

The application of structuration theory in studying collaboration between librarians and academic staff in universities in Australia and Vietnam

Hue Thi Pham

Introduction. *There is little research applying structuration theory in library collaboration studies. This research aims to show how structuration theory informed a study of collaborative relationships between academics and librarians in two universities of Vietnam and Australia.*

Method. *The research used the case study method. Data collection was undertaken with fifty-two participants who were academics, library staff and administrators from one university in Australia and one university in Vietnam.*

Analysis. *Sources of evidences included forty-one semi-structured interviews, a focus group, two observation sessions, a workshop and several written responses that were analysed using middle-level analysis techniques, grounded theory analysis methods and cross-case comparison strategies.*

Results. *The theory informed the study of collaboration in two university contexts and enabled the exploration of the influences of power, culture and social identities on academics and library staff during their collaboration practices, and how their actions change these social structures in different socio-economic, cultural and political contexts.*

Conclusion. *The research contributes initial empirical experiences and research strategies by using the central concepts of structuration theory to study collaboration. It further enriches its interpretation with new personal dimensions including personality, personal relationships and personal perceptions in studying collaboration.*

Introduction

Research in library and information science, knowledge management and education has been increasingly informed by structuration theory. The theory has been found valuable in addressing research problems and achieving important findings in the areas of information seeking and use in various social and organizational contexts ([Rosenbaum, 2010](#)), and information practices ([Huvila, 2013](#)). In library and information science education, Ma ([2010](#))

believed that structuration theory provided a useful theoretical lens for understanding the interrelationship between the work practices of information professionals and social structures. Stillman and Stoecker (2004) acknowledged the role of structuration theory in explaining social and cultural values in community information and knowledge management. They found the duality of structure to be a particularly powerful framework for studying the qualities of human relationships, which were recurrently influenced by the production and reproduction of structure. Pang (2008) valued the relevance of structuration theory in viewing structure as both the medium and outcome of human action and the distinction of unconscious, tacit and discursive knowledge in understanding the nature of human interaction in situated contexts. These central notions of the theory were found to be significant in her research into the interplay of knowledge commons, communities, and participatory design in creating and sharing knowledge in the public libraries and museums of Australia and Singapore.

Giddens's theory has become an influential framework used in information system and organization research (Jones and Karsten, 2008; Poole, 2009; Pozzebon and Pinsonneault, 2005; Rose and Scheepers, 2001). Orlikowski (1992) was a pioneering information systems scholar who significantly extended the application of structuration theory specifically for information technology studies. Her duality of technology theory focuses on the influences of structure and technology and explores the dynamic interactions between technology, institutional structures and people in an organizational context.

Although structuration theory has been extensively used in empirical enquiries, there is little research applying this theory to organizational collaboration in universities. This research aims to show the applicability of structuration theory in studying collaboration processes between academics and librarians and the factors influencing collaboration, i.e., the impact of structure and socio-culture, the changing roles of librarians and the development of technology. The theory has facilitated the study of collaboration contexts and the influences of power, culture and social identities on academics and library staff on their collaboration, and how their actions reproduce these social structures in different socio-economic, cultural and political contexts. It was considered as an explicative approach to other organizational or cultural theories, for discovering the complex nature of work relationships and the interplay of social, organizational, cultural and technological structures, which underpin collaboration practices.

Insights from this empirical research in analysing social structures

and cultural influences in organizations will be useful for researchers in their own related studies. The research was conducted at one Australian university and one Vietnamese university. It utilised an embedded multiple case study design, gathering evidence broadly across each university as well as from specific library–faculty collaboration cases in different faculties.

The paper consists of four sections: (i) reviews of the current state of collaboration and main elements of structuration theory; (ii) research design; (iii) findings and discussion of structuration theory’s usefulness and limitations; and (iv) theoretical implications and conclusions.

Literature review

This section first examines literature on the current state of collaboration between academics and library staff in universities, and major factors influencing their collaboration. It then reviews key concepts of structuration theory, and discusses the relevance and shortcomings of the theory in empirical research.

Current state of collaboration between academics and librarians

Very few studies report cases where the university has developed a university-wide collaborative partnership between academics and library staff. Libraries and faculties are conventionally separate entities in the university so there is little authority of either one over the other ([Chu, 1997](#)). Thus, academics and librarians work independently, which makes collaboration happen on a more voluntary basis. A recent study of 221 academics in multiple disciplines at York University in Canada reported a very low level of participation of faculty members in incorporating information literacy into the curriculum, although they were mostly aware of the availability of instruction ([Bury, 2011](#)). Bury indicated that York academics showed strong support for collaboration with the library, but in practice very few of them co-teach with librarians.

