



RESEARCH ARTICLE

STRUCTURATION THEORY IN CONTEXT OF ALVAN IKOKU GEOGRAPHIC SPACE: UNDERSTANDING AND APPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Human expedition for equity, freedom, and justice within a micro and/or macro geographic space has gain global attention in this anthropocene. However, sustaining given quest sometimes attract conflicts, contingencies and uncertainties because of disparities in the level of individual or group awareness and application of knowledge in a given context. This study adopts a discourse analysis in elucidating possible dimensions and contextual applications of structuration theory in Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education as a unique academic environment (geosphere). Qualitative data were generated from the works of some Titans in structuration theory and contextualize in the study area with a view to offering expansive, yet, place-specific case applications. The results reveal that structuration theory has enable geographers to clearly understand and define the level of social interactions in context of enabling or constraining within the University space. It also provides a basis for geographers' rejection of the traditional divides between nature and humans that are common in social and Earth science researches. It offer an expansive perspective for promoting concept formations and understandings especially such as location, structure, space, and the importance of presence, absence, and exceptionality to interpret social relations in a university environment. In spite of the values, the theory is flaw on many grounds such as methodological inadequacies and over-reliance on abstract languages are usually eclipsed or unfitted to physical geographers whose interests is on practical needs of empirical researches in this anthropocene. There is urgent need for more issue-based studies on structuration theory to boost stakeholders and understanding of the University environment.

Keywords: Structuration theory, social system, structure, agency, geographic space.

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary quest for sustainable applications of valid knowledge to facilitate the understanding of human behaviours and actions in a given space tend attract divergent, but relevant ideologies and methodologies in the field of geography and environmental sciences. One of the cardinal domains that have attracted limited research applications in Nigerian academic environment due to low of awareness is structuration theory (Umo, 2016). Structuration theory represents an approach to social theory that explains the connections of human agency and the wider social structures within which humans operate (Giddens, 1984). It therefore offers researchers and educators a clear dimension to view society (geographic space) as neither existing independently of human activity nor being a product of it.

From the tradition of Geography and allied social and environmental sciences, advocates of structuration theory belief that to understand the patterns of human behaviour, it is necessary to explore the underlying structures that produce or shape such actions (Aitken and Valentine, 2004). The notion attests an inherent spatiality to social life which are embodiment of interactions among people in a given university and allied academic environment. By implication, the structures that humans find themselves are sometimes determined for them through self-conscious social interactions, production, reproduction, and volunteerism which together provide bases for humans to freely create their functional environment.

Historically, structuration theory was envisaged and developed by a British sociologist, Anthony Giddens in 1970s through series of issue-based publications (e.g. Giddens 1976, 1979, &1984). The theory later gains wider recognition and applications in geographic explorations following the supports and friendship of Giddens with Derek Gregory at the University of Cambridge. The theory suggests an inherent spatiality to social life and offers a better avenue for researchers to understand and explains human interactions and actions in the context of geographic space.

Accordingly, Giddens believed that the sociological project of the time was not one of discovering an underlying pattern of social life, rather, a concern for how social systems are bound together in time and space. This concern was an attempt to provide a non-functionalist theory of society in response to a tenet that was unable to integrate face-to-face interaction with institutional analysis. He intended to sensitize social analysis by emphasizing the knowledge of individual agents in the reproduction of social practice, the time-space context of social life and interpretive nature of analyses.

Society is a structural organization that is defines by interface. To Hossain & Ali, (2014), it is the total complex and range of human relationships. Furthermore, 'Social relationships invariably possess a physical element, which takes the form of awareness of another's presence, common objective or common interest' (MacIver and Page, 1965:23). The interest can be enabling or contradicting within a given geographic space. Therefore, one can say that



society is the union itself, the organization, the sum of formal relations in which associating individuals are bound together. Societies exist in reciprocated interaction and interrelation of individuals and of the structure formed by their relations (Hossain & Ali, 2014). More succinctly Giddens noted thus:

“the consequences of what actors do, intentionally or unintentionally, are events which would not have happened if that actor had behaved differently, but which are not within the scope of the agent's power to have brought about (regardless of what the agent's intentions are) (Giddens, 1984:11).

