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Causality, Contextual Frames and International Migration

Combining Strong Structuration Theory,
Critical Realism and Textual Analysis

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- contribute to new theoretical approaches
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Abstract

This paper will take its cue from recent work in international migration, particularly the writings of Ewa Morawska and Karen O'Reilly, that has explicitly placed structuration theory at its heart in analysing issues of causality. While firmly endorsing this work, I argue that it is possible to further strengthen the use of structuration in international migration studies by paying more attention to certain tenets of strong structuration theory (SST), synthesised with aspects of critical realism. This entails closer engagement with issues of epistemology and methodology, and also a more fine-grained approach to ontological concepts, the relationships between them, and their use in empirical analysis. The device of a 'theorised contextual frame' is introduced as a reference point that can be used to systematically evaluate the status and adequacy of individual migration studies. The device combines attention to the structural context or field relevant to a particular migration issue with the systematic focus demanded by a specific research question or objective. In sketching out the structural context, I draw out the relationship between critical realism's emphasis on plural causal mechanisms or 'planes of analysis', and strong structuration theory's emphasis on clusters of position-practice relations. The device is also designed to highlight the phenomenological and interpretative dimensions within particular causal processes, while insisting that such dimensions need to be grounded within the relevant structural aspects of the contextual frame. Two ideal types of 'hermeneutic-structural' text – contextualising and floating – are presented to help sharpen a sense of how to employ the theoretical model to heighten critical awareness of the status and quality of particular research accounts of international migration. Finally, I conduct a close analysis of Ewa Morawska's recent structuration-inspired account of large-scale migration across the Atlantic from Polish villages in the *longue durée* from the 1870s to the 1930s. This is undertaken in order to illustrate, clarify and exemplify the strengths of the approach.

Non-technical summary

This paper builds on the work of Ewa Morawska and Karen O'Reilly analysing causality in international migration. The paper argues that it is possible to strengthen the use of 'structuration theory' in international migration studies by paying more attention to the contribution of 'strong structuration theory', combined with aspects of critical realism. This entails closer engagement with methodology and with the science of how things can be 'known'. It also requires a more fine-grained approach to concepts relating to the nature of social relations. The paper introduces a 'theorised contextual frame' as a reference point that can be used to evaluate the status and adequacy of individual migration studies. This device combines attention to the structural context relevant to a particular migration issue with the systematic focus demanded by a specific research question. The paper includes an analysis of Morawska's account of large-scale migration across the Atlantic from Polish villages from the 1870s to the 1930s, in order to illustrate the strengths of the approach.

Keywords: theorised contextual frames, hermeneutics, structuration theory

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1 Introduction

This paper takes its cue from recent work in international migration that has explicitly placed structuration theory at its heart in analysing issues of causality.

The work of Ewa Morawska and Karen O'Reilly, for example, has made a strong case for the gains to be made by incorporating a structurationist view of the world into research in international migration (e.g. Morawska 2009, 1996; O'Reilly 2012). This work has shown how the substance of migration and its various processes can be elucidated by the structurationist world view, with its emphasis on the continual interplay of social structures and social actors. It has dwelt on the kinds of entities that make up the social world of migration, and how these entities relate to and interact with each other within ongoing, constantly unfolding processes of 'becoming'. In the process, it has developed concepts and vocabulary, through importation and through neologisms prompted by the specific subject matter of migration, that help to crystallise certain ways of viewing all of this, and to refine these ways of seeing. That is, it has used the structurationist model to shed light on the nature and characteristics of migration processes, and on how to conceptualise these. In this sense it has been concerned with ontology and the ontic; concerned, that is, with both abstract and concrete notions of the entities and relations that have an existence within the worlds of migration.

Morawska and O'Reilly's work has also been concerned, however, with issues of epistemology and methodology. Both writers are experienced researchers and ethnographers whose work in the field combines close and informed attention to questions of theory, evidence and the relationship between these. O'Reilly, for example, exhibits this kind of concern throughout her forthcoming book, not least in thinking about the relationship between the concepts of strong structuration and what she calls the 'special role' accorded in her work to ethnography and life history. The latter have key parts to play in that they allow access to the hermeneutic dimensions of agents' lives in ways that are able to embed them in their immediate structural contexts (O'Reilly 2012: 7). This combination of hermeneutics and structures has always been a defining feature of structuration theory, and strong structuration's emphasis on the application of the theory at the empirical level has drawn greater attention to the need to systematically reflect upon the implications of this for issues of methodology.

Morawska has employed versions of structuration theory as a guiding approach for many years in her formidable body of historical and ethnographic research. In the recent volume, *A Sociology of Immigration* (2009) Morawska notes that she typically begins her analysis by identifying the enabling and constraining structural contexts within which the people she examines conduct their activities. She follows this with analyses of the actors' creative negotiation with those structural conditions, and by looking at the subsequent intended and unintended consequences of those negotiations on societal structures. While fully endorsing Morawska's approach, as far as it goes, my view is that critical awareness of the quality and status of knowledge can be strengthened through paying closer attention to the epistemological and methodological concerns proposed within 'strong structuration theory' (SST) (see Stones 2005, 2012; O'Reilly 2012).

