

Adaptive Structuration – Scott Poole

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Adaptive Structuration Theory

of Marshall Scott Poole

Imagine that you are a third-year communication major who signed up late for a required course in communication theory. Since you missed the first class and haven't seen the syllabus, you aren't sure what to expect. When you walk into the room, you're surprised to find out that there are only 12 students in the class, no course syllabus, and no instructor present. When the other students start to talk about tests and papers, the scope of assignments, and the breadth and depth of coverage, the guy sitting next to you fills you in. The prof has made this an experimental section and has given students the responsibility to structure the course before he returns to class.

In the discussion that follows it becomes apparent that there are at least a few parameters or rules. The class will meet from noon till 2 P.M. every Tuesday and Thursday for the entire term. The instructor has adopted a text that introduces over 30 communication theories, and he will be there from the third week on to serve as a resource. No matter how final grades are assigned, they should reflect what individuals have really learned—nobody gets an automatic A. Other than those givens, class members have two weeks to decide which theories to cover, how to use the scheduled class time, what course projects to assign, and how students should be evaluated. Essentially, the group is free to shape the course any way it wants.

After an hour, you seriously consider dropping the course. Josh, the prof's teaching assistant, and Paige, a sophomore transfer student, are totally monopolizing the discussion. Everything Josh is for, Paige is against, and vice versa. Michelle's only contribution is to insist that she doesn't want to take part in a group project. Mike, a varsity linebacker, and Karla, a campus beauty, chat about plans for Saturday night while ignoring the rest of the discussion. A few other students offer tentative suggestions, but Megan looks confused and Pete puts his head on the desk and snoozes.

You decide to stick it out but ask yourself, *Will the group stay this way for the entire semester, or will it change?* You worry that this specific mix of individual motivations and personalities makes more of the same a foregone conclusion.

And even though the prof has labeled the class format “experimental,” you also wonder, *Are we really free to create whatever we want or are the results inevitable, given the academic setting?*

The first question raises the issue of group stability versus group change. The second question revisits the dilemma presented in Chapter 1—members’ freely chosen actions versus their behavior determined by existing social structures. These are the two group-related questions that University of Illinois communication professor Scott Poole seeks to answer with adaptive structuration theory. When asked to state the core idea of his theory, Poole offers this synopsis:

Members in groups are creating the group as they act within it. . . . A lot of times people in groups build up structures or arrangements that are very uncomfortable for them, but they don’t realize that they’re doing it. The point of structuration theory is to make them aware of the rules and resources that they’re using so that they can have more control over what they do in groups.¹

The implication of Poole’s claim is that you and other class members are just as responsible for Josh and Paige’s domination of class discussion as they are. Will things change? Only if you and the others make it happen. Are all of you free to change the way you’re reacting? Only to the extent that you are aware of what you’re doing.

At first glance these answers may seem simplistic. But they are derived from an understanding of *structuration*, a concept that is quite sophisticated. Poole adopted the idea only after a decade of empirical research convinced him that no single model of group development adequately explains what takes place in decision-making groups. Let’s see what he found.

PHASING OUT THE PHASE MODEL

For much of the twentieth century, small-group researchers thought they had spotted a universal pattern of communication that all groups use when they make a decision. These scholars generally agreed that there was a good fit between the following single-sequence model and the actual phases that groups go through as the members reach agreement:²

Orientation—efforts are unfocused because group goals are unclear; relationships are uncertain; members need more information.

Conflict—factions disagree on how to approach the problem and argue against other viewpoints; members justify their own positions.

Coalescence—tensions are reduced through peaceful negotiation; members allow others to “save face” by adopting solutions acceptable to all.

Development—the group concentrates on ways to implement a single solution; members are involved and excited.

Integration—the group focuses on tension-free solidarity rather than the task; members reward each other for cohesive efforts.

If the phase model is right, your communication theory group is now in the conflict stage, but it will sooner or later shift to a more cooperative pattern.

