts. There are several routes to advance the understanding of the possibilities of human choice.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of concepts such as strategy and strategic choice is very appealing and triggers provoking discussions. If strategy is so important, Knights and Morgan (1991) ask, how did business management (and business research!) survive so long without a conscious concept of strategy? Among the different explanations that have been suggested for the emergence of strategy as a field of research, is one that posits that what is new is not a conceptually different managerial practice in terms of strategy, but rather the *academic discourse on strategy*. Zan (1995) associates the diffusion of the strategic perspective with the world of ideas: the concept of strategy emerged as a new representation in studying human action. Along with

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this attempt to substantiate the emergence and reproduction of strategy as an essential element in managerial discourse, Knights and Morgan (1991) contend that problems and solutions are mutually constituted through the discourse of strategy and that strategic management theorists indeed create the problem they propose to solve. Briefly, strategy would be, above all, a politically situated and discursive activity (Hardy and Phillips, 1999). In this vein, in this paper I see strategy and strategic choice as discursive activities framed by a given understanding and account of organization, managerial activities and the relationship between strategic management research and practice.

As in any other area of social and organizational studies, the discourses shaped by strategic management theorists are far from concordant. People interpret the world differently and very often such different interpretations end up crossing paths with conflicting positions. We are skilled in creating dichotomies: agency/structure, meaning/cause, relativism/objectivism, atomism/holism, autonomy/tradition, micro/macro. Many frameworks have appeared that try to make sense of – and thereby reaffirm and re-create – such differences. One of the most influential frameworks, regarding the whole area of sociology and organizational analysis, is Burrell and Morgan's (1979) four-paradigm grid. Among other effects, one is the reinforcement of differences or so-called dichotomies: subjective-objective, determinist-voluntarist and so on. Dichotomous ways of interpreting research, once established, end up hiding the emergence of other ways, which are sometimes more creative, opportune, less confined to institutionalized meanings, or simply *different*.

Taking the subjective-objective debate as an example, Deetz (1996) suggests that it has become a *misleading* debate because it reproduces a basic distinction between an interior and an exterior world, affords identity protection and privileges powerful groups (both in the academy and in other organizations) and is simply not a very interesting way of thinking about research programme differences. Reed (1997) refutes the division of social science into four mutually exclusive paradigms and develops epistemological arguments in defence of *pluralism*, which supposedly secures greater intellectual freedom and choice. Willmott (1993) critically hits upon Burrell and Morgan's core argument, that of the mutual exclusivity of paradigms, and also refutes Reed's pluralism. He maintains that *continuity* as well as *incommensurability* between competing approaches (paradigms) characterizes theory development, more clearly in natural inquiries but also in social studies.

Regarding the agency/structure dichotomy from the strategic management perspective,[1] some of us would operate from imperative lenses, where external environmental forces, viewed as autonomous and formal constraints, shape organizational change or permanence. On the other hand, those who operate from strategic choice views would assume that the first and foremost source of organizational transformation or maintenance is human agents' choices and decisions. Concerning the advance of the strategic management field, Whittington (1988)

argues that this classical opposition between determinism and voluntarism is too crude, that prevailing characterizations of determinism have obscured certain conditions for an adequate theory of strategic choice and that more differentiated and critical characterizations of differences could be proposed.

In this paper, I contend that discourses that embrace *non-dichotomist* logics should be viewed as valuable attempts to purposively explore new understandings of human agency and strategic choice rather than continuing to nourish dualistic debates. Although clearly distinct, the critical commentaries produced by Deetz, Reed, Willmott and Whittington have motivated me to explore alternatives that avoid classical dichotomies. I do not intend to embark on the incommensurability debate. In fact, I acknowledge that different, sometimes competing, points of view exist and they can enter into some degree of dialogue. Commensurability (or simply communicability), I believe, depends more on speakers' and hearers' openness to each other's views than on the 'paradigms' themselves.

It is from the above perspective and intent that I interpret the potential of Giddens' propositions, which have been adopted by a number of organizational researchers since the 1980s. Rather than opposing objective-subjective or voluntarist-determinist dimensions, Giddens (1984) challenged the premise of mutual exclusivity and assumed the duality of structure and action, proposing the *theory of structuration*. There are many approaches that have avoided dichotomies (e.g. Bernstein, 1983; Bhaskar, 1989; Bourdieu, 1977; Fay, 1996). My concern here, however, is how Giddens' propositions have influenced scholarly discourses on strategy and how they can conceptualize the 'problem of human agency' (Reed, 1988) in a way that can make for a more 'adequate theory of strategic choice' (Whittington, 1988).

This paper addresses two research questions. The first – *how have discourses on strategy been influenced by structurationist arguments?* – reveals that structurationist ideas have been combined with other approaches, triggering a second question: *how has an articulation of structurationist ideas with other approaches contributed to strategic management research*? I aim to identify and understand recent patterns of usage of structuration theory (ST) in strategy literature, addressing their articulation with other theories and approaches. The paper is structured as follows. First, because Giddens is not the only theorist to have proposed an alternative to the dichotomous logics that dominate social science, I briefly review some of the existing alternatives, explaining why my focus remains on Giddens. Second, I describe my assessment of how ST has been appropriated by the strategic management field from 1995 to 2000, insofar as this is evident in the main journals. Next, I perform an analysis of different theoretical articulations of ST in strategy relying on Whittington's (1988) framework. Finally, I discuss the main contributions that ST offers and how it can be mobilized to advance the study of strategy as an evolving discourse to produce new knowledge toward our appraisal of how organizations work.

BEYOND DUALISM: THE STRUCTURE-ACTION DEBATE

Giddens is not alone in challenging the intellectual hegemony of functionalism, proposing alternative forms of social analysis and avoiding dualist logic. Other classic examples are Bernstein's (1983) move beyond objectivism and relativism, Bhaskar's (1989) account of positivism and post-modernism; Bourdieu's (1977) interplay between objectivism and subjectivism and Fay's (1996) discussion of science versus hermeneutics.[2] Reed's (1997) discussion of duality and dualism, Willmott's (1993) break from paradigm mentality and Weaver and Gioia's (1994) incommensurability versus structurationist inquiry are some examples of the extensions of such a debate into organizational studies. Finally, Whittington (1988), Zan (1995) and Avenier (1997) are examples of similar contentions translated to the strategic management field. Facing all these approaches, the student of organization and strategy needs to make theoretical choices. What would be the best approach for overcoming dichotomist logic (if 'overcoming it' is desired) and embracing a more integrative approach?

I believe that most of the existing accounts that go beyond dualistic ways of thinking are not really competing but alternatives and the choice among these alternatives is often a matter of ontological affinity. Different social theorists have reworked social conceptions differently, from different assumptions concerning the essence of the phenomena under investigation, and we can feel more penchants toward one conceptualization than toward another. I use the term ontological affinity not as a reason to group various theories, but to describe the appeal that a given theoretical account has for a given researcher. Such attractiveness subsequently serves as a criterion for his/her choice. Briefly, ontological affinity in this paper is a property of the relationship between a researcher and a given theoretical account of social phenomena.