In what follows I will argue that the application of structuration theory to international migration can be strengthened through paying more attention to epistemology and

methodology, and also through a more fine-grained approach to ontological concepts, the relationships between them, and their use in empirical analysis. In order to do this I will outline the device of a 'theorised contextual frame', designed to act as a systematic reference point by which to evaluate the status and adequacy¹ of the arguments and empirical evidence provided in individual migration case studies. A number of the key constituents of such a frame are outlined, and some of them elaborated upon in detail. This is then combined with an emphasis on the relative autonomy of texts, and on the need to incorporate sensitivity to this autonomy when engaging in theoretically informed critical assessments of their representations of reality. Two ideal types of 'hermeneutic-structural' text – contextualizing and floating – are then presented to help sharpen a sense of how to employ the theoretical model to heighten critical awareness of the status and quality of particular research accounts of international migration. Finally, I conduct a close analysis of Ewa Morawska's recent structuration-inspired account of large-scale migration across the Atlantic from Polish villages in the *longue durée* from the 1870s to the 1930s. This is conducted in order to illustrate, clarify and exemplify the strengths of the approach.

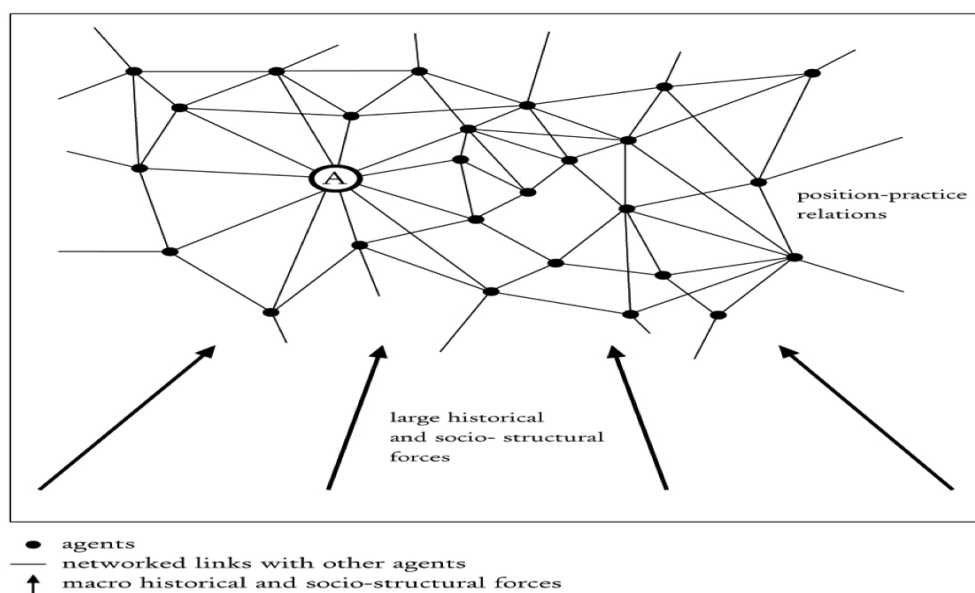
2 Elements from a theorised contextual frame and their relation to conceptual methodology

I will thus offer some ideas that I hope can complement and further strengthen existing uses of structuration theory in the field of migration studies. I believe that more can be done to develop and deepen the relationship between the ontological-ontic level of structuration and issues of epistemology and methodology. It is useful to label the domain of this relationship 'conceptual methodology', as this is the space where sustained thought is given to the implications of specific conceptualisations of entities and relations for issues of methodology. It is the point at which conceptual and methodological concerns meet and engage, adequately or inadequately, with each other. To pursue this goal, I will introduce some aspects from the conceptual device of 'a theorised contextual frame', which I have been developing in a different context, as a means of elaborating and strengthening the research protocols of post-positivist social theory (see Stones 2012). The device is designed to act as a reference point by which to systematically evaluate the status and adequacy of the arguments and empirical evidence provided by migration case studies. The frame is meant to set out the abstract, generalised characteristics of the entities and relations that populate the landscape covered by any case study, and provides a starting point that can be adapted to a particular case. It is with respect to individual cases that the more detailed and variable forms and substance of contexts, structures, actors, networks of relationships, antecedents and consequences can be fleshed out. The application of a theorised frame allows one to distinguish between the surface events within a particular account of migration and the networks of relationships and other elements that provide these events with their necessary conditions of existence. The careful use of theoretical frames as guides for the carrying out of research, and as points of reference by which to judge research accounts, can indicate what is required in order to systematically embed surface events in a relevant field of forces and entities.

¹ For an explication of the notion of practical adequacy, see Sayer 1992: 69–70.