Despite widespread acceptance of this one-size-fits-all phase model of group decision making, Poole wasn’t convinced. Beginning with his dissertation research

in 1980 and extending throughout that decade, he sought to find out *if* and *when* ongoing groups actually conform to the single-sequence model when making tough decisions on important issues. Poole tracked 47 specific decisions made by 29 different groups in natural settings—real people making real decisions.³

Early in his research, Poole discovered that only a quarter of the groups actually followed the discussion pattern laid out in the single-sequence model. But just as Hirokawa and Gouran offer their functional perspective as a preferred procedure for task groups to adopt (see Chapter 17), Poole was still hopeful that the five phases offered a blueprint for reaching high-quality decisions. He wrote that “the unitary sequence provides a logically ideal format for decision making and it may well be the simplest effective path a decision-making group could follow.”⁴

Yet the longer Poole examined the complexity of group decision making, the less optimistic he became that any theory or model would be able to predict a specific sequence of action. By the end of the decade, he was disenchanted with the scientific quest to discover a fixed pattern of group behavior. He became convinced that group dynamics are far too complicated to be reduced to a few propositions or a predictable chain of events. He also grew uncomfortable with the phase model’s objectivist assumption that group and task structures dictate the way a decision is made. In effect, the model claims that communication has no significant impact on the process or the outcome; group members are just along for a five-stage ride.

Poole continued to think that group members are affected by *social structures* such as group composition, communication networks, status hierarchies, task requirements, group norms, and peer pressure. But he no longer saw these structures as *determining* how the group reached a decision or what that decision might be. He was convinced that what people say and do makes a difference.

Given this commitment, Poole and two other communication scholars, Robert McPhee (Arizona State University) and David Seibold (University of California, Santa Barbara), became intrigued by the work of British sociologist Anthony Giddens. Giddens suggests that people in society are *active agents* in the sense that they are “able to act otherwise” and have the capacity “to make a difference.”⁵ McPhee went on to apply Giddens’ core ideas in an organizational context, while Seibold used them to analyze the structure of arguments. But in Giddens’ macrotheory of societal structuration, Poole saw insights that could be adapted and applied to the microlevel of small-group activity.

Social structures

Rules and resources of a group; characteristics such as composition, norms, communication networks, status hierarchies, task requirements, and peer pressure.

STRUCTURATION ACCORDING TO GIDDENS

Currently the director of the London School of Economics, Anthony Giddens was the chief intellectual adviser to former British prime minister Tony Blair. Colleagues call him “the most important English social philosopher of our time.”⁶ Giddens openly admits that *structuration* “is an unlovely term at best,”⁷ yet he believes that no other word adequately captures the process of social structures shaping people’s actions while at the same time being shaped by their actions. Specifically, *structuration* refers to “the production and reproduction of the social systems through members’ use of rules and resources in interaction.”⁸

By using the word *interaction*, as opposed to the more passive term *behavior*, Giddens signals his belief that people are relatively free to act as they will. They aren’t merely pawns in the game of life or unsuspecting dupes controlled by unseen forces they can’t resist. He says that every social actor knows a lot about

Structuration

The production and reproduction of social systems through group members’ use of rules and resources in interaction.

the way society works, and when asked, these competent social agents can explain most of what they do.⁹

Giddens uses the phrase *rules and resources* interchangeably with the term *structures*. *Rules* are implicit formulas for action, recipes for how to “get on” in life.¹⁰ They are guides for participants on how to play the game. *Resources* refers to all the relevant personal traits, abilities, knowledge, and possessions people bring to an interaction. Resources are almost always in short supply and tend to be unequally distributed within a society. Because rules and resources (structures) are constantly changing, structuration is a fluid process.

Production of social systems is a process akin to the “creation of social realities” in CMM (see Chapter 6), although Giddens refers to sweeping changes across an entire society, not just among persons-in-conversation. Production happens when people use rules and resources in interaction. So does reproduction. *Reproduction* occurs whenever actions reinforce features of systems already in place, and thus maintain the status quo.

Poole applies and extends these key concepts of structuration within small groups, but a brief example of societal structuration may help you picture the kind of large-scale process that Giddens imagines. The sexual revolution that began in the 1960s illustrates how the widespread adoption of new rules and resources dramatically transformed patterns of physical intimacy. Through faithful use (a rule) of “the Pill” (a resource) prior to sexual intercourse (an interaction), women increased their control over their own bodies (production). The change in contraception meant that men worried less about unwanted pregnancy, thus reinforcing (nonbiological reproduction) the sexual double standard that it is men’s role to push for greater sexual intimacy and women’s responsibility to say when to stop (a rule).