Let me give some examples. Critical realism[3] can be seen as an alternative approach to dichotomist thought that has produced important implications for social analysis (Reed, 1997). It is based on a philosophy of science closely associated with the work of Roy Bhaskar. Regarding strategic management and organizational theory fields, the influence of critical realism is well illustrated by the work of Whittington (1988, 1992), Reed (1997, 2001), Mahoney and Snyder (1999) and Tsang and Kwan (1999). From a critical realist perspective, the logic and practice of scientific research and explanation stems from the identification of underlying generative mechanisms that produce manifest phenomena such as observable contingent tendencies and patterns (Reed, 1997).

Although Bhaskar and Giddens are comparable regarding their anti-dichotomist views of the structure-action debate, they differ ontologically in several aspects. For instance, Bhaskar's realist ontology produces a *categorical distinction* between human action and social structure, seeing them as fundamentally different (Reed, 1997). Such an interpretation departs from the central notion of the

duality of structure as proposed by Giddens, where structure and human action are not seen as categorically distinct but as instantiations of each other. In addition, postulating structures as enduring generative components that pre-exist the social activities through which they are reproduced and transformed, Bhaskar ascribes primacy to structure rather than structuration and once again departs from Giddens (Cohen, 1989). From my point of view, Bhaskar and Giddens try to solve the agency/structure dichotomy through different ontological routes. Researchers espousing a realistic ontology will likely tend toward Bhaskar's account and those ascribing to a nominalist or constructivist ontology should find ST more appealing. The choice between critical realism and ST is of an ontological order. Both contribute to the 'problem of human agency' and to a more 'adequate theory of strategic choice', but they just do it differently.

Another important attempt to avoid dualistic thoughts is Bernstein's (1983) move beyond objectivism and relativism. From his view, although each paradigm has competing views, each simply represents a foundational claim (a meta-theory) about the possibility of a more complete understanding or explanation of the world. Similarly, Fay's (1996) work on multicultural philosophy and critical intersubjectivity calls into question the dualistic way of thinking that predominates in the philosophy of science. He proposes a dialectical view where alternatives, while genuinely competing, only appear to be completely 'other' to each other and are, in fact, deeply interconnected. By some means, Bernstein and Fay consider the different views developed to avoid classic dichotomies more as alternatives than as irreconcilably competing accounts.

Neither of these routes provides an easy or obvious solution to the problem of human agency and choice. Yet, a closer look at either of these specific approaches suggests some mutual rejection of key concerns (see, for instance, Bernstein's (1983) critique of Giddens' claim to be critical of the status quo or Bhaskar's critique of Giddens for being already too voluntarist[4]) and all have been subject to criticism from other researchers (e.g. Craig and Moreland, 2000; Held and Thompson, 1989). All these alternative accounts represent efforts to overcome 'narrow' dualistic thoughts and to explore new interpretations of renowned sociological dilemmas. From this point of view, recalling the dilemma of students of organizations making theoretical choices, perhaps the 'right' question is not which, among these alternatives, is *the best choice* for avoiding dichotomist reasoning and contributing to advance our understanding of human agency and choice, but with which of these alternatives one feels *greater ontological affinity* in order to contribute to the understanding of the possibilities of human choice.

The same argument for 'ontological affinity' could be used regarding Donaldson's claim that 'the most fruitful programme of inquiry that best yields knowledge about organizations is a macroscopic approach that relies upon positivist methods' rather than a programme based on structure-action interaction as proposed by Giddens (Donaldson, 1997, p. 78). The main weakness of Donaldson's argument

is his view of a *unique and definitively better approach* to investigate organizational phenomena. Why such a strong insistence that *only one approach* – the positivist – is fruitful? Why is the structure-action approach considered less likely to be fruitful? Mixing arguments from different ontologies as if they could all work from his positivist judgment, Donaldson seems to deny that researchers can pursue different explanations for and understandings of organizational life. Some researchers might find deterministic explanations through models that deal with a limited number of variables, as Donaldson firmly claims. Other researchers, however, might prefer, and many will, microscopic and detailed studies of daily interactions without necessarily believing that such things as unidirectional causation and independent and dependent variables make a lot of sense. It is above all an ontological and epistemological matter.[5]

Despite all the obstacles and criticism, my argument is that integrative approaches such as ST have played a relevant role in investigations about organizations and their management, individuals and their choices, although such a contribution is not yet widely recognized. Since the publication of *The Constitution of Society*, people in diverse fields have made use of concepts drawn from ST in pursuing both conceptual discussions and empirical inquiries (Anderson and Hinings, 1993; Orlikowski, 1992, Ranson et al., 1980; Riley, 1983; Sarason, 1995; Walsham, 1993; Whittington, 1992). My intent is to shed some light on this recent contribution to strategy.

STRUCTURATION THEORY AND THE STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT FIELD: AN APPRAISAL OF RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

In a number of texts in the late 1970s and early 1980s, culminating with the publication in 1984 of *The Constitution of Society*, British sociologist Anthony Giddens developed the theory of structuration, addressing fundamental problems in the social sciences in what was, at the time, an unconventional way. Moreover, he provided an account of the constitution of social life that departed from and challenged established theoretical positions and traditions (Cohen, 1989). The advent of ST did not leave people indifferent: numerous books and papers promptly emerged with the purpose of discussing, scrutinizing, supporting or criticizing the tenets of Giddens' ideas. It is not my purpose, in this section, to provide a full overview of Giddens' theory. There are a number of comprehensive and authoritative texts that do so.[6]

The relationship between agency and structure is among the most pervading and difficult issues in all social theory. How is the action of individual agents related to the structural features of their society? How is action structured in everyday contexts? How are the structured features of action reproduced? To solve the dualism between structure and agency, Giddens departed from the conceptual-

ization of structure as having some given or visible form. Structure is what gives form and shape to social life, but it is not itself that form and shape. Structure only exists in and through the activities of human agents (Giddens, 1984). Similarly, he departed from the idea of agency as something just 'contained' within the individual. Agency does not refer to people's intentions in doing things but more to the flow of people's actions. Giddens deeply reformulated notions of structure and agency. While the structural properties of societies and social systems are real, they have no necessary physical existence. Actually, they depend upon regularities of social reproduction (Giddens and Pierson, 1998). As a consequence, the basic domain of the study of the social sciences is social practices ordered across space and time (Giddens, 1984).

Complementary to the notion of the *duality of structure* is another concept held by ST, that of *competence of agents*. For Giddens (1984), all actors are socially competent. The core idea is reflexivity: the capacity of humans to be reflexive – to think about their situation – is the ability to change it. The concepts of the duality of structure and competent agents are inter-related. In fact, the structurationist way of interpreting the interplay between structure and action requires competent and reflexive actors. Therefore, it can be also seen as an alternative way to analyse strategic choice.