A key injunction built into this device is to clarify the particular research question or *explanandum* (event or other phenomenon to be explained), and to combine this with a preliminary sketching out of a structural context or field that can encompass the most salient explanatory forces. Within SST these forces are phrased in terms of position-practice relations, and the various components, entities and relations that populate a given field of these relations can be fleshed out in some detail on the basis of structuration and cognate social theories (i.e. in ontological terms). The broad parameters of such relations are illustrated graphically in Figure 1 (cf. Stones 2005: 62–6; 89–94; Cohen 1989: 207–13). The graphic representation of position-practice relations helps to bring out the configurational quality of these social processes, whereby the practices in one domain are dependent on, or are influenced by, prior or continuing relations and pressures in another domain. This means that the necessary (current and prior) conditions and constituents of any one practice or set of surface events exist, in large part, elsewhere, outside the particular interaction in focus. Events can thus be rendered immediately more meaningful once they are conceptualised as being in the midst of, as already being caught up in the flow of, the positioned-practices of variously located actors and their relations.

Figure 1: Meso-level position-practice relations (Stones 2005: 128)



This sketching out of the nature of the processual and configurational nature of the contextual frame at a general ontological level needs to be combined with the epistemological conception of retroduction, associated with critical realism. This is a mode of inference whereby ‘events are explained by postulating (and identifying) mechanisms which are capable of producing them’ (Sayer 1992: 107). One can phrase this in terms of the powers of individual and collective actors, and of other entities, to produce the events or outcomes that become the focus of an explanation. In terms of temporally extended processes of international migration one would expect outcomes-to-be-explained to be the result of many different actors, each with specific powers and vulnerabilities, interacting with each other as migrants-in-focus, facilitators, hinderers, and so on, in many different

sub-processes of pushing and pulling. From within a researcher's particular perspective on the causal process, a clear and resolute distinction will usually need to be made between key actors-in-focus at any one time (the circled 'A' in Figure 1) and the various actors and entities that provide conditions – which may encompass anything from the provision of infrastructural support to the presentation of difficult obstacles – for those actors-in-focus as they proceed on their journey or trajectory.

It is the role of retroduction to make some sense of particular processes by postulating the most salient forces at work in the production of the *explanandum* at hand, and to draw into the contextual frame the most relevant actors, entities and relations. A prior condition of being able to do this is that the relevant entities that may have played some part in the causal process need to be sufficiently differentiated from each other. It is often useful in this respect to identify the nature and limits of the potential powers available to various key actors-in-focus at time 1. Without this one would not be able to identify the causal contribution of that entity. Thus, when looking at the powers of particular agents and entities it is important to begin by focusing on those powers that have a high degree of personal or organisational independence, which at a given point in time are embedded in, or attached to, the individual and her body, or to an organisation and its immediate infrastructure. On the basis of this, one can also identify emergent powers that result from processes and relations of combination and association, control and command, and so on. When focusing on the behaviour of social actors, however, one must never lose sight of the fact that their own phenomenological perspective on their raw powers (their potential 'power to' do particular things) will be embedded within a more or less understood network of position-practice relations. This means that locally identifiable powers are always intertwined with perspectives on wider networks of power relations, and the meanings and norms thought to be embedded within these. These structurally anchored phenomenological perspectives on distributions of power, on what is culturally acceptable and unacceptable, and on what will be rewarded and what will be punished, play a major role in both the relatively minor and the highly consequential decisions of actors.

A firm initial basis for analysis should thus be provided through retroduction on the basis of a clear *explanandum*, in which the explanation is conceived in terms of processes taking place within an extended field of position-practice relations.

The basic idea is that one works backwards from the surface phenomenon identified as a problem-to-be explained to an attempt to identify the causes that have produced it. Thus, when one sketches out the initial contextual frame, this should be done with a view to identifying the powers (potential and actually employed) of key actors that may have contributed to the *explananda*/outcomes to be explained. In analysing a textual account one would be interested in the extent to which the author has provided a convincing retroductive account along these lines.

Within such a frame, the first step in drilling down further into those structural contexts mentioned by Morawska (broad conceptions of enabling and constraining structural contexts), is precisely through the preliminary sketching out of a relevant structural context or field. This would typically entail identifying the primary actors relevant to any explanation of the problem at hand. In order to avoid flattening out or subsuming relevant heterogeneity and complexity, one should ask whether various actors are sufficiently differentiated from each other? And, as part of this, are *individual* and *collective*

actors sufficiently differentiated from each other? These are questions one needs to ask in carrying out one's own research, but also in assessing the fruits of case-study research as presented within any textual account. Further steps in line with building up a contextual frame of position-practice relations that is relevant to the *explanandum* would entail such questions as: to what extent does the research/text position key organisations and institutions in relation to the other relevant organisations and institutions to which they are externally linked through position-practice relations? Does it do this adequately? When is it necessary to go beyond the situating of *collective actors* (e.g. institutions, organisations, social movements) to a more intense micro concern with the positioning of their constituent individual actors – whether with respect to the organisations and institutions they belong to and chronically participate in, or with respect to their relations with external organisations and individuals? The very drawing of such internal and external boundaries itself involves significant choices, and the appropriateness of the decisions made will be related to the *explanandum* and the value-relevant stance adopted towards it. It is necessary to confront these kinds of questions and issues as a preliminary step in building up a contextual frame that will enable one to assess the nature and character of a particular research account. They are a first step in a process that will allow one eventually to be confident in proclaiming, with some precision, a view as to *how much knowledge, and what quality of knowledge* a research account has been able to convey about the various aspects and processes it has focused upon.