This lack of collaboration can also be observed by the physical and temporal separation between library and faculty. Christiansen, Stompler, and Thaxton ([2004](#)) found that librarians mainly work in the library where they are based and have fixed working hours, whereas academics had much more flexibility in terms of their time and places of work. These divisions seemed to limit the interaction opportunities and mutual understanding between academics and librarians. Without top-down management support, lecturers and library staff only work together on information literacy as individuals

(Overn, 2014; Thull and Hansen, 2009; Wang, 2011).

In a survey of the perception of academics toward library services, Library Journal and Gale Cengage Learning's Research (Schwartz, 2015) showed a disconnection between library service provision and faculty needs. Academics perceived library support of faculty research as most important, whereas libraries rated instruction of students in information literacy the most essential. Interestingly, Ithaca S+R Faculty and Library Surveys 2015 (Wolff, Rod, and Schonfeld, 2016) showed findings that contrasted with those of Library Journal and Gale Cengage Learning; they reported that there has been a significant increase in recognising the importance of the library's role in teaching support, whilst research support-related services appeared to be of the least importance. Nearly sixty per cent of participants rated research support as highly important. The authors concluded that the library's role has been changing significantly, particularly in developing research skills for students, thus continuing support for teaching and research is an important mission.

Apart from the differences in their work cultures, there has been a debate about the misperceptions of academics and library staff of the work roles of their partners. The causes of these misunderstandings are believed to be the consequences of the unequal power relationship between academics and librarians (Austin and Baldwin, 1991; Christiansen *et al.*, 2004; Chu, 1997; Julien and Pecoskie, 2009); the adverse impact of the school's culture and systemic factors such as conceptual, practical, attitudinal and professional barriers (Welch, 2000); the differences in goals, status, knowledge and expertise (Shen, 2012); and the chronic adverse impacts of the stereotypes of female librarians (Radford and Radford, 1997).

Many librarians believed that academics' perceptions are influenced by the stereotypes of librarians working with mechanical tasks related to the library collections (Given and Julien, 2005; Walter, 2008). However, Phelps and Campbell (2012) noted that most of the literature discussing the perceptions of academics was reported by librarians and from the librarians' perspective. By contrast, this research explores the perceptions of both librarians and academics concerning their collaborative relationships, to gain a more rounded understanding from both points of view.

Based on the findings of the literature review of collaboration, the current research seeks to apply structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) for explicating some of the complex dynamics at play in collaboration between academics and librarians. Giddens offers an important theoretical lens for the deeper understanding of organization and

management issues from both the broader structural and individual action perspectives.

Structuration theory

Structuration theory, developed by Giddens seeks to reconceptualise the dualism of individuals and society as the duality of agency and structure ([Giddens 1984](#), p. 162). Structure refers to,

the structuring properties allowing the binding of time–space in social systems, the properties of which make it possible for discernibly similar social practices to exist across various spans of time and space, and which lend them systemic form ([Giddens, 1984](#), p. 17).

In other words, for Giddens, relations of time and space exist in all moments of social change and social production ([Lars, 2000](#)). Social activity involves reciprocity between actors embedded in a particular temporal and spatial context; such a context impacts on the nature of social interaction. Temporality encompasses concepts such as flow of life, routines, events, individual life-spans, institutional and generational time-spans, continuity and change. The spatial dimension refers to a place or setting of interaction; an individual, with various social roles, who interacts in multiple locales ([Giddens, 1984](#)). Place, setting and locale all refer to physical regions where interactions happen. However, a locale is seen as '*a physical region*' where rules of interactions exist to '*sustain meaning*' when individuals communicate ([Giddens, 1984](#), p. xxv).

Central to structuration theory is the notion of human agency, the capability of people to engage in purposive actions with both intended and unintended consequences. Giddens defines human actors as knowledgeable agents who have the competency to utilize resources and may control other people in purposive interaction contexts. Human actors base their interaction on their existing knowledge of the world, their capabilities and social rules of conduct. Their interactions carry intentions, meanings, power and consequences that lead to changes in the structures that govern their actions. Agents are simultaneously autonomous, involving a continuous flow of activities that are reflexively monitored, and constrained by dependence on a social collective. The concept of actors' knowledgeability is crucial because actors draw upon structure, rules and resources to constitute social systems ([Giddens, 1979](#), p. 64).

In contrast to common usage of the term structure in the English-speaking world, where structure is conceptualised as 'some given form', Giddens's concept of structure in structuration theory has quite different connotations ([Giddens and Pierson, 1998](#), p. 76).

Rather than saying social systems have structures, in structuration theory it is more a case of social systems exhibiting structural properties. Structure is embodied, existing '*only as memory traces, the organic basis of human knowledgeability, and as instantiated in action*' ([Giddens 1984](#), p. 377).