Although ST is primarily concerned with social groups, not with organizational change and strategy, the theory developed by Giddens has been extended to explicitly consider the role of strategy. Earlier assessments of ST adoption in organizational studies suggest that although its potential has been clearly recognized, the concrete contribution through research results has been sporadic (Anderson and Hinings, 1993) and only a limited part of Giddens' oeuvre has been assimilated into management studies (Whittington, 1992). Although not numerous, important contributions to the application of ST in the strategic management field can be illustrated, such as Westley's (1990) concepts of strategic conversation, Sarason's (1995) differentiation between intended and enacted strategy and Rouleau's (2000) conceptualization of strategy-making as socially structured within the ongoing action of all agents, where the link between strategy and structure is located in the agents' everyday activities.

In order to contribute to the assessment of the recent role ST has played in strategic management research, an in-depth literature review encompassing five years (1995–2000) was conducted and is described in this paper. Two main sources were used to identify relevant articles. First, the ABI/INFORM database was explored using keywords such as *structuration theory*, *Giddens*, *strategic management*, *business policy* and *strategy*. Second, a manual search of important journals for which full texts are not present on ABI/INFORM (mainly *Organization Science* and *Strategic Management Journal*) was conducted to complete the literature review. In doing so, I ensured that a substantial number of articles that account for strategy and ST were considered. A preliminary examination of each article was necessary to

ensure that each paper was actually a study *centred on strategy* and that it *used ST as its theoretical foundation* rather than simply referring to both. From 299 articles selected through the initial search, 280 articles were eliminated because they did not meet these criteria. The final sample includes 19 articles, which can be seen as representative of the use of ST to discuss *strategy*, even if some of these articles occupy the boundary between the fields of strategic management and organizational theory.

First, I examined the nature of the use of ST in each article, identifying whether it was used as the primary or secondary theoretical foundation. From this I was able to draw a broad picture. The preliminary analysis of the 19 articles suggested that Giddens' ideas are not applied alone but that they are often articulated or combined with other theories or approaches albeit to different degrees. Few studies used ST as the sole theoretical foundation. In fact, in only two cases did I find ST applied on its own. Figure 1 shows the distribution of these two and the other 17 articles throughout 1995 to 2000, by journal and by theoretical perspectives applied. I was able to organize the combinations between ST and other perspectives into distinct groups: institutional, network, interactionist, constructivist, sensemaking, phenomenology and strategic choice.[7]

From this broad picture, it can be observed that among the academic journals 'open' to structurationist approaches, *Organizations Studies* dominates with seven of the 19 articles. The second position is shared by three journals: *Journal of Management Studies*, *Academy of Management Review* and *International Studies of Management & Organization*. Some important journals in the strategic management field did not publish any articles using structurationist ideas, such as *Strategic Management Journal*[8] for instance. In addition, there is a greater concentration of articles that apply structurationist approaches in 1998–2000 than in 1995–97, more than twice as many in fact, suggesting that Giddens' ideas are potentially an increasingly promising avenue of research. But talking about 'potential' and 'promise' is not enough. I put forward the analysis, exploring this trend in greater depth.

Table I presents the result of this in-depth analysis. The first column presents each article, the journal in which it was published and the theoretical approach, i.e., the type of articulation of ST, whether or not it was combined with other theories or approaches. ST has often been appropriated by researchers in strategy, not as the primary theoretical foundation but as a broad *framework or 'envelope'* (e.g. Coopey et al., 1998), as a *general premise* incorporated into existing approaches (e.g. Lowe, 1998; Phillips et al., 2000), as *an integrative theoretical tool* (e.g. Child, 1997) or used *to inform the argument* (e.g., Karnoe and Nygaard, 1999). In all these cases, although Giddens' ideas are undoubtedly applied as a *secondary* theoretical foundation, his ideas have been adopted to complement existing perspectives and have thereby transformed these perspectives.

The second column in Table I shows how the *definition* of strategy changes depending on different combinations of ST and other perspectives. For example,
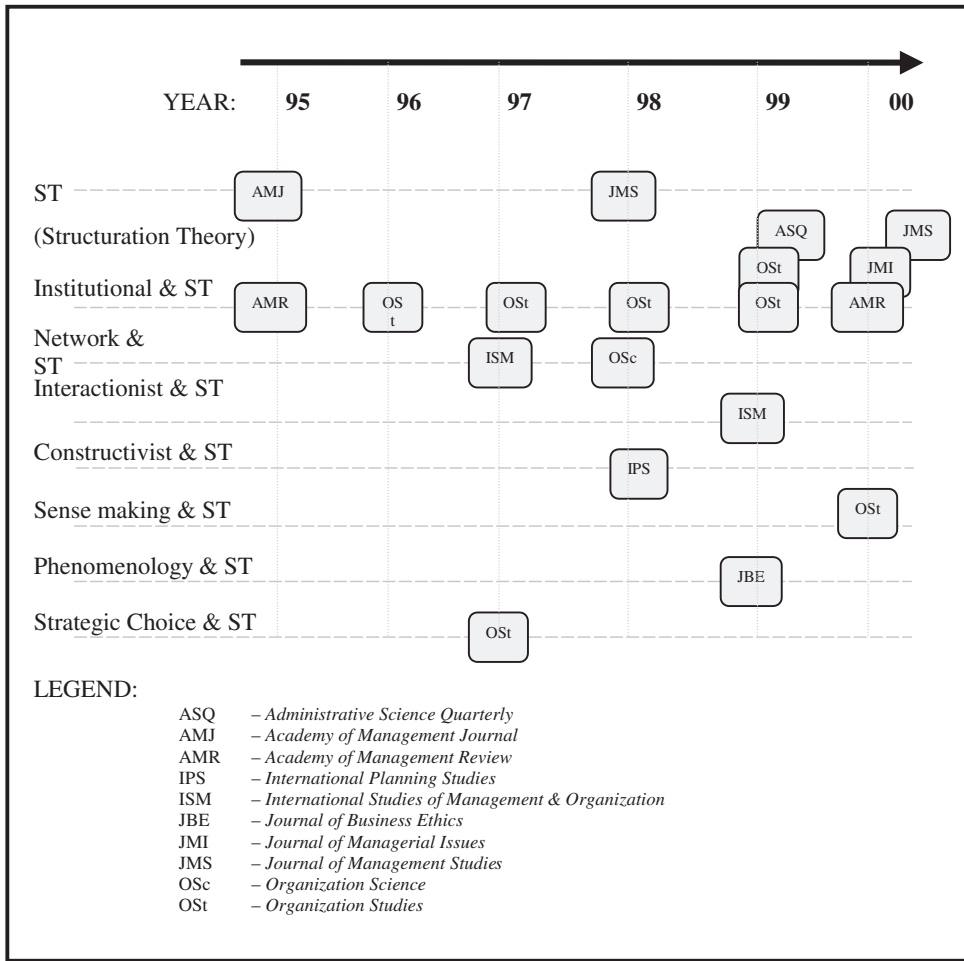
Figure 1. Articles using structuration theory (ST) in the strategic management field from 1995 to 2000

when a structurationist perspective is adopted solely, strategy is defined as *interactions* among multiple agents, with intended and unintended consequences. When combined with other perspectives, the definition of strategy undergoes subtle transformations. For instance, institutionalists conceive of strategy as *practices, patterns of actions, processes* or *responses*. Strategy is thought of as *discourse* when a critical organization discourse analysis is applied and so on. Although a discussion of these differences would be of interest, it is beyond the scope of this paper, and it is a subject for future research. Instead of discussing them here, I do discuss a central element that a structurationist approach to strategy undeniably introduces: the power that intervenes behind these interactions, practices, patterns of action or whatever form strategy is seen as taking on. The reformulation Giddens offers to the articulation between structure and agency is strongly based on social