In looking at the way in which an account positions a key *individual* actor embedded within and between organisations, it is also important to look closely at how these actors subjectively interpret the socially networked contexts in which they are embedded. From a strong structuration perspective one could well want to ask how much we know about the following components of an actor's subjective world, and how these are dynamically combined in producing action: i) their habitus – those durable and transposable understandings, dispositions and motivations, including typifications or cultural schemas, loyalties, emotional and value-dispositions, and general formulations of interests and principles; ii) their conjuncture-specific knowledge of the immediate terrain, including felt pressures emanating from the perceived powers and norms of influentially networked others; and iii) their facility for reflexivity, creativity, improvisation, reorganisation of motivational priorities, and other forms of active agency? (Stones 2005: 84–109). These processes are often complex and in tension with each other, and gaining knowledge of how they lead to particular actions, emotions, utterances and so on, requires fine-grained hermeneutic analysis, without which claims to have grasped them will be doubtful. Actors will inevitably have something akin to what Giddens calls a 'hierarchy of priorities' and Archer calls an 'ordering of concerns' within their habitus (see Giddens 1993/1976: 84, 90–91; Archer 2000: 230–41). It is important to note that in the kinds of extreme or critical situations faced by migrants, they will typically have to creatively re-order their priorities in ways that re-position the significance of particular structural networks to their most dearly held ambitions and concerns. Strong structuration theory – which synthesises elements from, among others, Giddens, Bourdieu, Sewell Jnr., Mouzelis, and Archer – suggests that all of these various elements within actors, and the way they combine them, will be strongly anchored in their past and present socio-structural milieu, but that empirical investigation is necessary to fathom the ways in which, and the extent to which, this will be the case in specific instances (Stones 2005).

These ideas could be fruitfully developed and refined through the insights Morawska draws from Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische's seminal account of agency. The emphasis here is on the three agentic orientations of: the *habitual*, where the actor is oriented to past patterns of thoughts and action in an iterative fashion; the *practical-evaluative*, where the actor responds and makes judgements in relation to the demands and dilemmas of 'presently evolving situations'; and the *projective*, which involves the imaginative generation of a range of possible future trajectories of action (Morawska 2012: 4; Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 970; and see Stones 2008). Emirbayer and Mische argue that all three aspects are involved in any action, but that the balance will change from situation to situation, or more exactly, from one switch in the phenomenological horizon of action to another. Refinements in conceptual methodology that were able to draw on the existing agentic concepts within strong structuration and on those of Emirbayer and Mische would, however, have a prior necessary condition of existence. This prior condition would be an adequate synthesis of these agentic concepts at the ontological level, one that would almost inevitably require a degree of re-conceptualisation of some or all of the various components. One would need, for example, to ensure that the individual actors' practical-evaluative orientation is not reduced entirely to their conjuncturally specific knowledge. It is necessary to be clear about their relative properties, their conceptual relationship to each other, and the range of potential empirical relationships they could have to each other. Taking things in the opposite direction than this one of avoiding the reduction of the qualities of the larger concept to those of a constituent component, it is equally important not to ignore the genuine qualities of constituent components when these may be highly relevant to the explanation at hand. Thus, the *sui generis* qualities of conjuncturally specific knowledge, which are a component of the practical-evaluative, should not be neglected in situations where their inclusion would enrich and strengthen the analysis. It would be equally important to guard against the conflation of either of these two concepts with the situated interaction itself, which involves both elements in the unfolding of the interaction along with a number of other components (see Stones 2008).

It was mentioned above that processes of international migration usually involve many different sub-processes within a designated temporal and spatial contextual frame. In the language of critical realism this means that the *explanans*, the causes producing the outcome, will typically be plural. This relates to the domain that the Durkheimian tradition characterises in terms of the specialisation and differentiation of organisations, institutions, and individuals. Such differentiation brings with it a vital force field of social and infrastructural connections and power-laden interdependencies between pluralities of actors. One needs to ask which other groups, organisations, and individuals have the most influence on the actors most imminently involved in the surface events to be explained, through latent or manifest influencing or pressuring? There are likely to be plural social mechanisms or planes of analysis combining to produce any one social outcome, and any concrete event or episode will thus typically be the emergent outcome of several social processes (cf. Jessop 1981: 211–20; Sayer 1984: 103–25). In identifying these influential actors within networks, it is essential to analytically distinguish between those other actors and their powers that: i) combine to pre-constitute the immediately available powers of the particular actor-in-focus; and ii) those differentiated actors and their powers who the actor-in-focus relies upon – knowingly or unknowingly – in order for their future-oriented

intentions to be achieved.² Intervening mechanisms and forces can affect the causal field of an agent-in-focus either by affecting their current powers and well-being, for good or ill, or by affecting the conditions necessary or significant for their future plans and aspirations. Careful analytical work is required to identify specific processes, their own plural constituents, and their articulation with other processes. It should also be remembered that the problem-at-hand is often defined from the outset in value-relevant ways, which carry with them various moral implications, even when these are latent and passive rather than manifest and actively promoted.

