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The practice of pharmacy as a social system: 
Giddens' sociological structuration theory

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Abstract

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In the series of articles published to date by the *International Journal of Pharmacy Practice* on the relevance of sociological theory to pharmacy practice (Bissell & Morgall Traulsen, 2005; Bissell, Morgall Traulsen, & Stig Haugbølle, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2003; Morgall Traulsen & Bissell, 2003, 2004; Morgall Traulsen, Bissell, & Stig Haugbølle, 2003; Ryan, Bissell, & Morgall Traulsen, 2004) the authors have placed the emphasis on either structure or agency. Through his theory of structuration, British sociologist Anthony Giddens (Giddens, 1979, 1981, 1984, 1993) has sought to move beyond the dualism between structure and agency by placing the structure/action dialectic at the heart of the social system defined as practice. From this perspective, pharmacy practice can be viewed as a social system in which actors, through their everyday actions, contribute to the permanent production and reproduction of the system. In this article, we begin by presenting the key concepts of structuration theory in order then to examine community pharmacy practice as a social system in perpetual reproduction. We close with an exploration of future avenues of research in community pharmacy practice.
Since 2001, the *International Journal of Pharmacy Practice* has published a series of articles aimed at presenting sociological theories or topics of reflection related to the social sphere that might provide conceptual models for pharmacy practice research. These articles were recently collected into a book by Bissell and Morgall Traulsen (2005).

Essentially, the articles fall under two major themes of reflection: (1) modernity and its social effects, and (2) the logical frameworks within which the social sciences conceptualize society and social behaviours. Under the first theme, Morgall Traulsen and Bissell (2003, 2004) looked at the risk society, on the one hand, and at the professionalization of pharmacy practice, on the other. In this article, we focus our attention exclusively on the second theme.

In this regard, some authors have pointed out that certain logical frameworks used in social sciences to conceptualize society and social behaviours could serve as interesting conceptual models for pharmacy practice research. With this in mind, Bissell, Morgall Traulsen and Stig Haugbølle (2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2003) penned four articles dealing, respectively, with Talcott Parson’s structural functionalism, Marxist sociology, interactionist sociology, and critical theory, and Morgall Traulsen, Bissell and Stig Haugbølle (2003) authored one paper on feminist theory. Rounding these out is an article by Ryan, Bissell and Morgall-Traulsen (2004) on Foucault’s post-structuralism. Each of these different theoretical perspectives is based on a particular assumption about the relationship between social structures and practices (agents *a fortiori*).

More precisely, in structuralist- or functionalist-based logical frameworks, structure is given primacy over the individual and the determinism of social structures is stressed. In interpretative and critical theories, instead, the individual (his competencies and freedom of action) is central and the subjective nature of social structures is underscored (Giddens, 1979, 1984).
In other words, the social theories presented to date as having a conceptual appeal for pharmacy practice research rest on the principle of dualism between structure and agency. Structure and action are perceived to be independent: The accent is placed either on structure or on the individual. The approach developed by Giddens (1979, 1981, 1984, 1993) seeks precisely to overcome this dualism by focusing on the complementariness of action and structure.

This article is intended as an introduction to Anthony Giddens’ structuration theory. Our discussion will centre on how structuration theory could prove attractive as a logical framework to be used in pharmacy practice research.

Anthony Giddens’ structuration theory: Presentation of key concepts

Contrary to numerous other schools of thought, Giddens does not conceive social systems merely as a set of structures but rather recognizes that social systems are endowed with social structures: “Social systems, according to Giddens, have no existence apart from the practices that constitute them, and these practices are reproduced by the ‘recursive’ (i.e., repeated) enactments of structures.” (Sewell, 1992, p. 6)

Because they are at the heart of social systems, social practices represent, according to Giddens (1979, 1984, 1993), the best unit of analysis from which it is possible to gain an in-depth understanding of social dynamics. These practices are relational, that is, they have to do with social interactions. Social interactions (or, more broadly speaking, the social practices that interactions underpin) are the doings of individuals with social competencies (agents). Through these competencies, agents mobilize those social structures that constitute the medium for the interactions that they wish to have. Contemporaneously, the social structures thus mobilized restrict these same interactions. In short, social structures both enable and constrain interactions. In turn, the interactions conducted by agents either perpetuate existing social structures or create new ones. This double complementarity between interactions and structures is what
Giddens (1979, 1984, 1993; Giddens & Pierson, 1998) refers to as the duality of structure. Lastly, interactions occur within a specific time-space setting, that is, they have a specific contextuality.