Table I. The analysis of strategic management literature using structuration theory (ST)

Study and type of use of ST (with or without other theories)	The definition of strategy
Bloodgood and Morrow (2000), *Journal of Managerial Issues*. **Institutional, resource-based and ST:** ST articulated in an institutional framework. The resource based view is also used to demonstrate how the perception of choice, determinism and uncertainty influence the types of strategic changes managers are likely to develop.	**Process:** strategic decision-making and strategic organizational change.
Chikudate (1999a), *Journal of Business Ethics*. **Phenomenology and ST:** Phenomenology and sociology of knowledge incorporating aspects of Habermas and Giddens.	**Patterns of action:** focus on strategic alliances.
Child (1997), *Organization Studies*. **Strategic choice and ST:** Strategic choice analysis is situated in the realm of ST and is presented as potentially integrative (organizational learning and evolutionary economics).	**Decisions and actions:** strategic choice perspective.
Cooper et al. (1996), *Organization Science*. **Institutional and ST:** Institutional with Giddens' (1979, 1984) insights about ST, organizational structures (conceived as generative rules) and systems that both reflect and help reproduce the interpretive scheme.	**Practices:** a set of formalized practices, which has an aggregate connotation (firm-wide strategy and not individual strategies).
Coopey et al. (1998), *Journal of Management Studies*. **Structuration theory (ST) alone:** 'This framework is developed by integrating various research perspectives within an envelope of structuration theory' (Giddens, 1984, p. 263).	**Interactions:** social interactions or meetings, formal or informal.
Cosio (1998), *International Planning Studies*. **Social constructivism and ST:** Social constructivist approach, which articulates discourse analysis, new institutionalism and ST.	**Practices:** strategy as social or organizational practices.
Hardy and Phillips (1999), *Organization Studies*. **Institutional, critical organizational discourse analysis and ST:** Articulation of structurationist ideas, critical discourse analysis and institutional theory.	**Discourse:** strategy is seen as a discursive activity.
Hung and Whittington (1997), *Organization Studies*. **Institutional, resource-based and ST:** The theoretical framework for the reconciliation between new institutionalism and resource-based view is pursuant to Giddens' (1984, 1991) theory of structuration in the contemporary conditions of 'modernity'.	**Practices:** focus on strategies of individual firms as managerial practices.

Reference	Description
Jennings and Zandbergen (1995), *Academy of Management Review* **Institutional and ST:** Institutional approach with some of Giddens' ideas.	**Response:** strategy is viewed as a response and adaptation as a process that can range from very specific responses to switches in general strategy.
Karnoe and Nygaard (1999), *International Studies of Management & Organization* **Interactionism and ST:** ST is articulated with interpretive sociology (Schitz, 1973) and more specifically with interactionism (Blumer, 1969).	**Patterns of action:** situated social actions temporarily institutionalized as stable patterns in actions.
Lowe (1998), *Organization Studies* **Institutional, cultural approach and ST:** Culturalist and institutionalist explanations articulated with a few of Giddens' ideas.	**Practices:** cultural view of strategic development along with national, organizational, functional and professional frames of reference.
Mayer and Whittington (1999), *Organization Studies* **Institutional, systems theories and ST:** In order to extend the institutionalist approach, the authors emphasize the self-reinforcing integration of national business and institutions, with a 'looser' structurationist perspective that allows for internal inconsistency and incremental change.	**Pattern of actions:** focus on corporate strategy and national patterns of continuity and change.
McKinley et al. (2000), *Academy of Management Journal* **Institutional, socio-cognitive and ST:** ST articulated with institutional and socio-cognitive approaches.	**Process:** a process and the result of a process. Downsizing is an intentional, proactive management strategy.
Ocasio (1999), *Administrative Science Quarterly* **Institutional theory of action and ST:** Institutional theory of action which follows some of Giddens' ideas.	**Patterns of action:** it is a kind of response to external pressures and internal dominant patterns and rules of behaviour.
Phillips et al. (2000), *Journal of Management Studies* **Institutional and ST:** Institutional approach with some of Giddens' ideas.	**Practices:** collaborative practices as set of negotiations (inter-organizations)
Sarason (1995), *Academy of Management Journal* **Structuration theory (ST) alone:** 'This paper argues that structuration theory offers strategic management a theoretical framework to understand strategic transformation' (p. 47).	**Interactions:** strategy is a result of the interaction among multiple agents, with intended and unintended results.
Sydow et al. (1997/1998), *International Studies of Management & Organization* and Sydow and Windeler (1998), *Organization Science* **Network and ST:** The network perspective is anchored in the theory of structuration.	**Practices:** strategic activities are directly related to the organizing of inter-firm networks.
Wright et al. (2000), *Organization Studies* **Sensemaking and ST:** Sensemaking theory with Giddens' ideas. Fairclough's concept of sensemaking practices, Weick's sensemaking and Habermas' linguistic turn.	**Practices:** focus on sensemaking activities of individuals in interdisciplinary product development teams.

practices and power relations. When inspired by structuration, strategic choice would rely upon the capability of individual actors to 'make a difference' in the production of definite outcomes and their potential to transform some aspect of a process or event. Such a transformative capacity is intrinsically related to micro-dynamics of power. Power is not a property of individuals or groups but a property of all relations[9] among individuals and groups (Knights and Morgan, 1991). A helpful example is Westley's (1990) concept of *strategic conversation*. Strategy is considered, at a macro level, an aggregate of actions, transactions, recipes, positions, designs, plans and interpretations. At the same time, strategy can only be empirically grounded in the discrete actions, decisions or routines of a variety of actors (micro level). What is the linkage between these discrete actions and macro level events and, for instance, organizational positioning? Wesley focuses on daily conversations to illustrate how discrete and observable events contain all the elements of social structure (legitimating, domination and signification). Any conversation is defined by power relations: it may be co-determined or it may be dominated by one or another of the participants. Exclusion from conversations means exclusion from coalitions which embody organizational routines, decisions and hence, from action. Domination and co-domination of such conversations produces the energy required for both organizational maintenance and change (Westley, 1990). Consequently, although with different degrees of power, individuals in their daily practices, coalitions with other individuals and even in their omissions, do participate in strategy formulation and execution, sustaining it or doing it differently. The link between micro and macro emerges clearly through such structurationist view of strategy seen as a matter of ongoing social practices and power relations.