Giddens’ concept of structuration is the core idea that spawned adaptive structuration theory. Poole calls his theory *adaptive structuration* because he observes members of task groups intentionally adapting rules and resources in order to accomplish their decision-making goals. His “adaptive” label also seems appropriate because, along with his then University of Minnesota colleague Gerry DeSanctis, he’s tailored Giddens’ macrosociological principles to the microworld of small groups. When applied to group interaction, structuration obviously describes a process more intricate than the five-phase model presented earlier in the chapter. That’s fine with Poole. He believes that the “value of a theory of group decision making hinges on how well it addresses the complexities of interaction.”¹¹

In the rest of the chapter I’ll continue to use the example of an experimental communication theory course to illustrate key elements of adaptive structuration theory. Although this example is hypothetical, every part of the case study is drawn from actual class experience. Since Poole recommends *ethnography* as one of the ways to explore structuration, I’ll write you into the picture and ask you to think of yourself as a participant observer in the events that I describe.¹² I’ll follow the same *interaction, rules and resources, production and reproduction* order that I used to parse Giddens’ concept of structuration.

INTERACTION: CONCERNS OF MORALITY, COMMUNICATION, AND POWER

Group structuration is the result of action, and so whenever members interact, they have an impact on the group. If the rules and resources of the group change, it’s because members do something that changes them. But Poole makes it clear

that action doesn't always *alter* rules and resources. "If the structure of the group stays the same, it is because members are acting in such a way that the same structure is created and maintained with every act."¹³ That seems to describe the entire two hours of the first class you attended.

The next class is different. Right from the start, class members interact with each other on how to design the course. Even Pete wakes up to the realization that he has a stake in what's decided and voices a depth-over-breadth rationale for concentrating on fewer theories—perhaps only a dozen. Michelle piggybacks on his idea, suggesting that each student become an expert on a different theory. Andrew welcomes the chance to specialize in one area—on the condition that he can pick a theory of new media that will intersect with his double major of communication and computer science. This surge of *interaction* supports Poole's optimistic assumption that group members are "skilled and knowledgeable actors who reflexively monitor their activities as they navigate a continuous flow of intentionality."¹⁴

Skilled and knowledgeable actors don't always agree, however. Paige expresses concern that people will select only theories that are familiar or within their comfort zone. She thinks everyone should discuss theories that question unjust corporate control of the media and propose ways in which poor people could have a voice. Mike wants Pete to explain what he means by studying theory *in depth*. If he's referring to practical application, fine. If he means wading through primary sources, no way. Reminding the class of his special status as the professor's TA, Josh claims that the prof won't let the group concentrate on only a dozen theories while ignoring the other 20 that are in the book. Note that these class members raised issues of *morality, communication, and power*—issues that Poole and Giddens agree are fundamental in any social interaction. Poole writes that these three elements are mixed together in every group action. He says that it's "hard to use moral norms without considering their interpretation—a matter of meaning—and how they are 'made to count'—a matter of power."¹⁵

Megan, always a sensitive observer of the human scene, notices that Lauren seems hesitant to speak. By specifically asking for her opinion, Megan tries to create a space for Lauren to be heard. In a soft voice, Lauren wishes there could be a midrange compromise on the breadth/depth issue. After class you overhear her thanking Megan for caring what she thinks. No doubt Megan's intentions were good, but in subsequent classes you observe that Lauren is even quieter. This confirms Poole's structuration research, which suggests that advocacy can sometimes hurt rather than help a reticent member of the group.¹⁶ Megan's encouragement may simply reinforce Lauren's tendency to wait for an invitation before speaking up. Even actions that are well-thought-out have unanticipated consequences.

The class experience I've described so far highlights two key points of adaptive structuration theory. First, communication in small task-groups makes a difference. We might know the structure of a group, the nature of its task, and even the history and personality of each member. But it is impossible to predict what decisions the group will make without hearing what's been said. Communication matters.