Drawing on both Turner (1986) and Giddens (1979, 1984), we devised the schematic diagram in Figure 1 to illustrate the key elements of structuration theory: agents and their (inter)actions, structure, the duality of structure, and the contextuality of interactions.

Agents and their actions

Individuals base their (inter)actions on social structures that, albeit constraining, nonetheless enable their daily practices. It stands to reason, then, that the social structures that individuals mobilize in their course of action are not the product of chance. Rather, they are the product of their competencies.

These competencies derive from their knowledge, their reflexive monitoring of action, and their rationalization of action (see Figure 1, Part A). According to Giddens (1984), reflexive monitoring of action refers to the faculty that individuals have of situating their action in relation to themselves and to others. It also refers to the capacity that agents have of controlling the physical and social aspects of the contexts in which they interact (Giddens, 1979, 1984; Giddens & Pierson, 1998).

As for the rationalization of action, Giddens (1984) sees it two ways. First, rationalization is closely linked to reflexive monitoring of action: “By the rationalization of action, I (Giddens) mean that actors — also routinely and for the most part without fuss — maintain a continuing ‘theoretical understanding’ of the grounds of their activity.” (p. 5)
Figure 1. Schematic diagram of Anthony Giddens’ structuration theory.
Second, this rationalization refers to the discursive justification of agents for their actions: “However, it is expected by competent agents of others (...) that actors will usually be able to explain most of what they do, if asked.” (Giddens, 1984, p. 6)

What’s more, reflexive monitoring of action and rationalization of action are rooted in certain psychic components. On this particular point, Giddens (1979, 1984) proposes replacing the traditional Freudian triad of ego, superego and id with three fluid tiers of personality: discursive consciousness, practical consciousness, and the unconscious. Aside from being the headquarters of reflexive monitoring of action, rationalization of action and motivation, these three components of the personality of agents constitute stocks of knowledge (see Figure 1, Part B).

Finally, consciousness holds the agent’s knowledge and beliefs regarding the conditions and consequences of his actions and those of others (Haines, 1988). The discursive portion of consciousness contains all that the agent is able to verbalize. Accordingly, the justification of actions, the second aspect of the rationalization of action, mobilizes discursive consciousness. Practical consciousness, for its part, comprises what the agent can do (know-how) but cannot express in words (Bernstein, 1986; Giddens, 1979, 1984, 1993).

As it happens, however, though individuals may be capable of providing a discursive explanation of the intentions and reasons behind their actions, these same individuals, according to Giddens, have a hard time doing the same when it comes to the motivation for their actions.

In fact, the motivation for action constitutes the third aspect of the stratification of the acting self (see Figure 1, parts A and B). The motivation for action dwells in the unconscious.

The unconscious includes those forms of cognition and impulsion which are either wholly repressed from consciousness or appear in consciousness only
in distorted form. Unconscious motivational components of action, as psychoanalytic theory suggests, have an internal hierarchy of their own, a hierarchy which expresses the 'depth' of the life history of the individual actor. (Giddens, 1984, pp. 4-5)

Consequently, for Giddens, motivations constitute buried desires and needs, which the individual cannot access directly through his practical or discursive consciousness (Bailyn, 2002).