The preceding viewpoints clearly reveal that society in context of this study is used interchangeably with the operations and functionalities of Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri as a lived geographic space for academic per excellence. The cardinal issues that form the nucleus of this study are: What are the dominant concepts that drive the understanding of structuration theory within a unique academic environment? Does Alvan Ikoku geographic space operate within the context of structuration theory? What are the contextual benefits and cost of application of structuration theory? A lucid clarification of the highlighted issues will enhance place-specific awareness and applications of structuration theory.

2.0. CONCEPT CLARIFICATIONS

The concept *spatiality* represents any geographic attribute relating to or occupying space such as dimensionality, directionality and spatial configuration. In *spatial ontology*, to be a human means to be on the *Geo* (e.g. hostel, classroom, office or recreation/ sport ground). It denotes ‘opening and occupying the *somewhere* and to view it from *nowhere* or non-spatiality is impossible” (Umo, 2016; Umo & Ajoku, 2023). Space and spatiality are often positioned at the heart of the discipline and practices of geography, unifying a diverse subject matter that ranges from the patterning of cultural landscape, economic, population and social life to physical processes (runoff, rainfall, weathering) and natural landforms (Dennis Wei, 2015; Shoorcheh, 2018).

Many geographers and environmentalists prefer to operationalize the seemingly more encultured and embodied concepts, such as place, environment, landscape, region, and locale in their studies than the abstract concept of space (Tuan, 1976; 1991). It is precisely the multiplicity and heterogeneous nature of space and spatiality, abstract and concrete, imagined and materialized, structured and lived, relative and absolute, which lends the concept a powerful functionality that appeals to many geographers, social scientists and humanists (Merriman, Jones, Olsson, Sheppard, Thrift & Tuan, 2012). Space is conceptualized as “not an empty dimension along which social groupings become structured, but has to be considered in terms of its involvement in the constitution of the systems of interactions (Giddens, 1984: 396)”.



Spatial analyst belief that *duality of structure* is central to Giddens' structuration theory. It emphasizes that neither the human agent nor society is regarded as having primacy. This *duality* is a process in which structure is both medium and outcome of productive and reproductive practices (Giddens, 1984). They are caused by both intended and unintended consequences of human actions in space. Social system and social structure are integral to the notion of duality of structure. Structuration theory uses several unique nomenclatures to explain the relations that human *agency* has with institutions (structures). This represents reproduced relations (or system of interactions) between individuals, groups, and collectivities. That is, social systems are essentially regularized relations between individuals and groups, comprising routines' social practices situated in academic environment and time. They are often grounded in the knowledge of actors and contain structured properties that are realized through the structure.

There are some valid attempts by the observers of space to evaluate the intriguing relationships people x-ray their actions in social environment. In clarifying the relationships between individual action and social process, Giddens (2009) offered tripartite dimensions presented thus:

- - - (1) *general statements concerning the dialectical relations between the two and the historicity of human nature*; 2) *concrete descriptions—often angry, sometimes satirical—of the impact on people of their particular relations to the production process and the examination, as a major concern, of “estrangement” or “alienation”*; and 3) *analyses of consciousness*” (Giddens, 2009:87).

Collectivity in a university system depicts academic interactions and extra-curricular relationships or practices that stalemate people (such as teachers, students, and administrators) together or separate them from each other based on the services or activities they perform. Giddens (1976:81) defines *social practice* as an ‘on-going series of practical activities’. This definition carries with it a sense of regularity, continuity, and respect for day-to-day activities involve in getting ordinary, but necessary things done. Regular activities bring together people into social systems, which are reproduced over time through continued interactions (Whittington 2015).