Second, adaptive structuration theory has a "critical edge."¹⁷ Recall that critical theories strive to reveal unfair social practices and free people from oppressive systems (see Chapter 4). By highlighting the way in which undemocratic

Interaction

Intentional acts of group members who are aware of what they are doing.

group processes can be altered, Poole hopes to empower people who are now treated as second-class citizens.

THE USE AND ABUSE OF RULES AND RESOURCES

Rules

Propositions that indicate how things ought to be done or what is good or bad; recipes for actions.

Resources

Materials, possessions, or attributes that can be used to influence or control the actions of the group or its members.

Poole refers to small-group *rules* as “propositions that indicate how something ought to be done or what is good or bad.”¹⁸ Although rarely put into words, these rules contain the collective practical wisdom that members have gleaned on how best to reach the group goal. The *resources* that individuals bring to the task are “materials, possessions, or attributes that can be used to influence or control the actions of the group or its members.”¹⁹ As a research strategy, Poole selects a few structures that appear to be pivotal and then examines them in greater depth.

Personal relationships quickly emerge as a resource for the class discussion. Megan and Lauren’s growing friendship and Mike and Karla’s romantic closeness seem to add impact to their words. You find that when any of them say something in class, you tend to assume that they speak for their partner as well. But it is Andrew who possesses the most effective relational resource. In contrast to the computer geek stereotype, he’s a genuinely warm guy whom everyone likes. When the two of you took the same interpersonal course, he turned out to be the most competent face-to-face communicator in the class. When Andrew speaks, others listen, and vice versa.

Topic expertise is often another key resource in group decision making. Although none of you have any training in education methods or curriculum development, some students start the course with more knowledge about communication theories than others do. Because he’s performed months of library and Internet research for the instructor you’ve yet to meet, Josh has inside knowledge of the type of theory that this prof would value. Josh presents these insights in a self-confident manner; thus, his insights carry more weight in the discussion. Status structures are almost always important in group structuration.

Some of you know that Michelle carries a 4.0 GPA and is a member of Lambda Pi Eta, the national communication honor society. She’s a loner who doesn’t say much in class, so you imagine that she must be impatient with the value the group places on relationships rather than intellectual resources. *After all*, she might reason, *I’m in this class to learn communication theory, not to join a social club*. Her likely frustration highlights Poole’s claim that group structures can constrain members from acting freely. And if Michelle doesn’t bring her knowledge and intelligence to bear on designing the course, it ceases to be a resource for the group. Conversely, one who makes the effort to understand and use these structures—as Josh does—can become an effective player.

Appropriation

Adopting a rule or resource from another group or the larger culture.

A group’s rules and resources are often borrowed from parent organizations or from the larger culture. Poole calls this process *appropriation*. Given that students in your class come from a variety of backgrounds and have experienced different leadership styles, Poole wouldn’t be surprised if the rules you appropriate for making decisions don’t square with standard parliamentary procedure. As it turns out, he anticipates how your class reaches a decision on the depth/breadth issue when he writes, “Different groups may appropriate the political norm of majority rule in a variety of ways. One group may regard the rule as a last resort, to be used only if consensus cannot be attained. . . .”²⁰

Consensus is the only decision path acceptable to most students in your group. You personally feel that way because it’s a seminar type of course and you

don't want to ride roughshod over one or two people and then see them be bitter for the rest of the term. But Pete and Megan want a formal vote so that everyone is on record as supporting the decision. The group ends up appropriating both structures! When Josh, Paige, and Andrew coalesce around a compromise plan of reading the entire book yet concentrating class time on just 12 theories, no vote is taken until all doubts and hesitations are worked through. With some fine-tuning, the class crafts a plan that all 12 of you can embrace, and then Josh calls for a unanimous vote—a ritual to seal your mutual commitment.

RESEARCHING THE USE OF RULES AND RESOURCES

Group decision support systems (GDSS)

Media technology designed to promote democratic decision making by displaying all ideas anonymously.