Motivation refers to potential for action rather than to the mode in which action is chronically carried on by the agent. Motives tend to have a direct purchase on action only in relatively unusual circumstances, situations which in some way break with the routine. (Giddens, 1984, p. 6)

For Giddens, then, most action is not directly motivated. Motivation and routinization are linked through the concept of ontological security by which Giddens means the confidence or trust that both the natural and social worlds are as they appear. (Haines, 1988, p. 169)

Routine is integral both to the continuity of the personality of the agent, as he or she moves along the paths of daily activities, and to the institutions of society, which are such only through their continued reproduction. (Giddens, 1984, p. 60)

In short, in order to interact, the agent mobilizes his personality, that is, his acting self, his consciousness (both discursive and practical), and his unconscious. Day to day, the agent’s actions are routine: At each of his (inter)actions, the individual reproduces the components of his personality (the individual’s personality is thus preserved), the structures of the social universe in which he evolves, and the physical conditions in which his interactions take place. The maintenance of his personality, social structures and physical environment confers to the agent a sense of ontological security. Having said this, let us now look at the meaning that Giddens attributes to the notion of social structures.

Social structure and structural properties

Giddens distinguishes between structure and structural properties. For Giddens, structure is virtual, that is, it is not rooted in time-space. Structure exists only in
the memory of individuals and is brought into being through their practices (Fararo & Butts, 1999). Structural properties, for their part, refer to the structural features of time-space contexts. Accordingly, a social system does not form social structure but rather exhibits structural properties, which Giddens arranges in order of their time-space extension: “The most deeply embedded structural properties, implicated in the reproduction of societal totalities, I call structural principles. Those practices which have the greatest time-space extension within such totalities can be referred to as institutions.” (Giddens, 1984, p. 17)

This differentiation between structure and structural properties is important above all for the meaning Giddens gives the generic notion of structure, which diverges from structuralist or functionalist definitions. “Structure as conceived by Giddens does not refer, as it does in some ‘structuralist’ thinking, to models constructed by observers, nor, as it does in functionalist thought, the static description of the patterns of relationships found in collectivities.” (Dickie-Clark, 1984, p. 101)

Giddens (1979, 1984, 1993) underscores two components of social structure: rules and resources. In defining rules, Giddens (1984) refers to Wittgenstein’s “knowing how to go on” (Bailyn, 2002) and presents them as modalities or general procedures for action that agents mobilize. Consequently, rules contribute to actualize and reproduce social practices. Kondrat (2002) points out that certain social rules can be formulated explicitly and, for this reason, fall within the realm of discursive consciousness. Others, however, are essentially tacit and reside in practical consciousness. In this regard, Giddens makes an additional distinction between two sorts of rules: interpretative and normative. “Interpretative rules, or rules of signification, constitute the cognitive aspect of social structure. Normative rules regulate the legitimization of actions.” (Bresnen, Goussevskaia, & Swan, 2004, p. 1540).
Resources, for their part, can be allocative or authoritative. Allocative resources comprise the material elements in the agents' environment, as well as all of the artifacts (techniques, instruments, and so on) produced by human beings (Giddens, 1984). Authoritative resources regard the social organization of time-space, the organization and relations of human beings in multiple associations and, lastly, the organization of chances of self-development and self-expression (Giddens, 1984).

Interpretative rules form structures of signification (this dimension of structure refers to “How we do it”) and normative rules, structures of legitimation (i.e., “How we should do it”) (Staber & Sydow, 2002). Allocative and authoritative resources constitute the domination dimension of social structures (i.e., “How to get others to do it”).

The first line of the duality of structure (see Figure 1, Part C) refers to the rules and resources that compose the three dimensions of structure. The arrows between the components illustrate their interdependence. For example: “What is, or is not considered and accepted as a resource in a particular interaction context depends eventually on an ‘agreement’ on what is to be interpreted as such.” (Leeuwis, 1993, p. 295)

*The duality of structure*

The preceding excerpt also underscores that structure and (inter)action are indissociable. On the one hand, rules and resources are at once the means and outcomes of human behaviour; on the other, rules and resources constrain and enable (inter)actions.

The last line of Part C in Figure 1 stresses the three elements of interaction: communication, power and sanction. All social practices rest on the communication of signification, which cannot be dissociated from the exercise of power or from normative sanction.
The central axis of the duality of structure (Figure 1, Part C) calls attention to the three modalities or mediators (interpretative schemes, facilities and norms) between interaction and structure. Accordingly, in the course of his practices—on the basis of his competencies (The rationalization of action and knowledge of social rules and procedures or, in other words, the mastery of techniques of doing, are at the core of the reflexive competency of agents (Giddens, 1984)) and motivations—the individual mobilizes the modalities that appear to him to be the conditions for his capacity for intervention or interaction. Thus, the agent unconsciously and unintentionally brings into being structural properties. However, as action on a day-to-day basis is routine (The same modalities are mobilized most of the time by the same competencies.), in actual fact the individual more often than not merely reproduces structural properties (Edwards, 2000).