THE INFLUENCE OF STRUCTURATIONIST ARGUMENTS

In the above section I pointed out that discourses on strategy have included structurationist ideas, which, most of the time, have been combined with other approaches. In this section, I adopt Whittington's (1988) framework to explore the characteristics and potentialities of the theoretical articulations recognized. Why Whittington's framework and not another?

Burrell and Morgan's (1979) sociological paradigms gained an almost hegemonic capacity to define alternatives in organizational analysis. After them, many other grids and frameworks have appeared (Astley and Van de Ven, 1983; Deetz, 1996). Regarding the strategic management field more specifically, Whittington (1988) proposes an alternative grid, arguing that the prevailing dichotomization of organizational studies into voluntarism and determinism is too simple, too crude to adequately understand strategic choice: the actors' behaviour is portrayed as autonomous in relation to the world or strongly determined by structural constraints. Such a strict dichotomy between voluntarism and environmental deter-
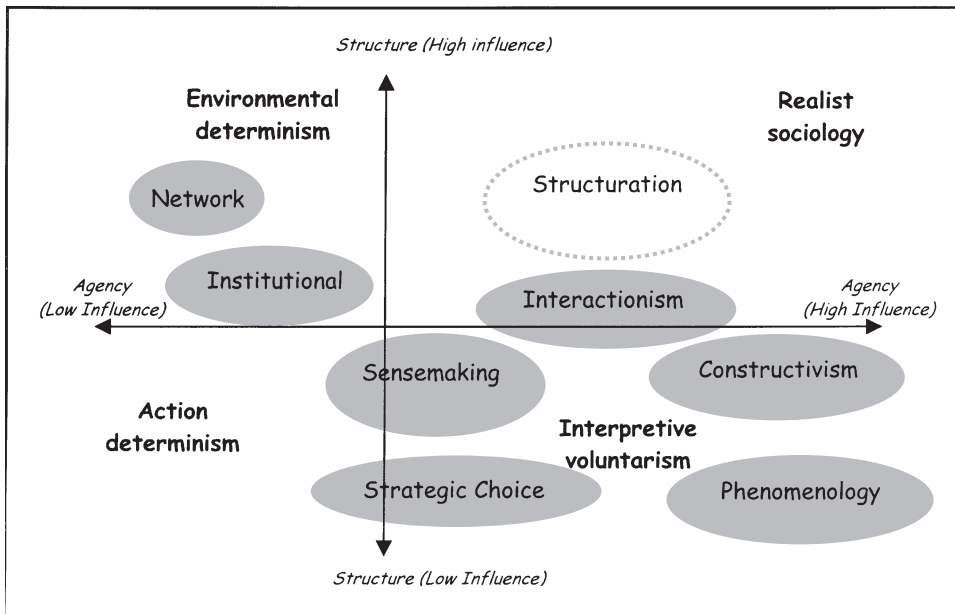
Figure 2. Placing the theoretical approaches into Whittington's (1988) framework

minism seems to offer a simple but unfruitful solution to what Whittington terms *the problem of strategic choice*. 'All that is necessary for strategic choice is to dissolve away environmental constraint. Smash the imprisoning walls, and with one bound the actor is free. But here lie the dangers of these characterizations of determinism and voluntarism. In dissolving constraints upon action, many voluntaristic authors also dissolve preconditions' (p. 522).

Aiming to overcome such limited visions of strategic choice, Whittington proposes a more differentiated view of determinism that produces an alternative realist account. The centrality of the strategic choice debate to strategic management research makes Whittington's framework highly insightful. Whittington (1988) constructs his grid across two axes (structure and agency) which is adopted here as a way of focusing attention on differences rather than on a rigid way of classifying them (Figure 2).

The vertical axis represents the range of structure (wherein the influence of structural constraints is high or low), encompassing: (1) *environmental determinism* where the actor may select from a range of available courses of action, but the environment ensures that only one is compatible with survival; and (2) *action determinism*, which holds that, given certain drives, the actor will select only one sort of action because he is driven by a single-minded internal mechanism. Consequently, in the first form the environment is seen as determining human choice (indeed seen as meaningless). In the second form, it is not the environment but an actor's internal mechanisms (single-mindedness) that produce determinate actions as the final 'choice'. These two forms vary in degree according to the influence of envi-

ronmental structure and both tend to ignore the power of human agency. Both are determinist, what vary are the explanatory forces: exogenous structural constraints or dictatorial psychological mechanisms.

Whittington (1988) adds a horizontal axis to account more purposively for agency, ranging from low to high power of human agency). This second axis creates the final two quadrants of the grid: (3) *interpretive voluntarism* that celebrates agency but condemns structure; and (4) *realist sociology*, which while urging agency, also recognizes structure as its essential precondition, which is presented as a reconciliation of structure with agency.

I have placed the eight perspectives or theoretical approaches described above into Whittington's framework. Figure 2 shows *network* and *institutional* in the environmental determinism quadrant, given their confessed tendency toward this type of determinism; *sensemaking*, *phenomenology*, *strategic choice* and *constructivism* in the *interpretive voluntarism* quadrant, given their tendency to dissolve structural constraints upon action;[10] and finally *interactionism* in the *realist sociology* quadrant. None fall into the category of *action determinism*. Following this, I explore the potential of each combination in terms of theoretical complementarities: to what extent do these theoretical complementarities change discourses on strategy and the way strategic choice is perceived?

Institutional Theory and Structuration Theory

The institutional perspective is not easily confined to a single quadrant. Different streams coexist under this label. However, there is some common ground: structural forms (and the values sustaining these forms) of relevant external institutions map themselves onto organizations, which depend on them for legitimacy, resourcing or staffing. Environmental conditions are regarded as ultimately *determining* organizational characteristics (Child, 1997). Environmental characteristics have *generalized* effects for all firms in an organizational field and organizational fields influence managerial choice. Managerial perceptions only influence the strategy-making process (Bloodgood and Morrow, 2000). Briefly, *within an institutional framework, institutional forces guide strategic change.*

How do these basic institutional assumptions change with the integration of structurationist insights? Early seminal writings on institutional theory are supposed to integrate Giddens' concepts of ST (e.g., DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) but Anderson and Hinings (1993) suggest that the definitions appropriated by institutionalists are only remotely related to Giddens' original propositions. I do not intend to pursue this debate but propose that the recent reiteration of structurationist premises reinforces a less deterministic view of institutionalization processes. In Whittington's words, 'reconceptualizing institutional environments in the terms of ST could, moreover, provide a way out from the institutionalists' self-confessed tendency to determinism' (1992, p. 694). In effect, my analysis suggests

that, when adopting structurationist premises, the *mutual influence between organizations and their fields are strengthened*. The outcomes from strategic change processes, such as implemented change strategies, are viewed as influencing the organization and its field through *the shared interactions and perceptions of its members*. Other consequences of the theoretical complementarity between ST and institutional theories are exemplified by the selected articles: human actions reestablish the structure of the field (Bloodgood and Morrow, 2000); the negligence of actors and strategy may be reduced and will emphasize divergence rather than convergence (Hung and Whittington, 1997); the recognition of internal inconsistency and incremental change (Mayer and Whittington, 1999); a greater emphasis on cultural influences (Lowe, 1998), social meanings (Jennings and Zandbergen, 1995), collective interactions (Cooper et al., 1996) and history-dependent contexts (Ocasio, 1999). In summary, *structurationist arguments decrease the deterministic role of institutional forces, making strategy more susceptible to actors' actions and perceptions*.