In constructing any causal explanation it is necessary, for purposes of parsimony, to identify the networked combinations of different actors and forces most significant for the problem-at-hand. However, it is also necessary to try and match up the nature and rationale of the *explanandum* with the character and density of the explanation itself. Let us take as an example a case when the outcome at hand – say, the large-scale migration of a particular social category of people, or of people from a particular locality at a specific point in history – is linked to a related moral-strategic or counter-factual interest in how one might have either prevented or changed the character of that migration. In such an instance it would probably be necessary to provide a very dense account of the structural forces at play in the relevant context. To borrow a locution of Pierre Bourdieu's, it would be necessary to provide a dense enough account of position-practice relations so as to be able to reinsert the decisions of the migrants (and any other salient actors playing a part in the creation of the field of forces and pressures relevant to those decisions) back into the networks of 'relevant relationships' in which they were actually embedded (Bourdieu 1996/98: 6–7). The greater the emphasis on strategy, and therefore on what would have been necessary, counter-factually, for the migration not to have happened, or not to have happened in the way it did, then, *ceteris paribus*, the denser the networks of relevant relationships it would be necessary to investigate and account for. It could be the case that changes in the forces at work within any one from a range of different sub-processes or planes of analysis would have been sufficient to diminish the push factors at work within a particular case. Alternatively, it may be that an emergent combination of two or more planes of analysis was causally decisive. In such cases the value of parsimony would have to give way to greater, denser, levels of detail in order to genuinely address the knowledge-interests that had animated the formulation of the problem at hand.

3 Ideal types of migration text: contextualising and floating texts

These emphases on the ontology of position-practice relations within structuration, and on the discipline and precision required within the epistemology and methodology of analysis, need now to be combined with closer attention to an additional consideration. This is the need to pay detailed attention to the textual forms in which research insights and arguments are conveyed. The tools embraced and developed within the structuration-realist nexus allow the introduction of a key distinction between two ideal types of the textual presentation of case-study analyses of migration processes. I will label these, in shorthand, the *Hermeneutic-Structural Contextualiser*, and the *Hermeneutic-Structural Floater*. In both types the substantive analysis has been affected by the world view of

² In reality, one would clearly expect some overlap between these two sets of actors.

structuration theory, but in the second type the effect it has had on the shaping of substantive research and empirical evidence is much weaker. The importance of these ideal types is that they increase the capacity for systematic critical awareness of the status and quality of the knowledge offered by any given case-study account of international migration. I will attempt to elucidate the kinds of things that are at stake here by following the theoretical presentation of the ideal types with a close textual and theoretical analysis of a forthcoming paper of Ewa Morawska's in which empirical case studies are presented expressly in order to draw out broader theoretical points regarding structuration.

Figure 2: Types and degrees of knowledge regarding the contextual frame³

	Observer's Combined Hermeneutic-Structural <u>and</u> External Analysis	Observer's External Analysis
High Levels of Contextual Detail	1) Hermeneutic-Structural & External Contextualiser	2) External Contextualiser
Low Levels of Contextual Detail	3) Hermeneutic-Structural & External Floaters	4) External Floaters

Both of the ideal types, which are illustrated in quadrants 1 and 3 of Figure 2 involve the researcher-observer in looking at: i) the hermeneutic-structural experience of actors involved in migration processes; and ii) at the relevant structural networks in which these experiences are embedded. The term 'hermeneutic-structural experience' refers to structuration theory's emphasis on the ways in which external social structures enter into the consciousness of individual actors as they perform their roles, duties, and so on, and do so in a way that is mediated by phenomenological and cultural influences within that individual and her social setting.

The reference to the hermeneutic-structural experience of actors means that the researcher refers, within their text, to empirical knowledge of some kind of the interpretative processes of actors within the relevant structural networks. The reference to relevant structural networks, in turn, points to all those differentiated and inter-dependent organisations, institutions and other power centres that provide antecedent conditions for, and future sanctions and rewards for, prospective actions. In its strongest form (quadrants 1 and 3), the analysis of structural networks involves not only analysis of elements that can be accessed from an external vantage point, but also of the hermeneutic-structural

³ For earlier versions of this figure, see Stones 1996: 75, 106.

experiences of actors situated within the structural networks. In accounts approached only from an external point of view (quadrants 2 and 4), both actions and structural networks will be interpreted without the benefit of evidence of the internal phenomenological and culturally inflected perspectives of the actors-in-situ.

While both of the textual ideal types I want to highlight (quadrants 1 and 3) include the hermeneutic-structural experience of actors *and* relevant structural networks in which these experiences are embedded, there are still significant differences between them. In one case there is the *textual presentation* of a high level of contextual detail of both elements, based on a high level of detailed contextual *knowledge*. In the other the presentation of substantive processes includes only low levels of contextual detail. It is important to note the relative autonomy of the text here, in that low levels of contextual detail provided in a text do not necessarily mean that the researcher does not possess more detailed knowledge. There are many reasons why a researcher-author may withhold some of their knowledge, either from presentation in this particular text (see Nichols 1991: 118–25), or from all the texts they produce. For such reasons, it is important to be aware both of the extent of knowledge presented in the particular text under analysis, and of the need to think across texts.