Firstly, human communication involves the use of interpretative schemes which are stocks of knowledge that human actors draw upon in order to make sense of their own and others’ actions. They thereby produce and reproduce structures of meaning which are termed structures of signification. Secondly, human agents utilise power in interaction by drawing on facilities such as the ability to allocate material and human resources; in so doing, they produce and reproduce structures of domination. Finally, human agents sanction their actions by drawing on norms or standards of morality and thus produce and reproduce social structures of legitimation. (Walsham & Han, 1991, p. 78)

Given that the interactions at the root of the duality of structure occur in time-space, let us now discuss what this means in terms of regionalization and the encounters that take place there.

*Time, space, encounters and regionalization*

In the sociology of day-to-day life as proposed by Giddens (Giddens, 1979, 1984), the structuration of society occurs in locales (see Figure 1, Part D). These can be a country, province, city, neighbourhood, pharmacy, etc. The agent defines and recognizes a given space as a locale, on the one hand, via the structural properties that it possesses and, on the other, according to the nature of the
encounters it makes possible. What’s more, agents use these structural properties as settings for the interactions that occur during these encounters. The encounters that agents have as they move through locales possess two major characteristics: opening/closing and order of succession.

Encounters always entail an *opening* and a *closing*. These help to demarcate one encounter from another. Moreover, encounters are conceived as a multiplicity of episodes each with its own particular colour, markings or traits (Giddens, 1984). Episodes and encounters reveal the seriality of social life and cannot occur without respecting what Giddens (1984) terms an *order of succession*. This notion refers to the coupling constraints necessary for encounters in interaction settings owing to the fact that an agent’s words, which are the principal medium of communication in encounters, can only be deployed one after another.

In the course of the various possible types of encounters, ordered successively and delimited by an opening and closing, the competencies (knowledge, reflexive monitoring of action, rationalization of action, and motivation for action) developed by agents serve to mutually coordinate interactions. In order to understand what is going on, adopt the right practice, use the appropriate resources, and properly adjust action to norms, agents draw on their competencies to mobilize the structural properties that serve as the settings for interaction. By so doing, agents reproduce the structural properties and renew their recognition of the given space as a locale.

Not all agents have the same access to structural properties. On the one hand, this depends on the competencies specific to each agent. On the other, it is defined by the agent’s positioning. Accordingly, an agent’s bodily occupation (For Giddens (1979, 1984) as for Goffman (1963), on a day-to-day basis, most encounters occur in circumstances of co-presence.) of a locale in the course of an encounter conditions his relationship to structural properties.
Based on the above, one might think that everyday encounters constitute for agents an exhausting exercise in attention, mobilization of structural properties and adjustment. This is not the case, however, given that most encounters are routine. In other words, agents make chronic use of the properties of interaction settings in constituting their encounters across time-space. The characteristics of these settings serve routinely to form the signifiers of meaning of interactions. Giddens gives the name of regionalization to the process of zoning time-space relative to routine practices (Giddens, 1984). Accordingly, interactions in a region such as the elevator of an office building can differ from those in other regions of the same building, such as in each individual office or in the cafeteria on the ground floor, for example. Regions are separated by physical or symbolic boundaries.

In a bid to overcome the micro/macro dualism found in numerous brands of sociology, Giddens introduces, in relation to the spatial-temporal characteristics of encounters, the notions of social integration and systemic integration. In this regard, the adjective “social” refers to interactions between agents. In short, social integration is the process whereby relationships of reciprocity between individuals in face-to-face situations become regular social practices, that is, routines. These face-to-face encounters take place within a locale and, at times, between locales. In fact, the structural properties of a locale, together with the co-presence of actors and the reciprocity that develops between them, provides contextuality to interactions.