A singular combination between institutional and structuration theories is provided by Hardy and Phillips (1999). Critical discourse organizational analysis is given a central position. Rather than an abstract process of institutionalization that affects actors 'behind their backs' (referring to Powell and DiMaggio), Hardy and Phillips focus more directly on *how the strategies of actors affect institutionalization*. The institutionalization of practices and structures embodies sets of power relations that are deeply embedded in the institutionalized practices and taken-for-granted rules that shape institutional action. This form of power affects the strategic opportunities of members of the institutional field, but is not the straightforward or direct result of discrete acts of agency. Rather, it is the result of complex discursive struggles between members of an institutional field as each tries to influence the way in which it is defined. Such a perspective of critical organizational discourse analysis allows a particular interest in political acts by organizational members as they engage in discursive activity to reconstitute concepts, objects and subject positions and, thereby, change the way other actors respond in an organizational context.

Network and Structuration Theory

Instead of institutional forces, network theorists tend to see networks as constraining (determining) strategy-making (Sydow and Windeler, 1998). Put simply, the network perspective seems to distract scientific attention from *strategic activities* other than horizontal and vertical networking and from structures other than those produced and reproduced by networking. However, many of these activities will materialize in a structural change of networks. Adopting a structurationist perspective, *the implications of these strategies for praxis and actor reflexivity intentionally changing their practices are taken into account*. Any kind of relations, especially interorganizational relations, become important for developing a more comprehensive,

socially informed, and dynamic understanding of a specific industry. Industry and networks are redefined in structurationist terms, using two basic concepts of ST – the duality of structure and the recursiveness of social life. According to Sydow and Windeler (1998), 'structuration theory, more than any of the well-established theories of organizations and networks, sheds light on the interplay of structure and action as well as on the mediation of different social dimensions of social practices (such as signification and legitimation and domination), and emphasizes the recursiveness of social life not only within but also among organizations' (p. 266).

Sensemaking and Structuration Theory

Drawing upon existing sensemaking theory (defined as an alternative based on a philosophy of intersubjectivity and communicative action), Wright et al. (2000) extend its central concepts using Giddens' ST as well as other theoretical contributions like Habermas' communicative action and Fairclough's ideas about sensemaking practices. Using first-hand observations of participants' organizing activities where participants develop an understanding of their 'ensemble of practices' – one of Giddens' notions – Wright et al. seek to generate a description of the resourceful sensemaking concept. By resourceful sensemaking process they mean the ability to appreciate the perspectives of others and use this understanding to enact horizon-expanding discourse. They use the notion of *duality of structure* to explain the connections between events, sensemaking practices and lifeworld. According to this notion, social structures shape and are shaped by social action. Knowledgeable actors face structures that are both enabling and constraining. This recursive relationship helps explain how sensemaking practices shape and are shaped by both events and lifeworld. The more important influence from Giddens in this case is to clarify the link between micro and macro levels of analysis, helping to improve Weick's sensemaking model.

Phenomenology and Structuration Theory

The intersection between ethnomethodology and structurationist approaches has been explored by Chikudate (1999a, 1999b, 2000): through socialization, knowledge shared by organizational members is precipitated as a cultural product (Giddens, 1984). This product includes the inferential operations possibly shared by organizational members. The conception that leads to changes in knowledge structures is called reflexivity. People assume a world of the workplace, which is not only objectively present, but a world to which they have continued experimental access and, further, which others experience in a more or less identical way. Norms that determine social actions are collective behavioural expectations. With structurationist ideas, *the complex process and mechanisms that help to produce and repro-*

duce patterns of action are combined with the normative contexts that establish the set of all interpersonal relationships held to be legitimate in a given intersubjectively shared organizational life.

Strategic Choice and Structuration Theory

According to Child (1997), the process of agency in organizations cannot be treated adequately by a perspective that does not incorporate both the subjective and objective features inherent in ST. Indeed, Child (1997) argues that strategic choice as a process above all furnishes an example of 'structuration'. That is, action is bound by the cognitive, material and relational structures existing within organizations and their networks, but at the same time it has an impact upon those structures. Through their actions, agents endeavour to modify and redefine structures in ways that will admit different possibilities for future action. The process is a continuing one. Strategic choice thus presents a dynamic rather than a static perspective on organizations and their environments. In keeping with ST, it also addresses the so-called problem of levels of analysis. Actions carried out in the name of organizations are driven by individuals. When these actions become a constituent element in the relations between an organization and external bodies, they move onto an even higher level of social process. The consequences of this process for the organization are social in origin but may be interpreted in some circumstances by individual actors primarily in terms of their own personal values or priorities. Child (1997) proposes that strategic choice should be able to make a contribution to the realm of ST, *bringing agency and structure into tension and locating them within a significant context.*

Social Constructivism and Structuration Theory

Social constructivists are interested in finding ways of understanding the policy process by looking at the organizing principles, discursive practices, institutional designs and mediation arenas that shape the systemic conditions of policy environments and that determine the process and content of the social production of environmental knowledge. Thus the social constructivist approach seems to accept that the environmental policy process entails a collective action problem, critically dependent on the relationship between agency and structure, and whereby a variety of actors and a complex structure come together in the policy process in order to try to influence its output. Organizational life is directed by a set of 'shared meanings and practices' that have become socialized over a long period of time. Actors organize themselves accordingly and, by participating in the socialization process, agency becomes incrementally institutionalized. Following Giddens, institutions are the commonly adopted practices, which persist, in recognizably similar forms across generations. People create society and at the same time they are

created by it. Giddens also sees institutions as being constantly renegotiated in an interplay between social agency and wider social structures; as such, *agency has an element of choice in its decisions, but is also constrained in what it does by the structural conditions it is embedded in, a point shared by 'structural social constructivists'* (Cosio, 1998).

Symbolic Interactionism and Structuration Theory

Karnoe and Nygaard (1999) draw on the traditions of interpretive, interactionist sociology and Giddens' principle of structuration to conceptualize social action, as well as the production and reproduction of the implicated business systems. Thus, they do not admit a dominance of structure over agency *a priori* but see a mutual constitution of structure and agency (the reason it is placed into the realist quadrant). They do not deny the possibility that social action may turn into typified patterns, which may follow rules and become institutionalized. From such a perspective, social structures associated with business systems may become temporarily institutionalized as relatively stable patterns in actions. Karnoe and Nygaard (1999) point out the role of agency in this constitutional process of business systems and the situated rationality at work. They conceptualize agency with the notions of social action and situated rationality, without losing sight of the structural aspects. With such a focus, interactionist theorists are able to analyse what actors know about why they produce, reproduce and change those 'societies' and 'business systems' of which they are a part. This emphasis on individual actors does not shift attention away from the role of institutions or rules that can explain the relative stability in the social patterns of action and the associated stability in patterns of economic organization in a business system or in a society. With the inclusion of ST, the micro-level conception of 'which institutions act, where, and how', a perspective that acknowledges the mutual constitution of structure and actors, is provided.