On the other hand, texts often claim more knowledge than the author actually possesses. A text can create an aura of knowing through the rhetorical techniques of what Roland Barthes calls a ‘reality effect’, which can function on the basis of our familiarity with, and unquestioning acceptance of, certain conventions, and this can serve to push into the background those things of which our knowledge is vague, insubstantial or non-existent, to gloss over or efface significant gaps in what we know (cf. Barthes 1992; Stones 1996: 157, 188). The mapping of contextual frames is important precisely because it prompts and guides reflection with respect to these subsumed or vacant spaces. When focusing in on any international migration research it is important to be on the look-out for those inevitable moments of subsumption when different actors – collective actors and individuals – and different sub-processes are collapsed into each other in a way that fails to address vast swathes of the contingent detail of networked relations underpinning situated interpretation, interdependencies, power and influence, resource deprivation and debt, stigma and persecution, command and response, consensus or conflict.

In any case, on the basis of – and corresponding to – the two theoretical ideal-types, we can distinguish between two types of text covering structuration-informed substantive case studies of migration processes. The first of these will involve densely populated, highly contextualised, accounts of the relevant hermeneutic-structural experience of actors and the related structural networks of relationships in which those experiences are embedded. As it is the combination of pertinent hermeneutic-structural experience and associated networks of relationships that makes the practices of actors understandable, the greater the relevant density and contextualisation provided, the better the understanding. The second type will veer much more towards sparsely populated, weakly contextualised accounts of hermeneutic-structural experience and related structural networks. That is, it will still be informed by structuration theory, but in a much slighter, vaguer, manner. We can label the first type of account, a *hermeneutic-structural contextualising text*, one in which the point of view of the actors involved in the migration process are recounted in ways that, to adapt a notion from Clifford Geertz (Geertz 1987/1974), are ‘experience-heavy’ and in which their *in situ* positioning in relation to the networks of relevant relationships that provide the context

for their subjectivity is fleshed out in ways that are ‘structurally-dense’. This can be contrasted with the second type of account, a more uprooted or *hermeneutic-structural floating text*, in which the *in situ* point of view of actors is presented in ways that are ‘experience-light’ and ‘structurally-sparse’.

The distinction between contextualiser and floater accounts will always be a relative judgement made when comparing one account with another, or made against a benchmark of what an exhaustive account appropriate to the problematic at hand would look like. The category of a *floating text* suggests an analysis made from a viewpoint metaphorically akin to that of traversing geographical space and historical time from the vantage point of a hot air balloon, taking a somewhat distant, bird’s eye, view of what is going on below. Accounts provided from such a vantage point often have the strengths and advantages of breadth and scope, but can lack the ability to provide a more detailed fleshing out of, and contextualised embedding of, the relevant networks of relationships, events and processes in focus. Floating accounts are also typically uneven, missing out important tranches of time and space and the relevant social processes that went on within them, as if their hot air balloon has periodically sailed above the clouds, shrouding the events below from sight (cf. Stones 1996: 74–8 and *passim*).

With respect to causal processes relevant to a particular explanation, including the practices of actors, the networks of relationships in which these are embedded, and ensuing processes and sequences, it is useful to seriously question the extent to which a text provides more or less detailed coverage of these, including the contiguity of their relations with each other (cf. Stones 1996: 75–8, 161–2, 183–8). By contiguity I refer to the combined temporal and spatial dimensions of the relations between entities and actors as they unfold in each successive moment of history. Related aspects of a text can be thought of in these terms. One useful, initial, way of thinking about different levels of contiguity is in terms of the *duration* of a text with respect to relevant realms of evidence; the ways in which a text can take 30 pages to present an interaction that unfolded over a few minutes of real time, compared to how whole lives, 20 years of migrant history, or a host of macro processes required to provide necessary conditions for the push factors underpinning a large-scale migratory movement, can be summarised in one or two sentences of exposition that come and go within seconds (cf. Genette 1979; Bordwell 1993: 71). In the latter cases, time is radically condensed and summarised, rhetorically subsumed, in one way or another. But so is space, with textual reference to only a few places and settings from within a much more expansive spatial configuration. In such cases there is clearly a low level of contextualisation.

4 Conceptual methodology in Morawska’s summary account of transatlantic migration from the Polish village of Maszkienice 1885–1914