Systemic integration, instead, refers to the maintenance of reciprocity between agents who are physically absent. In other words, without the totality of agents necessarily being present physically, larger social systems can be defined on the basis of the systematization of social practices that occur in locales distant in space and time. However, this can occur only if there is social integration to begin with. What this means is that systemic integration rests on the face-to-face interaction between individuals in specific locales. In return and on the basis of the principle of the duality of structure, the structures that characterize larger-
scale social systems condition face-to-face interactions and, therefore, social integration.

So far, we have focused on the production and reproduction of social systems. The question that begs asking at this point is the following: Do social agents also have the know-how to operate social change? Giddens (1984) proposes that, through the reflexive monitoring of their actions, agents in effect play a dominant role in processes of social change thanks to power defined as the transformative capacity of action. In this context, reflexive monitoring implies having the capacity to create a difference as an agent, that is, to act differently through the causal capacities exercised time and again in everyday life.

Relevance to pharmacy practice

To use Giddens’ perspective to examine community pharmacy is to take a close look at the day-to-day actions of agents and at the competencies they mobilize for the purpose.

The pharmacist’s professional competency, which derives from his stock of knowledge, allows him to act primarily in three areas: (a) verification of the medication-distribution process; (b) study of patient pharmacological profiles to ascertain drug contraindications and compatibility; and (c) communication with patients to ensure optimal use of drugs particularly by imparting instructions and recommendations at time of medication delivery. The pharmacy technician’s competency has to do, among other things, with answering the telephone, greeting patients in the prescription reception area, processing prescriptions using specialized computer software, packaging of medication, and billing at the delivery counter. When patients are not co-present in the pharmacy, the other day-to-day duties of the technician include ordering medication from suppliers, filling vials, and checking the account statements of insurers, when applicable.
As it happens, the respective competencies of the two types of agents above do not depend solely on their professional and technical knowledge and on their social skills, most of which are tacit. The everyday activities of these two agents also depend on the reflexive monitoring and rationalization of their actions, two notions that we covered earlier. In this example, the agents monitor the physical and social aspects of their activities relative to themselves and to the other agents co-present, that is, patients and colleagues. Let us take, for example, the case of the pharmacist: He verifies a basket containing drugs packaged by a technician a few moments earlier and then instructs the patient in the prescription delivery area. Given that the competencies of the agents are rooted in the components of personality (discursive consciousness, practical consciousness, unconscious), they are expressed differently from one agent to another.

In fact, on the basis of their competencies and indirectly of their personalities, in the course of day-to-day interaction, the pharmacist and the technician (agents) will, in the co-presence of patients and colleagues, mobilize the modalities of the structural properties of different space-time extensions.

Institutions constitute the structural properties with the greatest time-space extension. In referring to pharmacy as an institution, we are referring essentially to two things: on the one hand, to the institutionalized features of the pharmacist’s professional expertise of pharmacy, that is, recourse to scientific (pharmaceutical) knowledge and a university education to convey professional expertise to patients, to computer technology, and so on; and, on the other, to the institutionalized features of the commercial environment across time-space, that is, the physical layout of the selling floor for pharmaceutical and non-pharmaceutical products, merchandising and marketing of these products, inventory management, and so on.

We are also referring to the structural principles, or better still structural ties, that community pharmacies share across time with various social organization,
such as pharmaceutical companies, universities, third-party payers, government health departments, hospitals, medical clinics, physicians’ offices, dentists’ offices, rival pharmacy banners, other businesses providing products and services, such as grocery stores and natural products shops, to mention just a few.

This said, the preceding does not negate the fact that a community pharmacy is for all intents and purposes a regionalized space. Each region possesses structural features, that is, structural properties specific to the locale and its regions. These structural properties have a lesser time-space extension than do institutions and structural principles. Accordingly, the regions (reception, filling of prescriptions, medication delivery, etc.) that define a locale as a community pharmacy are no less than interaction settings containing both structural properties (pharmacy as institution, structural principles and structural characteristics) and encounters.