Space-time concept in structuration theory represents the spatial boundary (jurisdiction) which actions take place and the structures operating over a period of time. It is an indication that every action or event takes place in a given geographic space and time. The actions often vary depending on whether the space is international, national, regional, urban, or rural in nature; and the nature of individual/ group action

The preceding viewpoints suggest that structuration theory is very crucial in understanding the interactions of geographic phenomena in space and time; structures and human beings



especially how human use the structure; as well as those of urban arenas especially between humans and their environments; housing and movement within the environment. It is built on the social theory of creation and reproduction of a given social system that is based on the analysis or exploration of system, structure, agent, and space-time.

3.0. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

From the methodological dimension, past researches within the context of structuration theory are dominantly case studies backed by interviews, observations, diaries, review of meetings (Whittington, 2015). However, such case studies are rather scarce or eclipse in geographical analysis thereby constraining the exploration and understanding concepts such of schema, structure, reproduction, practice, agency, change, discourse, consciousness, and social structure to drive the understanding of cardinal themes in structuration theory. In this context, some of the underlying ideas of Anthony Giddens and his proponents are identify and dimensionally elucidated to provide a contextualize and expansive viewpoints on structural theory as one of the fashionable geographical and allied social and environmental science approach. The data generated from secondary sources are assess qualitatively using discourse analysis.

4.0. CONTEXTUAL DISCOURSES

4.1. Social System within an Agency: Awareness and Applications

Social systems exist at distinct levels such as country, society, industry, organization, community, family, or strategic project team. Amidst the complex nature of existence and operations, university-based evidence is very crucial given its role in human development. For instance, the intra- and inter-students relations in a Department (e.g. Geography, Political Science, or Economic) within Alvan Ikoku Federal university of Education can be expressed in terms of management-lecturers, lecturer-lecturers, lecturer-students, management-staff-students, or ultimately student-students' interactions. The pattern of interactions or relationships can provide an avenue for consulting, querying, reinforcing, motivating, separating, reacting, or reaching to others based on the existing structure; and attempts to establish social avenues that express individual or group interactions in given geographic spaces over a period of time.

The basic human actions and resulting activities can be seen as two defining capabilities called *Agency* (e.g. university, court, and Police). Agency points to the role of persons and group interest in social system (society) and structure (rules). Agency (like a University or court) can draw from the existing structure (Laws or rules) to query, analyse, interpret, or understand action (what is happening). One's interpretation of a given structure depends on his/her level of awareness and understanding of how the agency operation. The management



of a University can partner with the Police and obtain court order withdraw or seize a certificate belonging to a student, if she or he involve in a forgery or related crimes.

In another perspective, an action can be stimulated by individual or group that wants to investigate what somebody is doing or what others are doing. Each domain has a specific role in the overall process of actions, influenced by intended, unintended, or unacknowledged conditions of human actions. Change can be thought of as simple as transfer from one office to another within an agency (institution) to create enabling avenue for a neutral and non-bias investigation of an individual or group charged with an offence such as misconduct or mischief.

4.2. Context and Applications of Structure

This perspective usually provides a context for symbols to help individual or group relationships in society to exchange, prosecute, implement, interact or caution actions that are very crucial to social change. Structure could enable or constrain an individual or group action in place. Structure is regarded as 'rules and resources', which only exist temporarily when 'presented' by actors; that is, when drawn upon as stocks of knowledge in day-to-day activities. Structure, then, exists only through concrete practices of human agents, recognized as competent and knowledgeable, who reproduce social life through their routinized daily relations. Institutions, from this position, can be viewed as chronically reproduced rules and social relations within a limited area.

The structuration of society occurs via the *duality of structure* which Giddens defines as connecting the production of social interaction, as always and everywhere a contingent accomplishment of knowledgeable social actors, to the reproduction of social systems across time-space (Giddens, 1989). Contextualizing the functionality of Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, geographers and environmentalists can easily understand and explore structure in three basic angles. These encompass of structures of *legitimation*, *signification*, and *domination* (Giddens, 1989; Ojinma & Umo, 2019; Umo & Ajoku, 2023).