DISCUSSION AND NEW DIRECTIONS

This paper addresses two research questions: *how have discourses on strategy been influenced by structurationist arguments* and *how has the articulation of structurationist ideas in combination with other ideas contributed to strategic management research*? The first question is explored through the identification of patterns of use, which shows that, within the literature on strategy, ST has been *articulated* with other theories and approaches. The second question is explored by placing the recognized theoretical combinations into Whittington's framework and describing the effects that structurationist insights produce in each combination. The following discussion points toward a view of the effects of ST on discourses on strategy that is still evolving and open to further investigation and debate.
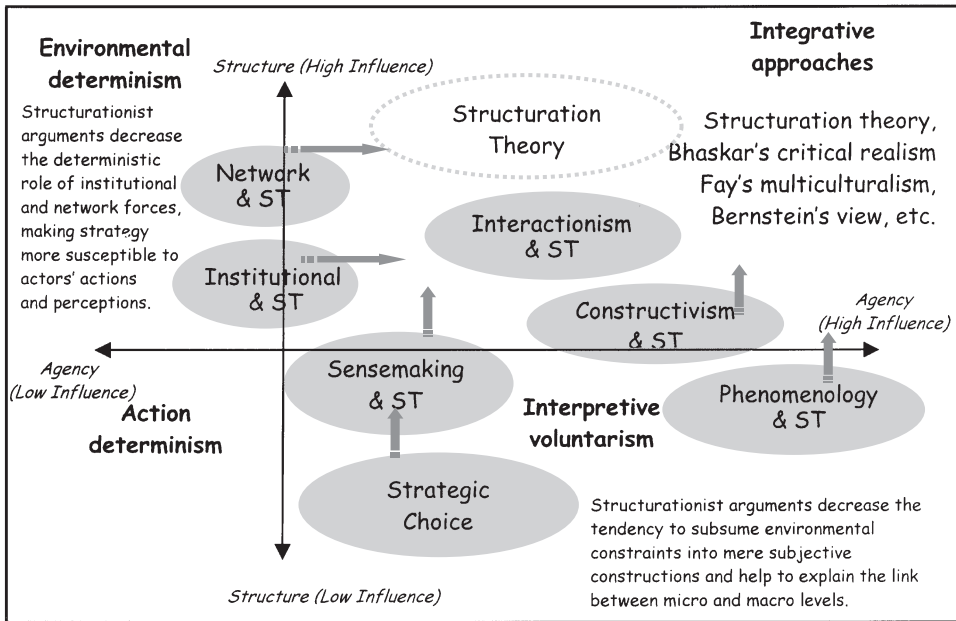
Figure 3. Interpreting the effects of structurationist insights: a move to integration

Figure 3 shows a tentative interpretation of the effects that structurationist insights have had on other theoretical approaches with which they have been articulated. The point of departure was Whittington's framework with two axes representing the power of structure and agency in the explanation or understanding of strategic choice. I have made some changes in order to adapt the framework to my purposes. First, the fourth quadrant, originally *Critical Realism*, was renamed *Integrative Approaches*, indicating that critical realism is one among other approaches that have attempted to break dichotomist logic and proposes more integrative thoughts. By integrative I mean perspectives that take into account both dimensions – structure and agency – thereby avoiding a dichotomist view and moving toward a more holistic understanding of human choice. My preference for *integrative* over *integrationist* is to avoid confusion with the integrationist quadrant as identified by Reed (1985), who also seeks to overcome traditional theoretical dichotomies, but who seems to underestimate the differences between competing approaches and ends by relying on an objective position (Willmott, 1993). In addition, I put the focus on ST, which I see simply as an alternative that proposes a particular redefinition of structure and action and that has already been articulated by other theoretical frameworks to minimize their tendencies toward crude determinism or voluntarism.

Second, I repositioned the perspectives according to the effects I have interpreted from their articulation with structurationist premises. An overall movement in the direction of the integrative quadrant can be recognized by carefully

analysing each theoretical combination. Such a movement suggests that a transformed theory or view of strategic choice, possibly more rich than others that favour structure or agency, might evolve for complementary theoretical approaches. Below I summarize these effects.

Approaches categorized as *environmental determinist*, which tend to focus more on the structural context in which they operate than on individual actors, seem to take steps toward an integrative approach, taking into account the role of human agents in a more purposive manner. As described above, institutionalist approaches combined with ST tend to focus more directly on how the strategies of *individual actors* affect institutionalization. Likewise, network approaches tend to be less deterministic regarding the primacy of network over strategy-making, analysing the implications of *personal relations* within and among organizations.

Approaches of an *interpretive voluntarist* nature, where the actor's capacity for independently motivated action prevails, show a decreasing tendency to subsume environmental constraints into mere subjective constructions. They become aware of lifeworld practices, collective regulations and normative contexts. The surrounding contexts are seen as influencing the production and reproduction of patterns of action. Strategic choice becomes bound by cognitive, material and relational structures existing within social and organizational contexts, but at the same time strategic choice impacts upon those structures.

Finally, from the beginning symbolic interactionism was placed near the integrative quadrant because it does not admit an *a priori* dominance of agency over structure or vice versa. Different from the approaches previously analysed, it postulates social analysis as dependent on the relationship between structure and agency, which are mutually constituted. For symbolic interactionism, and the same can be ascribed to interpretive voluntarist approaches, ST influences the understanding of *level of analysis linkages*. With the inclusion of ST, the link between micro and macro levels of analysis becomes clearer. Whether a social or a symbolic construction, the structures (macro level) emerge from individual action and choices (micro level).

Fragmentation, as suggested by Déry (1995), is one of the main characteristics of the strategic management field, which actualizes a highly structured version of the classic oppositions found in the field, such as micro/macro and voluntarism/determinism. He argues for a *bridge* between the issues of the entrepreneur (mainly situated at the micro level, and largely based on the study of entrepreneurs' characteristics and use of a voluntaristic logic) and the issues dominated by research (generally situated at the macro level of organizations and competitive environments, with emphasis on entrepreneurial processes and a more deterministic logic). In such a scenario, Giddens' ST combined with other perspectives represents an attempt to move beyond such dichotomies. A kind of theoretical negotiation occurs when different perspectives are put together and the resulting complementarity produces richer avenues and new directions for research.

Briefly, structurationist insights contribute to changing discourses on strategy in two ways. The first is related to the idea of the duality of structure and competent agents. Taking this duality into account, voluntaristic and deterministic positions moderate their polarized premises about environmental constraint and human autonomy. Both take steps to accept the importance of structural conditions influencing human agency without eliminating the power of human agency. Structure is inevitably involved in how agents both construct their strategic goals and realize them in their strategic choices (Whittington, 1988). At the same time, because Giddens does not ascribe primacy to structure, but to structuration, there is always space for human choice: people *can* (even if they *do not*) redefine the boundary conditions of their actions and choices.