Giddens's theory of structuration emphasises that social life is a product of the active flow of ongoing activities and practices that people undertake, and such recurrent practices reproduce institutions of the society ([Giddens and Pierson, 1998](#)). According to Giddens's notion of duality of structure, structural properties such as rules (procedures, conventions) and resources (allocative resources and authoritative resources) are embedded in action and are implicated in the production and reproduction of social systems; they are '*both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize*' ([Giddens 1984](#), p. 374). The process in which the actions of human agents both structure society and are structured by society through social practices is defined by Giddens as structuration.

The extent to which asymmetries of power can constrain or enable actions depends on the position of the agent(s) within the social system. Giddens uses the term duality of structure to describe the mutual relationship between human actions and the structure of society. Structuration dimensions include patterns of communication (signification), the exercise of power (domination, involving the capacity to act and utilise or control resources), and norms of social behaviour (rules, sanctions, the means of legitimation) ([Stillman and Stoecker, 2004](#); [Timbrell, Delaney, Chan, Yue, and Gable, 2005](#)). Giddens ([1979, 1984](#)) differentiated these structuration dimensions mainly for the purpose of analysing the interrelationships of social institutions. Human interaction mediates and is mediated by all of these interrelated structures, referred as the modalities of structure.

Berends, Boersma and Weggeman ([2003](#)) illustrated an interesting use of the duality of structure in their research into organizational learning through social practices. They gave an example of how structures enable and constrain the work practices of a technical team that needed to deal with the issues of equipment (resources) based on their knowledge (interpretive rules). Their actions were also mediated by the capabilities of other team members (domination) who drew upon different sets of rules to act differently to change the practice (legitimation). Berends, Boersma and Weggeman's empirical analysis of the organizational learning process reaffirmed that structure does not only enable and constrain practice, but also is reproduced over time through the same practice.

Interestingly, Walsham ([2002](#)) described structuration theory as a

useful and comprehensive framework for studying the influences of culture in information system and organization research. In structuration theory, structural properties of culture can be conceptualised as shared meaning systems, power relations, norms and values that are embedded in human minds, and can be viewed differently by individuals within the same context.

Criticism of structuration theory

Although structuration theory has been extensively used in empirical research, yielding valuable findings and new insights into the impacts of social structure on human interaction, it has encountered criticisms for being theoretically abstract in the explanation of social phenomena for empirical enquiries, and for its overemphasis on ontology rather than epistemology ([Gregson, 1987](#); [Silva, 2007](#); [Thrift, 1985](#)). The high level of abstraction of structuration theory in explaining social phenomena was considered a challenge for empirical research because of its complexity, the contradictory interpretation of concepts, and its attempts to conceptualise the dualism of agency and structure. '*Conceptually, ST is complex, articulating concepts from psychoanalysis, phenomenology, ethnomethodology and action theory, among others*' ([Turner 1991](#) cited in [Pozzebon and Pinsonneault, 2005](#), p. 1355).

In reply to these critics, Giddens has maintained his position that structuration theory is not a research method, but rather '*an eclectic approach to method, which again rests upon the premise that the research enquiries are contextually oriented*' ([Held and Thompson, 1989](#), p. 296). He specifically referred to the key aspects and guidelines for empirical analysis proposed in the final chapter of his *Constitution of Society* ([1984](#)), which emphasised that social research needs to be sensitive to: the importance of the double hermeneutic characteristics of social science (cultural and ethnographic aspects); the complex skills of actors in social interaction (methodological bracketing for institutional analysis level); and time and space as contextual features of the constitution of social life.

Giddens further illustrated some key theoretical notions of structuration theories that Willis ([1977](#)) in *Learning to Labour* successfully applied in his research. Willis studied the negative attitudes of a group of school students against the school's systems, and the consequences of their actions. Giddens believed that the main structuration concepts, such as the duality of structure, structural constraints, knowledgeable agents (who use both tacit and discursive knowledge to act upon structure), unintended consequences of actions, or power and punitive sanctions, were sensitively used by Willis, yielding significant implications beyond the study context

([Giddens, 1984](#)). In a later reply to critics, Giddens reaffirmed that structuration theory should be selectively applied rather than being imported as *en bloc* concepts in empirical research; and the theory should be utilized as a '*sensitising device*' rather than as a research method ([Held and Thompson, 1989](#), p. 294).

Research design

The research was conducted as a qualitative enquiry using the case study method. Qualitative research emphasises the study of qualitative data through interviews, observations, case study, texts, visual demonstration and personal reflection to interpret how social reality is constructed and how meaning is shaped ([Denzin and Lincoln, 2007](#)).

The methodology therefore enabled the exploration of the nature of the relationship between academics and library staff and their perspectives of the factors that influence their collaborative relationships in different university contexts.

In this research, a case study strategy was utilised to explore the meaning of collaboration, and the factors that enable or constrain the collaborative process. Case studies offer the researcher insights into the particularity and complexity of the studied phenomenon from multiple perspectives ([Simons, 2009](#); [Thomas, 2011](#)). The method is the most widely used research method in information systems research, particularly in studies exploring issues concerning the use of information technology in organizational contexts ([Darke, Shanks and Broadbent, 1998](#)). Although the case study has sometimes been misperceived as '*the weak sibling among social science methods*', the strategy becomes most relevant when the phenomena are too complex to explain the assumed causal relationships in real-life contexts ([Yin, 2003](#), p. xiii).