Against this backdrop I now want to focus on a recent article of Morawska’s in order to draw out just how greater awareness of the status of textual accounts can be gained by adopting the device of a theorised contextual frame as a point of critical reference. In ‘Studying International Migration in the Long(er) and Short(er) Durée’, Morawska places a structuration emphasis on the mutual constitution and reconstitution of human agency and

social structures within the unfolding of social processes. In this article, however, she is also concerned to emphasise that this is entirely consistent with the realist emphasis on analytical dualism whereby it is possible, at any one point in the structuration process, to analytically separate the 'factually distinguishable' structural and agency elements within this process. Such an emphasis, Morawska writes, is clearly there in the way she typically carries out her research – one that we have already noted above. That is, she begins her analysis by identifying the enabling and constraining structural contexts within which the people she examines conduct their activities, and then follows this with analyses of the actors' creative negotiation with their conditions, and with a focus on the intended and unintended consequences of actors' negotiations on structural outcomes. Her substantive argument is illustrated empirically by 'local statistical surveys and ethnographic studies conducted in Polish villages from the onset to the decline of mass transatlantic migration in the period 1870s–1930s' (Morawska 2012: 1). The length of time spanned by the illustration is indicative of one of Morawska's other theoretical aims in the piece, and this is to show how a structuration approach, with its emphasis on ongoing processes evolving over time, is particularly suited to examining the *longue durée*. This is so even though, as we shall see, Morawska in fact focuses a good deal of the example, within this longer period, on a more focused analysis of the pioneer migrants in the period of the mid 1880s, before the onset of mass transatlantic travels from this area of Poland in succeeding decades (2012: 7).

The substantive points Morawska makes in support of many of her arguments about the *longue durée* have, I would argue, a floating status. In fact, they often move outside the two ideal types of empirically informed structuration accounts I have sketched in, and those elements of the argument are thus best placed in quadrant 4 of Figure 2. Overall, the arguments on the *longue durée* are always informed by the broad structuration ethos, but they exhibit relatively little detail of the structural-hermeneutic experiences of *in situ* actors and include sparsely populated, weakly contextualised accounts of relevant structural networks. The entirely legitimate and valuable requirement of doing justice to powerful macro structures with a significant temporal and geographical reach, and therefore to provide a bird's eye view of these, leads to the uprooting of these structures from the networks of relevant relationships in which they are, in fact, embedded. Thus, Morawska writes of the accelerated urbanisation-and-industrialisation in Eastern Europe, in the five decades preceding the First World War, as being:

initiated and executed from above by the old feudal classes, constrained by the dependent character of the region's economic advance, which lacked internal impetus and was significantly influenced and subordinated to the far more developed core countries of Western Europe, and encumbered by the ubiquitous remnants of a feudal past in social forms and political institutions. The abolition of serfdom and alienation of noble estates (1848 in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and 1861/62 in Russia), executed without rearrangement of the socioeconomic order and combined with a demographic explosion, impoverished and dislocated large segments of the population previously occupied in the countryside, especially landless peasants and rural petty traders and craftsmen...The adverse effects on the impoverished residents of the belated and incomplete modernization of the socioeconomic structures in the south-eastern part of Poland were particularly pronounced owing to the profound backwardness of this region and its semi-colonial status under the political

domination of Austria (Poland was partitioned between Russia, Austria, and Germany in 1793 and did not regain independence until 1918) (Morawksa 2012: 8).

A structural ethos is apparent in the various indications of external forces and pressures working upon, and always at least in part constraining, both the old feudal classes and the landless peasants, rural petty traders and craftsmen. However, while we can see that there are structural dynamics propelling the dependent character of the region's economic advance, the abolition of serfdom, and the alienation of the noble estates, there is little detail about any of them. Neither is there any contextual embedding of them within connecting networks of relevant relationships, either with respect to the networks that pre-constitute aspects of the structural processes at any one point, or to those that the processes rely upon to perpetuate them at the next temporal stage. The picture we are presented with is experience-light and structurally sparse.

None of this, I should emphasise, is meant as a critique of these aspects of Morawska's short, persuasive, account. Rather it is to briefly demonstrate the kind of enhanced critical awareness of texts that can be provided by the approach I am suggesting. There is something inevitable about the need to introduce experience-light, structurally sparse, elements into discussions of the *longue durée*. Those substantive aspects of textual accounts that are, in fact, significantly informed by strong structuration's emphasis on networks of position-practice relationships and the hermeneutic-structural nexus at their heart, will almost inevitably be confined to the intermediate or meso, and micro, levels. A major role of the macro realm in structuration studies is to provide a broader, but inevitably weaker, context for the more focused studies. This is not to say that some local, restricted, dimensions of the macro elements required to frame these meso and micro realms cannot themselves be subsequently focused upon and subjected to the strong structuration treatment. It is necessary to recognise these possibilities and to transform them into actualities where strategically appropriate. It is important, however, to recognise that there is a difference between contextualiser studies whose substantive content is shot through with the effects of the structuration approach, and those floater studies, or elements of studies, whose spirit and form is informed by a structuration ethos, but whose substantive content is touched by it only in relatively rudimentary ways.