The *Structure of Legitimation* is another component that offers valuable perspective for one's awareness, consciousness, and responsiveness to moral excellence. Within the perspective of legitimation, an analyst can draw from existing rules and regulations that are backed by the laws to exercise his or her power. It usually produces moral order via naturalization of societal norms, values, and standards that regulate people's actions in the geographic space (e.g. university, Department or lecturer). When individual agents interact, they exhibit conscious, subconscious, or unconscious meanings (which Giddens refers to as sanctions) of their behaviours. Interaction in this domain help in shaping social norms and is weighed against the moral rules of the structure.



The degree an action is considered legitimate in the social order is structured by the dimension of legitimation. Antecedent records reveal some students had been dismissed from the University for involving in anti-social behaviours such as cultism or examination malpractices. Similarly, the management in few occasions have suspended staff for certain unethical conducts. Also, people have severally been punished by a court for committing diverse crimes by imprisonment, payment of fines, suspension, or hard labour.

The second dimension is the *structure of Signification*. It represents the *symbols* that facilitate individuals and/or group actions in the University based on one's status. Individual or group can draw his/their power from their status and exercised or deferred action. This perspective of structure produces meaning through organized webs of language (semantic codes, interpretative schemes, discursive practices) and actions (e.g. by Vice Counsellor, Dean of Faculty, Head of Department, or student Union President) to facilitate the University growth and unity. In the context of language, the interaction of agents through speech can be structured because a particular interpretation of reality can be signified in our language beyond the simple meaning of mere words and thoughts (Cloke, 1991). In such a case, an attempt is made to expand the actor's ability to interpret and manipulate a language (e.g. Regulation) by interpretive meanings.

Domination is another vital dimension of structure. It is more of oppressive conduct, rule, force, and power that help to drive actors' actions in social relations. Domination also focuses on the production of (and exercise of) power, originating from the control of resources. For examples, the Vice Councillor may exercise his powers by drawing from an existing regulation establishing the Office; Police or Military personnel may exercise certain forces by drawing from the criminal Laws/ Acts and apply force on the offenders that may want to cause problems in the University.

Contextually, domination is similar to master and servant relationships. To understand how a university community operates, one must first understand the laws, regulations, and norms that guide the people in that area. In spatial interaction, resources can be used as a form of authority illustrated by a University Management or any constituted authority and the subordinate relationship. Resources can also be used in form of property such as the allocation of wealth or property like land and house.

4.3 Contextualizing the Benefits within the Alvan Space

Some of the practical benefits of structuration theory are examine in the discussions that follow:

Structuration theory provides a basis for geographers' rejection of the traditional divides between nature and humans that are common in social and Earth science researches. Some evidence-based applications reveal that it offers a viable philosophical avenue for



geographers and allied social and environmental scientists to understand and explore the University setting as social system and structure within the larger society. Thus, the degree of awareness and understanding can be measured by interactions (of human actions or inactions). Actions or inactions encompass building relationships (e.g. membership of unionism and fellowship), protecting, unifying, enabling, or destroying, harming (e.g. membership of cult sect) over a period of time scale.

It enable geographers to perceive space-time as consisting of distinct domains of the temporality of scales (micro-, meso-, and macro-scale) defined by the level of social interactions. The interactions can be enabling or constraining as exemplified in land use patterns in a school environment (e.g. church, businesses, and classroom) or membership of associations. By drawing from the values of Structuration theory, some geographers has become aware and understand the relationships that exist in the structures (rules) that humans find themselves, regardless of economic political, locational, religious, and allied affiliation. Accordingly, 'the knowledge gained from such understanding constitutes a building block that humans can use to bring about change through social reform' (Lamsal, 2012).

The theory has helps in promoting concept formations and understandings especially such as location, structure, space, and the importance of presence, absence, and exceptionality to interpret social relations in academic and allied university environment. For example, structuration regarded space and time as playing equal importance in social interactions. The scales of location or geographic environments range from the dwelling, small community, state, nation, to continent. Locale has strong affinity with the idea of presence availability.