Working with DeSanctis, Poole has spent the bulk of his structuration research exploring how groups use computerized *group decision support systems (GDSS)*—high-tech media that have the potential to improve meetings and help make better decisions. Since new media scholars find adaptive structuration theory helpful in understanding the interface between computers and users, perhaps this is the theory that Andrew is looking for. I won't attempt to explain the hardware and software of computer-assisted meetings, but structures built into the system are designed to promote democratic decision making. These structures include features such as equal opportunity to participate, one vote per person, and anonymous idea generation and balloting so that every member feels safe to participate.

Just as we refer to the “spirit of the law,” Poole and DeSanctis call the values behind the system the “spirit of the technology.” They explain that “*spirit* is the principle of coherence that holds a set of rules and resources together.”²¹ In Poole's terms, a *faithful appropriation* of the technology is one that is consistent with the spirit of the resource. For example, suppose your experimental communication theory class met in a GDSS-equipped lab on campus to make final decisions about the course. A faithful appropriation of these rules and resources would be to use the system in a way that gives Lauren a real voice in the discussion while making it hard for Josh to dominate it.

Faithful appropriation

Using a rule or resource as it was originally intended.

Although your classroom isn't GDSS-equipped, it has a built-in computer with video projection capacity, so most of you use PowerPoint technology when you present the results of your research. Pete's report on constructivism turns out to be a real media event (see Chapter 8). Backgrounds change, words tumble into place, text dissolves, clip art scrolls. The sight and sound of exploding fireworks punctuate Pete's announcement that he found a journal article by Delia that the textbook doesn't mention. And when he suggests that his high RCQ score certifies him as cognitively complex, a picture of the Mona Lisa smiles. The class laughs throughout and applauds wildly when it's over.

Poole notes that group members sometimes appropriate rules or resources in ways that thwart their intended use. He calls this an *ironic appropriation* because it goes against the spirit of the structure. This seems to be the case with Pete's use of PowerPoint. By projecting over a hundred slides in a 10-minute presentation, he uses it to dazzle rather than clarify. His most vivid slides underscore his reactions to the theory rather than creating a deeper understanding of cognitive complexity, goal-based message plans, or person-centered messages. In the discussion that follows, Pete admits with a wry smile, “The developers of PowerPoint would probably be shocked at how I used the system.”²² Poole doesn't think all adaptations of technology or other rules and

Ironic appropriation

Using a rule or resource in a way that thwarts its original purpose.

resources *ought* to be faithful. Ironic appropriation can be an impetus to creativity that doesn't necessarily take away from task accomplishment. But he's a strong believer in being able to identify when and how this type of structuration takes place.

PRODUCTION OF CHANGE, REPRODUCTION OF STABILITY

So far my description of adaptive structuration theory has focused on group *process*—members' use of rules and resources in interaction. Poole is also interested in group *product*—that which is produced and reproduced through the interaction.

Crafting the Decision

Decision-making groups produce decisions. After everyone in your group agrees that you'll focus on 12 theories, you also decide that the student who selects a given theory should be the one to write a quiz that probes whether class members understand it. The instructor will grade the quizzes, but students write the questions. As for the other 20 theories, the prof can assess how well you understand them by reading your application logs—ongoing journals of ways you might use these theoretical principles in everyday life. Group members quickly reach these decisions after Mike reminds them that the instructor has a reputation for writing nitpicky tests.

If Poole was aware of what you decided and how you reached that decision, he would point out that the end product was both *produced* and *reproduced*. By deciding to focus on a dozen self-selected theories and empowering students to write the quizzes, you produced *change*—a break from normal class procedure. Since the prof can no longer ask specific questions about minor details, you can now focus your study on learning the basic thrust of each theory. On the other hand, by adopting the familiar educational structures of tests and student journals, you reproduce *stability*. When it comes to grading, your course will resemble other classes on campus.

Production

The use of rules and resources to create a new structure; change.

Reproduction

The use of rules and resources to reinforce structures already in place.

Duality of Structure

Poole would be even more curious to know the effect of the structuration process on the rules and resources of the group. Poole believes that Giddens' *duality of structure* concept is the key to discovering that impact. Duality of structure refers to the idea that rules and resources are both the *medium* and the *outcome* of interaction.²³ In terms of group decision making, this means that the decision not only is *affected by* the structures of the group but at the same time has an *effect upon* the same rules and resources. This is crucial to Poole because it helps explain why groups are sometimes stable and predictable—as the single-sequence model of group development suggests—yet why they are often changing and unpredictable. According to Poole, it depends on how group members appropriate rules and resources:

Both stability and change are products of the same process. Structures are stable if actors appropriate them in a consistent way, reproducing them in similar form over time. Structures may also change, either incrementally or radically through structuration.²⁴

Duality of structure

The idea that rules and resources are both the means and the ends of group interaction.