Data were collected at one university in Australia and one university in Vietnam. Participants were academics, library staff and administrators.

The Australian university case involves one of the leading universities in Australia with a very large number of students in both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. The university was an earlier adopter of the Research Skills Development Framework developed by Willison and O'Regan ([2008](#)), an educational model in which academics and library staff work together to enhance the quality of teaching, learning and research. Like many other universities in Australia, it has a typical structure of faculties and library branches located across multiple campuses. In recent years, there have been significant changes to the library staffing structure to

enhance the relationship with academics across faculties of the university. The university relocated academics who worked in an academic skills and English language teaching unit to the library. These academics were called academic skills advisers and worked with liaison librarians to collaborate with faculties in a team structure, known as a faculty-library collaboration team.

At the Australian university, a total of twenty-nine in-depth interviews with twenty-seven participants, one focus group with four participants, and two observation sessions were conducted. Through the research design process, six faculties were identified and selected as embedded cases. These cases represented a varied degree of collaboration and differences in faculty size and campus location.

The Vietnamese university is likewise one of the top universities in Vietnam, providing multidisciplinary higher education programmes to a large number of students. The university has a complex structure of courses delivered in multiple foreign languages since it has long-developed teaching and research partnerships with many universities in Australia and other countries. Many academics and university leaders have graduated from Australia and other developed countries. Thus their styles of teaching and course design have been influenced by more developed countries' education systems. Academics and library staff of the university have been working in different collaborative teaching and research initiatives. As with the Australian university, there have been significant changes in the library structure in recent years, with the aim of improving library performance and collaboration with all faculties of the university. The university library has built strong partnerships with some faculties through teaching information literacy to students, but is still facing various challenges in collaborating with the others.

At the Vietnamese university, there was a total of twenty-five participants; twelve semi-structured interviews with twelve participants (nine of them gave detailed written responses to a list of interview questions via email prior to the interview), a workshop with fourteen participants, and numerous informal conversations. There were five faculties selected as embedded case studies for this university. They represented different disciplines, sizes of faculty and different degrees of collaboration between academic staff and librarians across the faculties and library branches.

The smaller number of interviews undertaken in the Vietnamese case study is justified by the smaller size of this university, and the greater work experience of the researcher there.

The richness of data collected enabled this research to explore the

most important factors that influence the mutual interactions of academics and library staff in the university context. Strategies for data analysis included the middle-level analysis techniques of Dey (1993), constructivist grounded theory techniques (Charmaz, 2006, 2014) and cross-case comparison procedures by Miles and Huberman (1994). In addition, triangulation methods (Denzin, 1978) and key criteria to assess the credibility and trustworthiness of the research (Guba, 1981) were applied to achieve the rigour of the research. Participants have been labelled with their role title and a running number prefixed with an A, for Australia and V for Vietnamese participants.

Findings and discussion

In this research, structuration theory has provided lenses for examining the influences of social, organizational and cultural structures on collaboration practice at both universities. The central concern of this approach is the ongoing interplay between structure and agency. The dualism of *individuals* and *society* has been reconceptualised as the duality of *agency* and *structure*. Social phenomena should be studied from both epistemological and ontological perspectives. The epistemology position is about knowledge of the reality, how it is social constructed and why, whilst the ontology position concerns the nature of reality such as organizational rules, cultural norms and social orders to which individuals conform. Individuals' actions structure society and are in turn structured by society through social practice. In this research, such theoretical lenses have been particularly helpful in studying: first, the impact of changes in organizational structure; second, the social relations of power as seen in the professional and cultural divides between academics and library staff; and third, the influence of technology on collaborative practice.

Key concepts of structuration theory were utilised to study the influences of various structural and cultural factors on collaboration in both the Australian and Vietnamese universities, including (i) the socio-cultural dynamics of the academic group and the professional group on collaborative relationships; (ii) issues of the structural and professional divide between academics and the library liaison staff; (iii) the spatial and temporal dimensions of collaborative partnerships; and (iv) individual dimensions. However, it is noted that the level of influence of these factors varied across faculties, libraries, campuses and universities.

The socio-cultural dynamics

The description of structures in the findings such as the merger of the

language teaching unit with the library, the pressure of conducting research among academics, their heavy workload or the professional divide might give an impression that they physically existed. Structure, existing '*only as memory traces*' ([Giddens, 1984](#), p. 377), is more a case of social systems exhibiting structural properties, i.e., rules, culture and norms that actors embed in their mind and thus influence the way they perceive and interact with their partners.