It is within these distinct interaction settings that we are able to discern more readily the opening and closing of encounters that occur there every day, as well as their order of succession, which attest to the seriality of social life in community pharmacy. For example: the opening and closing of several encounters, one after another, with different patients within the zoned space that is the prescription reception area or, its corollary, the opening of several encounters with the same patient by different agents in different regions, such as a first technician who greets the patient at the start of the process, the on-duty pharmacist who instructs the patient, and a second technician who bills the patient for the medication at the end.

In the course of each encounter in community pharmacy, agents interact. In the course of these interactions, the agents, on the basis of the competencies described earlier, mobilize the modalities of the structural properties that refer both to pharmacy as an institution and to structural principles or, better yet, to the structural character specific to community pharmacy and to the region where
the encounter occurs. The modalities thus mobilized constrain the agents’ field of action. At the same time, they enable the agents to interact.

For example, a prescription made out by a physician and handed over by patient “A” at the reception area will be understood and electronically processed by the pharmacy technician through the mobilization of interpretative schemes, such as the scientific and technical content of the prescription, and of norms, such as the identification of the patient and his address, of the prescriber and his practice number, and so on. Furthermore, the agents will mobilize facilities in the form of allocative resources, such as the material elements of the agents’ environment, including computers, software, the paper on which the prescription is written out, the reception counter where the patient hands over the prescription, and so on. The agents will also mobilize facilities in the form of authoritative resources, such as the pre-determined organization and relationships among prescribers, pharmacists and patients. The agents here share multiple associations, each of which constitutes a relationship holding vastly different chances of self-development and self-expression.

On a day-to-day basis, encounters and interactions occur routinely. Patient “A” in the above example will be followed by patient “B”, and then by patient “C”. Mostly likely, the arrival of a new patient each time will launch the agents—pharmacists and technicians—into the same serenity of interactions in the course of which the same modalities of structural properties will be mobilized. Serenity of interactions combined with the repeated mobilization of the same modalities is what constitutes a social system. In our case, it is what makes community pharmacy practice an institution.

Thus, whether it is conscious and deliberate, by mobilizing the same structural modalities on a recurring basis, pharmacist and technicians as agents reproduce the structural properties (pharmacy as institution, structural principles, and structural features of locales). And because this occurs in the course of routine interactions, community pharmacy practice, too, is reproduced.
Conclusions

On the one hand, pharmacy practice as the professional delivery of healthcare services has been described by certain authors as a social function independent of those who exercise it and pursue the objective of meeting the needs of a “healthy” society, that is, one with a high degree of physical, psychological and social functioning.

On the other hand, pharmacy practice has been presented as the conscious and deliberate creation of individuals free to choose the sources of influence for their everyday practices.

Through structuration theory, Giddens invites us to conceive pharmacy practice as a social system that is the result of the day-to-day interaction encounters that ordinary individuals (not only pharmacists and pharmacy technicians, but also patients, physicians, etc.) have with one another in pharmacies. These encounters are not random occurrences. A pharmacy is a locale consisting of regions and, in the process of regionalization, each region is defined according to the nature of the interactions that normally occur there.

As it happens, if it is true that pharmacy practice is the result of interactions between ordinary individuals, it is also true that it constitutes the condition for future behaviour. In other words, pharmacy practice as it has been structured to this day constrains and enables the behaviours of individuals. This is because the pharmacy practice of yesterday is the condition for the results of the pharmacy practice of today, which in turn will be the condition for the pharmacy practice of tomorrow. This is how the systemization of community pharmacy practice comes about.
It is for need of ontological security that the habitual behaviours of ordinary individuals in pharmacies today reproduce yesterday's practice. By so doing, they fix the practice ever more firmly in time-space.

However, the ordinary individuals in pharmacies possess the competency required, in the course of interactions, to make the structural changes necessary for the production of a pharmacy practice (as social system) different from the one they have reproduced to date.

Following this perspective, pharmacy practice research would stand to benefit from examining the habitual behaviours of the ordinary individuals in pharmacies and, more particularly, the regionalization of community pharmacies as both the process whereby pharmacy practice is reproduced and a potential lever for bringing about its transformation.

References