The book contains a *Dilbert* cartoon here.
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Stability. You can't know from a few class meetings whether the rules and resources you've used so far will be employed the same way in the future. My guess is that consensus seeking among students and a relative independence vis-à-vis the instructor will continue to be enacted and be group norms even after he rejoins the class. You've already developed a sense of camaraderie, but it will survive only if spokespeople like Josh and Megan confidently instruct your instructor on the decisions you've made, and the rest of you back them up. Because structures exist only when they are put into practice—a use-it-or-lose-it structurational principle—a united front can reproduce the group's rules and resources. Members' continual use of the same rules and resources can form layers of solidified group structures much like sedimented rock.

Change. Reproduction does not necessarily mean replication. Even when a group appears stable, the rules and resources that members use can change gradually over time through the process Poole calls *interpenetration of structures*. Since any group action draws upon multiple rules and resources, Poole's phrase helps us picture how one structure might affect (or infect) the other. Think again of the way your class incorporates voting into a consensus structure. If no one ever casts a negative vote because agreement has already been reached, the consensus structure has mediated the meaning of the voting structure.

Although your class was able to create a way for voting and consensus to coexist, Poole notes that there are times when group structures are in direct contradiction, each undermining the other. This may be the case with the professor's knowledge of communication theory and the students' sense of autonomy. In his brief appearance on the first day of class, the prof relinquished his authority to structure the course but expressed his desire to serve as a resource for the group. Yet when he returns, you may find yourselves hesitant to ask questions. You want to tap his wealth of knowledge but fear falling back into the dependency of the traditional teacher-student relationship. If you don't draw on his knowledge, he will cease to be a resource for the group. Rules and resources survive and thrive only as group members actively put them in play.

Interpenetration of structures

Unnoticed change over time as reproduced structures affect each other.

HOW SHOULD WE THEN LIVE—IN A GROUP?

Browsing through a bookstore recently, I spotted the intriguing title *How Should We Then Live?* The question goes way beyond the scope of this chapter, but a scaled-down version seems appropriate. The core claim of adaptive structuration theory is that groups create themselves, yet members don't always realize they are crafting and reinforcing the tools that do the work.²⁵ If Poole is right, how should we then live our lives with others in a task group that makes decisions? The answer is implicit in the hierarchy below:

- Some people make things happen.
- Some people watch things happen.
- Some people have things happen to them.
- Some people don't even know things are happening.

Step up from a passive role to having an active voice within your group!

Poole is hopeful that a knowledge of how rules and resources work will equip low-power members to become agents of change within their groups: "If actors are unaware of a factor or do not understand how it operates, then it is likely to be a strong influence. To the extent that members are aware of a factor, they can use it or even change it."²⁶ Are you a group member with little or no say in the decisions made by others? Poole would encourage you to alter what you do and say in little ways. Small moves won't threaten high-power members who tend to resist change. Yet if you are consistent and persistent, these small changes can shift the direction of the group and your role in it.²⁷ How shall we live our lives in groups? Aware, free, as active agents of change who make things happen. That's the critical edge of adaptive structuration theory.

CRITIQUE: TIED TO GIDDENS—FOR BETTER OR WORSE

Along with symbolic convergence theory and the functional perspective (see Chapters 3 and 17), adaptive structuration theory is one of the three leading theories of group communication.²⁸ That's because Poole makes a serious attempt to deal with the dilemmas of change versus stability, and free will versus determinism in the context of group decision making. In essence, he asks, *What happens when an irresistible force (freely chosen human action) meets an immovable object (group structures that are no respecters of persons)?* Structuration is his answer—a resolution that privileges human choice and accounts for both stability and change. Poole's assessment of his theory's strength is similar:

The advantage of this theory is that it mediates the seeming dichotomy between action and structure that is inherent in much group research. It gives an account of how group members produce and maintain social structures, which acknowledges creativity and self-reflexivity.²⁹

The high standing of Poole's theory within the communication discipline is also enhanced by its grounding in Giddens' concept of structuration. For the academic community, this close tie provides the kind of scholarly clout that other theorists get by claiming Aristotle, Darwin, Freud, or Marx as an intellectual ancestor.