The second contribution of ST is to address the so-called problem of levels of analysis. The argument concerning the need for multiple levels of analysis is not new. In the introduction to an *Academy of Management Journal* special issue on 'change and development journeys into a pluralist word', Pettigrew et al. (2001) place the articulation of many levels of analysis in the treatment of context as a worthy analytical challenge in studying organizational change. ST helps to bridge micro and macro levels of analysis. Individuals perform actions in the name of groups or organizations. When these actions become a constituent element in the relations between an organization and external bodies, they move to an even higher level of social process. Micro practices begin to be shared, reproduced, routinized, and, finally, institutionalized. Similarly, institutionalized practices, norms and rules at the macro level (industry, for example) influence everyday activities, constraining or stimulating certain individual perceptions and choices.

CONCLUSION

To what degree do the theoretical complementarities and negotiations exhibited by ST and mainstream theories and perspectives contribute to the advancement of strategic management research? The purpose of this paper is the assessment of the use of ST in the field of strategy. Nineteen articles published over five years were analysed and several theoretical combinations emerged from the analysis. Four main conclusions can be drawn.

First, taking into account that, originally, the main tenets of ST 'indeed operate at a high level of abstraction' (Giddens, 1989, p. 295), ST is often considered a meta-theory, and perhaps the assessment of the contribution and influence of Giddens in the strategic management field has been misunderstood. The analysis carried out here suggests that, although seen generally as less important or even negligible, ST has often been appropriated by researchers in strategy not as the primary theoretical foundation but as a broad framework or 'envelope' (e.g. Coopey et al., 1998), as a general premise incorporated into existing approaches (e.g. Phillips et al., 2000) or as an integrative theoretical tool (e.g. Child, 1997).

Giddens' ideas have been adopted to complement existing perspectives and have thereby transformed these perspectives. Such articulations of ST with other perspectives, even as a simple trend, can change the profile of the field, not by creating a consensus about the underlying mechanisms of the strategy process, but by opening its boundaries. As previously pointed out, minimizing determinist and voluntarist trends means being more open to alternative and perhaps more complete explanations of strategic choice and organizational life.

Second, I see a greater concentration of articles applying structurationist approaches between 1998 and 2000 than between 1995 and 1997, suggesting that Giddens' ideas are being increasingly adopted. Challenging the traditional dichotomies, ST, as articulated by strategic management researchers, can offer empowered frameworks to better analyse and understand strategy. The core contribution structurationist premises offer is the *establishment of a kind of balance* between structure and agency, micro and macro, environmental constraints and strategic choice, an equilibrium perhaps lost by important schools, such as institutionalism, throughout their historical development. In other words, the increasing number of studies incorporating structurationist premises might represent the promising *bridge* advocated by Déry (1995).

Third, among the different theoretical articulations constructed with ST, it is clear that the combination with institutionalism is dominant. Ten articles (more than half of the total) fall into institutionalism. Even if institutional studies far from constitute a harmonized school, their importance to the field of strategy is clear. Institutionalists have been subjected to much criticism because of their tendency toward aggregation and environmental determinism. My argument is that such determinism can be *attenuated and complemented by explicit negotiation* with structurationist premises. Whittington has argued that an 'institutionalism perspective could be greatly enlarged if it were ready to make more than passing reference to Giddens' (1992, p. 703). More recently, Scott (2001) extensively refers to Giddens' structuration theory as an opportunity of taking the determinist flavour off institutional theory. From my interpretation of structuration theory's articulation within institutional studies, such an enlarged account of institutionalism has already been constructed and can be further expanded if researchers acknowledge that forward-looking non-dichotomist approaches can produce meaningful benefits. In addition, this review and analysis extends Whittington's (1992) and Barley and Tolbert's (1997) work: instead of focusing only on institutional theory, I outline that other worthwhile streams of research have also benefited from the extension of their concepts and the adoption of a more integrative view of strategic choice that complementary approaches such as ST provide. Future research may investigate the effects produced by theoretical complementarities with other approaches, such as with Bhaskar's and Bernstein's ideas. They can also draw a parallel to their effective or potential influence with Giddens' influence as analysed here.

Fourth, and finally, I describe the effects of the use of ST using Whittington's (1988) framework, emphasizing his differentiated characterization of determinism and strategic choice. I suggest that strategic research that embraces the logic of complementarity can revise strict dichotomies that have marked research production and analysis and may contribute to addressing contemporary social requests (Déry, 1995). Further discussion should be carried out to explore the new directions pointing toward the theoretical articulations outlined here.

NOTES

  [1] The opposition between the role of structure and agency is not a privilege of the strategic management field, but relates to a broader and enduring sociological and philosophical debate. Here, the opposition from such a perspective is taken as an important example that helps to construct the paper's main argument.
  [2] I thank one of the reviewers for their valuable suggestions of some of these examples.
  [3] According to Reed, 'critical realism has undergone something of an intellectual renaissance and re-vitalization in social theory in recent years'. The author provides a number of examples from literature.
  [4] See Mestrovic's (1998) work, *Antony Giddens: the Last Modernist*. I thank one of the reviewers for this reference.
  [5] From a critical approach, this discussion is also a political issue because Donaldson's theory seems to ignore the deeper structural mechanisms that generate the inequalities in life chances associated with a capitalist mode of production.
  [6] See the following Giddens' works: *New Rules of Sociological Method: A Positive Critique of Interpretive Sociologies* (New York: Basic Books, 1967), Central *Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (London: Macmillan, 1979), *Social Theory and Modern Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987). Cohen (1989), Held and Thompson (1989), and Bryant and Jary (2001) provide good overviews of Giddens' work.
  [7] The reader could argue that the list of perspectives does not respect any homogenous criterion. For example, *phenomenology* can refer to a broad branch of knowledge or branch of science whereas *strategic choice* can be viewed as a perspective in the study of organization regarding the human action. Likewise, *constructivism* and *structuration* are not mutually exclusive; indeed, structuration can be regarded as a constructivist approach. Despite this lack of homogeneity, I decided to respect the way that the researchers (the authors of the 19 articles) distinguish the nature of their own studies or the framework into which they incorporate Giddens' premises.
  [8] As one of the reviewers remarked, it is worth noting and calls for reflection that an established vehicle for strategy research such as *Strategic Management Journal* has not published any paper using structuration theory in the five years reviewed in this study.
  [9] The relational concept of power in structuration theory is difficult to understand without the notion of the ubiquitous presence in all power relations of the dialectic of control. For more details, see Cohen (1989, Chapter 5) and Giddens (1979).
 [10] Whittington (1988) would argue that, when influenced by the Carnegie School, some of these studies could shift toward the actor determinism quadrant. I decided to preserve their original position in the interpretive voluntarism quadrant.

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