Giddens emphasised that social systems are constituted by regularised social practices: '*We should see social life not just as society out there or just the product of the individual here, but as a series of on-going activities and practices that people carry on, which at the same time reproduce larger institutions*'. ([Giddens and Pierson, 1998](#), p. 76)

The influence of structuration theory on the study of the dynamism of social practice has been recognised by Berends *et al.* ([2003](#)), Jones and Karsten ([2008](#)) and Rosenbaum ([2010](#)). The theoretical lenses of recurring interplay between structures and practice allow the researcher to grasp the dynamic flow of social interactions and structure. In light of this, the dynamic changes in organizational structure and social practices and how they influence each other were explored. The theory also facilitated the discovery of the complex nature of a collaborative relationship, particularly different collaboration patterns that are mediated by the interplay of social relationships of power, financial resources, distinctive cultural values and norms.

Both universities experienced challenges in building an institution-wide structure for collaboration. The social structures, culture, nature of work, time, space and perceptions of academics and library staff influenced their collaboration, whilst their collaborative practices reinforced or changed these systems to enable their interaction in particular contexts.

Specifically, academics' workload was found to be considerable, with ever-increasing pressures to research, apply for research grants, and publish in high-quality arenas. Particular sources of frustration for many academics were the decreasing emphasis placed on education compared to research, and the escalating overall workload, as evidenced in the following comments:

there is a lot of pressure to do research and I'm not a researcher, I'm a teacher. That's where my passions and my interests lie. And the way universities are running at the moment, there's not a lot of emphasis put on the teaching.
(Academic skills adviser–A16)

When it comes down to it, the university values research output and if you go for a promotion, that's what's recognised, how much grant money you bring in, how many postgraduate [research] students you graduate and how many publications you produce. And education, it's just assumed that you do it and you're not really given any credit for it, really, when it comes down to it, even though the students are the ones that bring in the money that largely supports the day-to-day running of the university. You try to be a good educator, you try to be a good researcher and you try to meet all your service obligations and the university has the expectation you do exceptionally well in all three. And it's really hard to do all three well and have a life and that's the nature of being an academic these days. (Academic–Section head–A15)

There was a growing intensity in work and changing roles that both library staff and academics needed to handle to achieve the current university key performance indicators. However, each group needed to fulfil different performance criteria. Academics needed to place a higher priority on research than teaching. This explains why this study found that collaboration with library staff in teaching activities was not one of the primary intentions of academics. This contrasts with the significance of collaboration in the roles of library staff:

I think the library had placed a high priority on collaboration and engagement with academic staff and then it's a matter of us managing our role and the various tasks we're required to do and to try to do it in such a way that we're able to collaborate at the same time as doing some of the technical aspects of our work. So look for opportunities to collaborate. So I think it's a very big component– part of our role is the collaboration. (Liaison librarian–A20)

Studying collaboration as a structuration process from two levels of analysis (i.e., both a broader view of social systems and participants' actions) has yielded useful insights. At the broader level, both universities exhibited significant changes in their organizational structures and management strategies that directly influenced the constitution of social structures, work practices and the interaction of academics and library staff. At the individual level, each participant group drew upon current rules, norms and resources to act, with their actions in turn reinforcing or altering these structures.

Exploring how structure enables and constrains practices, as well as how practices influence and transform the structure, has provided insights into the causes, consequences and outcomes of human actions. *'The constraining aspects of power are experienced as sanctions of various kinds... One person's constraint is another's enabling'* (Giddens, 1984, p. 175). This constraint/enablement relation helped the analysis of power asymmetries from the perspective of the academic skills advisers and liaison librarians of

the Australian university. For instance, the academic skills advisers found that the merger of their academic language teaching unit with the library blurred (constrained) their roles under the umbrella organization of the library, whilst librarians found this reorganization had leveraged (enabled) their role and made a greater contribution to the library partnership with academics.

The structural and professional divide

Recognition of the impact of power became more extensive when the merger of the language and teaching unit into the library was perceived to have caused academic skills advisers to lose their academic status. Academic skills advisers used to be academics with entitlements to all academic privileges, but when they came to work in the library, their position description and entitlements came under the classification of professional staff. An Australian librarian noted the challenges of the restructure for the academic skill advisers:

they came to the library and their salary was decreased slightly. The academic skills people were academic status before, now they're the same level as me which is professional level... But some of them were considered to be lecturers before, slightly more well-paid, more flexible hours. They were expected to do research. They were expected to go off and present conference papers. There was a more collegiate – because they were on the academic staff award – this is their entitlements for leave and staff development. They can go off and do a big research project and do a study tour overseas. Well if I went to my boss and said I'd like to go and do a study tour overseas to learn more about libraries, my boss would say 'Oh yes, you're welcome, but there is no money'. (Liaison librarian-Sessional academic staff-A18)

Giddens's theory emphasises that human actors are knowledgeable agents who are capable of utilising or controlling resources. In the theory of structuration, resources are categorised into two forms: '*allocative resources refer to capabilities to forms of transformative capacity – generating command over objects, good or material phenomena; authoritative resources refer to types of transformative capacity generating command over persons or actors*' (Giddens 1984, p.33). Power over others forms and is formed by the capabilities of actors in utilising resources to influence the conduct of other individuals or groups. This concept is particularly useful in exploring causes and consequences of a structural divide between academics and library staff.