The adoption of structuration theory offers a viable domain that enables geographers and allied researchers to define the limits in exercising their powers, actions, and legalities thereof as domiciled in structure and agency. Consequently, excesses of such topic, power or action can be checked or regulated across scales using valid concepts within the structure or agency as often exhibited by scoping a study area. For instance, practical geography does not include surgical operations on people, but can include questionnaire administration or mapping the spread of diseases in a place.

Structural theory also provides a vital basis for the exploration and interpretation of space and society as a produced or reproduced practice through the concept of everydayness of lecture schedules, teaching method, attendance to class and reaction to a lesson. *Everydayness* symbolizes the standardization of individual or group lifestyles as a result of societal interactive processes as envisage in Lefèbvre cited in Löw, (2008). Capital along with the state safeguards its positions of power through access to space by splitting it up based on periodic uses.



4.4. The Retrospection of the Cost of structuration theory

Discounting of the popular values embedded in structuration theory as presented in the preceding discourses, some criticisms have been raised against its validity.

It has been criticized on the ground of *methodological inadequacy*. For instance, most supporters of structuration theory such as Lamsal (2012) and Whittington (2015) tend to over-rely on the abstract language and schemes (e.g. duality, structure, and agency) that are peculiar to social scientists. Such abstract languages and schemes are usually eclipsed or unfitted to physical geographers whose interests are on practical needs of empirical researches. Whittington (2015:149) opines that ‘the methodological implications of duality and structuration may seem dauntingly holistic’. Also, duality infers equal attention to both structure and agency, while structuration charges us to understand the past and equally engaging intimately with the present.

Another criticism is associated with its inability to explain the effect of spatio-temporal changes that are associated with oscillations in a social system, social structure, domination, and reproduced relationships in a unique (e.g. University) space. The issue of improvisation as a purposeful behaviour is not adequately clarified or contextualized. In validating the observation Giddens proposes, Craib (1992:33), Lamsal (2012:113) opine that people (e.g. students or teachers) do not have entire preference of their actions and their knowledge is restricted. Consequently, they are the elements that recreate the social structure and produce social change. The perspective attests that Giddens’ abstract conceptual focus offers few clues as to how to gather a useful understanding of the produced or reproduced relationships in a complex and fragile University environment.

Structuration theory failed to directly address how power and value relations are created in the use of technology. As a result, critics argue that structuration is not capable of clarifying exactly how technology regulates human production and distinct response actions toward such scientific innovations. Structuration theory has been criticized for its inability to offer clear explanation for the evolution of the foundation of the social structures. The structures are assumed to be the facilitators of the society, its spatial structures, and distribution of resources. Here lies the superiority of critical science over structuralism for critical science provides a theory of the evolution and the distribution of power and the consequent spatial appearances.

5.0. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Structuration theory possesses high potentials to prompt research strategies for elucidating the interactions between people and society. If the potentials are carefully explored in geography, it is capable of providing firm bases for understanding and averting the exploitative excesses of people in the University environment that can easily draw from



structure of domination or signification to victimized others in the lower cadre. Such exploitation excesses can take a form of management - lecturers, lecturer - lecturers, lecturer - students, management – staff - students, or student - students' interactions to avert and the corresponding negative or positive responses on nature and society.

Drawing from the existing structures, actions or inactions of an agent can be regulated while creating an avenue for sustainable, symbiotic, and peaceful academic environment. Indeed, Giddens notion of duality of structure suggests that geographic exploration of human actions will remain incomplete without a thorough understanding of environmental context, which the social systems, structures, agents, and space-time are vital parts and must not be neglected.

This study recommend that since structuration emphasises on the duality of structure and uniformity of social system and agency, there is urgent for more issue based applied research on structuration theory to boost the power of collectivities, awareness, and understanding of the University environment among students, staff and government.

Competing Interest

The authors declare that no competing interest exist in this paper.

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