Surprisingly, Poole's indebtedness to Giddens has not resulted in a group theory that's blatantly critical of oppressive structures. Poole does try to raise consciousness of unseen power dynamics that affect group discussion, and he encourages members

to act assertively. But this soft critical edge seems tame for a theory so deeply rooted in the ideas of Giddens, a leading figure in the critical tradition.

Ken Chase, a colleague at Wheaton, puts much of the responsibility on Giddens. Chase claims that the mark of a good critical theorist is that he or she “avoids separating ethical responsibility from theory construction and, accordingly, provides theory with an internal standard for moral argument.”³⁰ Although structuration theory takes communication seriously and claims that morality is an issue in all interactions, Giddens doesn’t provide a moral compass that indicates a clear ethical direction. Other critical theorists featured later in the book offer critiques grounded in the ethical assumptions of their theories (see Chapters 20, 26, 34, 35). They leave no doubt about what kinds of communication they are for, and what they’re against.

Poole’s faithful adaptation of Giddens’ ideas and terminology has another drawback. The complexity of Giddens’ thinking overwhelms most readers, and his ideas are couched in a prose style that even his admirers describe as *dense*, *thick*, *unforgiving*, and *impenetrable*. Poole’s writing is much more accessible, yet Giddens’ heaviness still comes through. Ironically, Poole reports that Giddens doesn’t recognize his ideas when they’re applied in a microanalysis of small-group structuration. Apparently, the British sociologist pictures sedimented structures being built across an entire society over decades, rather than layers of rules and resources forming within a group after a few meetings.

Poole acknowledges that structuration is a tough concept to grasp and apply. He critiques all group communication theories—his own included—for often failing to capture the imagination of students and practitioners:

We have not intrigued, puzzled, or spoken to most people’s condition. I fear we have overemphasized technique and propositional soundness at the expense of creativity. Creativity and a certain element of playfulness are just as important as sound theory construction.³¹

Adaptive structuration theory may not be playful, but it holds out the satisfying promise that every group member can be a player in the process of what the group creates. Some readers might wish that Poole had never abandoned the simple five-step path of group decision making. That route is certainly less complex than the sedimented, rock-strewn landscape of structuration that Poole describes. Yet it makes no sense to stick with a simplistic theory when the actual dynamics of group life have proved to be quite complicated and rather unpredictable, probably because people are that way. Poole has therefore chosen to craft a theory of commensurate complexity. I for one would prefer he tell it like it is rather than try to dumb it down.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. Poole refers to group communication as *action* rather than *behavior*. How does his choice of words reflect a rejection of the *phase* or *single-sequence model* of group decision making?
2. Poole and Giddens regard *duality of structure* as the key to understanding structuration. How does the Dilbert cartoon on page 243 illustrate this crucial concept?
3. Suppose you’ve been elected by communication majors to represent student opinion to department faculty. In what way is your role both a *rule* and a *resource*? How could you *produce* and/or *reproduce* student influence?

4. Why do you or don't you consider *adaptive structuration theory* to be a separate theory from Giddens' *structuration theory*? Should both names appear in the chapter heading? (Poole and Giddens?) (Giddens and Poole?)

CONVERSATIONS



View this segment online at www.mhhe.com.griffin7 or www.afirstlook.com.

In my conversation with Scott Poole, the author of adaptive structuration theory admits that it's a hard theory to grasp. Yet in this seven-minute segment, Poole makes the difficult notion of structuration come alive. He is clear, concise, and vivid as he gently corrects my naïve imagery of the duality of structure. He also illustrates rules and resources by referring to status hierarchies and the process of voting, which are typical group structures. Poole then clarifies the way in which his theory has a critical edge. If you got bogged down in the jargon of structuration, you'll be grateful for this interview.

A SECOND LOOK

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