I think they [academics] might not be aware of what the library staff can offer or they might see it in only a very limited way ... I have to be wary that I don't become a teaching assistant or a research assistant. That again comes

down to boundaries of my role being a professional. I'm a professional. I stand in my own right as a professional and an expert in my field and I'm not an academic's assistant ... I always have to make sure I'm aware of that. That I'm not being someone's assistant. Yeah, equal footing. (Liaison librarian–A20)

The finding highlighted a clear expectation of the scope of practice in collaboration between library staff and academics, and between the library liaison team members of academic skills advisers and liaison librarians. In some faculties, academics seemed uncertain about the skill sets and expertise that the library team could contribute to the partnership:

I think there's a great deal of expertise within the library but I also feel that it can be a sensitive issue and that the library needs to continue to approach this carefully. Reassure faculty that we tend not to be content experts and that our area of expertise is more in the area of the practicalities of teaching and learning and also in curriculum and assessment design. (Academic skills adviser–Sessional academic staff–A19)

To a certain extent, the social structure of the different professions in the university created power disadvantages for librarians when they collaborated with academics. It made them more susceptible to the perception of their academic partners over the collaboration practice. They were classified as 'professional' staff, in service provision or service delivery-oriented roles, and this affected the way that they were perceived by academics, and the way they saw themselves:

I think probably people who are in the service part of it, it's probably easier that they can come, do their job and go home and not much beyond that. They're paid to do a job, they do a job whereas an academic, you choose to go into the field because you do PhD, you do further study and it's a bigger, broader job role. (Academic–Section head–A15)

The nature of this structural divide comes from the higher status of academics to librarians in society. Academics are in well-recognised positions and possessed higher status in the university than librarians. To be an academic, candidates are often required to have postgraduate education and extensive knowledge of their disciplines. There is also a tradition that academics are usually high performing students or those who have achieved outstanding success in a research area. In society, the academic profession is one of the most well-respected careers. In contrast, librarianship, being less competitive and requiring lower qualifications, receives insufficient recognition in the academic world. An example of this structural divide can be found in the analysis of challenging situations perceived by academics and librarians at the Vietnamese university:

It was usually hard in the early stage. Academics do not think that our information literacy training is important. They don't trust our expertise and skills. (Liaison librarian–Sessional academic staff–V2)

Being an academic requires a doctorate or master degree. While some librarians have university degrees, their entrance score and recruiting system are less competitive. But I think they are doing well in their area of expertise. (Academic–V16)

Giddens underlined the importance of time and space as structural elements that bind in a social system as systemic form and exist in its instantiations of social practices. These concepts have significant implications for understanding collaboration practice between academics and library staff. Giddens believed that day-to-day interaction 'generalised motivational commitment to the integration of habitual practices across time and space' (Giddens, 1984, p. 64). Time and space existed in the co-presence of academics and librarians in various day-to-day interactions. Their routine interactions over time contributed to the transformation of social relationships and social integration.

I have a fairly strong personal, professional and collaborative relationship with library staff, and it's built up over the last two years when they have come in and been quite actively involved in the two practice units. (Academic–Section head–A15)

We do have that very close working relationship across the campuses and I think that's a strength of the library. We do have a representation across the campuses and we do actually have the capacity to offer our services very consistently across the campuses. ... I think that could probably be an advantage not just for us, the library, but also for students as well because, [wherever] you enrol, you still actually get similar services from the library and that kind of a consistency and continuity is something we are proud of. (Senior library staff–A23)

The spatial and temporal dimensions of collaborative partnerships

Another important aspect of structuration theory is that Giddens positioned all actors relationally in their time-space paths as social positions. A social position can be specified as a social identity that holds an actor's prerogatives and obligations. These privileges and obligations constitute and prescribe the roles of the actors (Giddens, 1984, p. 84). This concept guided the analysis of roles, professional identity, social status and professional divide between academics and library staff. Academics were in well-recognised positions and possessed higher status than librarians in each university. They were

provided with more privileges and academic entitlements than library staff.

Academics are entitled to flexible work time, while we are not. (Librarian–V6)

Academics don't have time. I usually catch up with them when they walk from the lecture hall to the car park. I need to be very brief when I want to suggest some new library resources or skills classes. (Librarian–V6)

However, like Adam (1990), this research has demonstrated that Giddens's conceptualisation of time and space has neglected its relationship with power. Adam believed that time and space should be conceptualised as resources that can be utilised and deployed in social life. As can be seen in both the Australian and the Vietnamese universities, time and space were important resources that participants were able to utilise to different degrees. Academics had a higher level of autonomy than library staff in terms of managing their time and place to work. Time and space became allocative resources; actors have the capabilities to generate command over such resources. For example, in collaborative practices, working together in academics' time and space (i.e., collaborative teaching in lecture time and lecture theatres) was seen as one of the most effective forms of library collaboration. But to do that, librarians needed to arrange their work routines to fit in with the time and space of the academics, who decided where and when to collaborate. In other words, time and space were arranged by academics, which shows their power domination in social practices with library staff.

The individual dimensions

Human actors base their interaction on their existing knowledge of the world, their capabilities and social rules of conduct. Their interaction carries intentions, meanings, power and consequences that lead to changes in the structures that govern their actions. Analysing structural properties of social systems that influence actions as well as the actions that exhibit structural properties is an empirical challenge. This encounter was minimised because the data analysis was carried out at both the institutional (structure) level as well as the agency (action) level, and the research focused on the ongoing changes of the structure as outcomes and consequences of interactions between structure and actions.

For example, examining the professional culture of the two groups in terms of structure revealed particular cultural values of academics and librarians i.e., independent vs. collaborative and outside the box vs. inside the box, respectively. Then, studying the influences of these

cultural norms in terms of participants' actions facilitated deeper explanations of how and why participants situated themselves or behaved in particular contexts.

I get the impression – I don't know if this is true – that the culture in the library is much more structured and a little bit more rigid, but I think that they work really well as a team, and they all communicate with each other very well. That's the impression I get. However as an academic, we don't have a lot of structure around what we do. We have more freedom, a bit more flexibility... (Academic–A13)

Giddens used his stratification model to describe the reflexivity of individual action and distinguished three levels of an actor's knowledge: unconscious cognition, practical consciousness (tacit knowledge) and discursive consciousness (explicit knowledge). Although this model can be used for analysing actors' capability to articulate the rules and resources on which they base their actions, and interactions between structure and agency, it places less emphasis in elucidating interactions between participants as agents. In this research, interaction at individual level, trust, and personality of participants exerted a significant impact on the perceptions, intentions and the level of participants' involvement in collaboration.

It was evident that the success of a collaborative venture was strongly influenced by the individual characteristics of participants and their personal views on collaboration. Interactions at an individual level helped them know how to work with each other:

I think it really goes back to building a relationship at a personal level. You can't just sort of start off a research collaboration without getting to know the person. I think that's really how it works with the library. (Academic–Section head–A2)

Various collaborative activities were grounded in personal communication and long-standing relationships. However, the degree of librarians' personal relationships with academics varied significantly, depending on various factors such as the personality of individuals, their positions and opportunities for social interaction:

[Regarding] the temperaments and personalities of the library staff, we've been very, very lucky, with [several named staff members]. I mean they're all really, really nice people. They're quietly spoken, they're calm and unexcitable, they're problem-solving people, they're articulate, so that's one thing. They never react to what people say. They always take a problem-solving approach and we've just been lucky, I think. Maybe the library's doing a very good job of choosing people, but you could see that it could be different, if you had a more difficult personality... (Academic–Section head–A9)

If I agree to collaborate, I am very willing to come in even when I don't do lectures. It is more about my relationship so I will be an active participant. (Academic–Section head–V21)

It is difficult to approach academics of some faculties, particularly senior staff. We don't have any personal relationships with most of them. (Liaison librarian–Sessional academic staff–V3)

Implications and conclusions

The degree of collaboration between academics and library staff at both universities varied between participants, libraries, faculties and campuses. Collaboration at the Australian university was more effective in regard to their structured collaborative approach, with an assigned liaison library staff team working with all faculties of the university. Collaboration at the Vietnamese university, on the other hand, was more unstructured since it was mostly based on personal relationships between library staff and academics. For relationship building, social technologies played a particularly important role in social interaction and social integration, which facilitated building personal and professional relationships in this university.

This research underscores the importance of the interplay between the social structure and collaboration practices of academics and library staff. While the literature mainly discusses issues of academic collaboration from the perspective of librarians, this research extended the insights to both academics' and librarians' perspectives. Furthermore, the elucidation and comparison of the differences of these two professions has given useful explanations for particular patterns on collaboration.

Collaboration was influenced by structural, technological, socio-cultural and personal factors. Structural factors related to the impact of organizational structures and changes, the differences between the roles of academics and library staff, and organizational resources and facilities. Technological factors involved the interactions between structures, participants and technology, and how these interactions mediate collaboration practice. Socio-cultural dynamics shaped power asymmetry, differences of work culture, the social positions of participants and elements of time and space in collaboration practices. The final but most significant influencing factor was personal features, including the perceptions of academics and library staff toward the roles of their partners, the trust and respect of the partners' expertise, the personality of each participant and their personal relationships. These four sets of factors are all interrelated and interact, in turn influencing and being influenced by collaborative practices.

The theory of structuration has been utilised in library and information science research, particularly in studying information-seeking and information behaviour. This research documents the applicability and the shortcomings of this theory for studying collaboration in different social, organizational, cultural and educational contexts.

First, the research has demonstrated strategies for making sense of and analysing data using Giddens's central concepts of enabling and constraining structure in studying collaboration, via the use of the two levels of analysis i.e., institution and agency. These strategies of analysis contribute to the resolution of empirical challenges of using structuration theory, particularly its overemphasis on ontology. Future research would benefit from the empirical application of structuration theory in this research, particularly through the analysis of examples related to the dynamic nature of interaction between organization structure and social practices, the influence of structures and the outcomes and consequences of interactions between structure and people in various social contexts.

Secondly, it has extended the observation of Walsham (2002) and Myers and Avison (2002) on the usefulness of Giddens's theory in studying organizational culture by showing the interaction of social structure with organizational and professional culture. Also, Giddens's concepts of social power relationships have been enriched by examples illustrating the interplay of an organization's governance structure, work culture and the professional boundary between academics and librarians. This application is recommended for research studying collaborative relationships between partners in an organization with different professional backgrounds. For example, academic culture emphasised a more independent working style and an individualistic focus. This could be explained as the consequence of a separate social structure, the independent nature of research and teaching within the academic role and the pressure of producing publications each year whilst achieving good ratings in teaching evaluations. The librarians' culture, on the other hand, was in transition from a technical role to a more academic-oriented profession, albeit one still affected by the librarian stereotype. This made librarians more susceptible to the perception of their academic partners within collaborative practices. They were classified as professional staff, in a service provider or service delivery-oriented role, and this in turn affected both the way that they were perceived by academics, and the way that they saw themselves. Thus, studying a social phenomenon through the lens of structuration theory enabled the discovery of findings that laid bare the interplay of power, organizational structures and professional cultures from both

ontological and epistemological perspectives. More specifically, the epistemological perspective not only enabled the discovery of the existence of power, organizational structures and professional cultures, but also facilitated the discovery of how and why these structural interactions were formed.

Third, it enriches the interpretation of time and space by illustrating their presence in collaboration, and how these elements relate to organizational changes and the social identity of participants in the relationship. Further, it conceptualises the relationship between power on the one hand, and time and space on the other, in which the latter serve as resources that can be utilised or manipulated by participants. This concept guided the researcher's own analysis of roles, professional identity, social status and the professional divide between academics and library staff. Academics were in well-recognised positions and possessed higher status than librarians in both universities. They were provided with more privileges and academic entitlements than library staff. The status gap between the two professions consequently created boundaries in the perceptions of roles and identity in each group, which were in turn reflected in rules and influenced their social interaction. This interpretation could assist research into organizational collaboration, since the study of time and space should not be limited to collaboration contexts and structural changes, but should also be used for understanding the implications of power domination among groups of collaborators.

Lastly, this research substantiated some criticisms of structuration theory for its overemphasis on ontology rather than epistemology ([Phipps, 2001](#); [Pozzebon and Pinsonneault, 2005](#); [Rose and Scheepers, 2001](#); [Silva, 2007](#)). The ontological philosophies of mutual constitutions of structure and agency made data analysis of structure and action inseparable ([Jones 2008](#)), since structuration theory reconceptualises the dualism of agency and structure. Structures are the outcomes and the medium of social interaction. As outcomes, structures are produced and reproduced in interaction, whilst as a medium, actors draw upon the existing structures to act ([Berends, et al., 2003](#)). Analysis of social systems is therefore based on the reproduced relations between actors and social practices. Thus, analysing structural properties of social systems that influence actions in this research is an empirical challenge. This encounter was, however, minimised because the data was analysed from both the institutional (structure) level as well as the agency (action) level, and the research focused on the ongoing changes of the structure as outcomes and consequences of interactions between structure and actions. For example, academic culture exuded a strong feeling of attachment by academics to their units. Studying the influences of these cultural norms in terms of participants' actions facilitated

deeper explanations of how and why participants situated themselves or behaved in particular contexts.

About the author

Hue Thi Pham is currently a Faculty member of the Caulfield School of IT at Monash University, Australia. She graduated with her PhD and Master of Information Management Systems from Monash University. Her research includes studies and publications of the influences of structure and technology in collaboration, information behaviour, information and knowledge management, social aspects of information technology and business information systems. Hue formerly worked as the Deputy Head (Acting Head) of the Natural Sciences and Technology Department, International School of Vietnam National University, Hanoi and the Library Director at Hanoi University, Vietnam. She can be contacted at hue.pham@monash.edu.

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