Morawska's argument becomes more densely contextualised and experience-heavy once it focuses in on one village, and concentrates upon the role played by, at first one – a young Maszkienican who left home in 1885 to dig coal in Pennsylvania – and then two more, and then yet two more, pioneer migrants from the village of Maszkienice in south-eastern Poland. These pioneers acted within, and were responding to, particular conditions at home and in the United States. We have already seen how Morawska sketches in some of the general character and large-scale influences on these conditions at home. The pioneer migrants, actively and creatively responding to, and negotiating with, their *in situ* conditions, played a significant contributory role in creating subsequent structural outcomes that, in turn, became the facilitating and motivating conditions for the next wave of migrants. Morawska recounts, in telling external detail, the 'demonstration effect' created by the first pioneer's display of his relative wealth on return to the village after a period of two and a half years – 'sporting a smart suit, a derby, a celluloid collar, and a shiny cravat and telling stories about how he ate fat meat and white bread everyday in America...[and as] with his American savings [he] purchased a dozen or so hectares of land and began

building a new house, the villagers went wild with envy and desire' (Morawska 2012: 11). One may legitimately wonder about the precise hermeneutic sources of interpretation for the motivational verbs of envy and desire at the conclusion of this sentence, but we can see that the interpretation is, at the very least, based on experience-near sources.

A trickle of followers turned, in time, into a stream and then a river of migrants from the village to the United States, as the repeated demonstration effects of their achievements created – in the terms Morawska borrows from Emirbayer and Mische – a new imaginary in the minds of the villagers. This was an ability to imagine a realistic alternative life and related future trajectories of action that could bring that life about. Their future-oriented, imaginative, *projective* capacity could be said to inform action-inducing *practical-evaluative* judgements that tipped the balance in favour of migration to America. This was a judgement for change as against carrying on with their previously habitual eking out of the barest subsistence from fragmented and underdeveloped agricultural conditions, and from seasonal labour migrations to farms in Hungary and Austria and coalmines and brick factories in upper Silesia (Morawska 2012: 9–10). While the combination of early ethnographic studies and local statistical surveys Morawska draws on provide a hermeneutic-structural dimension to her analysis, along with some immersion in significant networks of locally relevant relationships, it is still apparent that the texture of these aspects of the account belong either in quadrants 2 or 3, rather than firmly in highly contextualised quadrant 1. Posing a counter-factual question can highlight the clear limits in the detail provided of hermeneutic-structural perceptions, and of the density of relevant structural networks. Of all the structural networks of relevant relationships inhabited by the migrants of Maszkienice – and perceived by them in terms that included an intuitive or explicit ordering of concerns – which of the networks would have had to change in order for those who did leave for America not to have done so? And, further, what were the possibilities of those structures being changed in the necessary way?

A key point about the greater critical awareness to be gained from the approach advocated here is the increased sensitivity to the relativity and specificity of judgements that it promotes. Thus, notwithstanding the point I've just made about the degree of contextualisation required for counter-factuals, the relative weight of actors' own experiences within Morawska's more *in situ* argument about the inhabitants of Maszkienice, when compared with the *longue durée* accounts, is readily apparent. One can see this, for example, in her account of the building up and embedding, over time, of their stocks of knowledge of what SST calls *conjuncturally-specific* information about migration built up through letters and the stories of returnees, about such things as:

...living and working in particular American cities and industries, available housing and the possibilities of savings, the best routes and cost of travel to west European ports and on the ships across the Atlantic, and the appropriate answers to questions posed by immigration officials at US entry ports in Ellis Island in New York and Boston (where the majority of immigrants landed) (Morawska 2012: 13)

As Morawska puts it, there developed a (trans)local information system which began to 'exert an "external" impact on individuals considering migration to America who relied on it in making their decisions as to whether, when, where, and how to travel' (*ibid.*: 14).

It would certainly be possible to imagine an account that provided greater density in relation to the networks of relevant relationships combining to create the context for the lives and migration decisions of the Maszkienice migrants. However, there is enough substantive flesh on the bones of Morawska's account to provide a persuasive *prima facie* argument that these are actors making active, relatively well informed, practical judgements, on their conditions. In terms of the plural conditions constituting the immediate future of migrants setting out on their journey to the United States, a case is made for them having a significant grasp of the characteristics of those 'differentiated actors and their powers' who they will rely upon in order for a safe arrival in the new country to be achieved.

Combining elements of active appropriation of their structural context from the perspective of their old habitus, and being able to envision the possibility of an alternative life, the post-pioneer wave of migrants were able to successfully place themselves in radically new structural conditions in which their habits and dispositions would, in turn, be partially and unevenly reformed (cf. Morawska 1996; Stones 2005: 148–79). It is an important part of Morawska's purpose to emphasise that the characteristics and orientations of actors are themselves changed by the structuration process, such that they themselves are as much outcomes of a structuration process as the emergent social structures they help to produce. Morawska's point is to empirically reinforce Margaret Archer's realist emphasis on the existence and analytical separability of social structures and actors, each with their own specific characteristics (see Archer 1995, 2000). Both actors and social structures, she wants to indicate, have pre-existing qualities and can also be more or less amenable to change through mechanisms of structuration. In the parts of her text where she focuses a contextual eye upon the people and conditions of Maszkienice, she is able to reveal important details about how these mechanisms worked through an articulation of structural conditions and agency in a way that would not have been possible from the vantage point of a floating macro analysis.

5 Conclusion

I have attempted to endorse the relevance of structuration studies to research and analysis in international migration. I have also argued that it is possible to gain a greater critical appreciation of the quality and status of knowledge within structuration case studies through paying closer attention to the kinds of epistemological and methodological concerns developed within strong structuration theory (SST). In order to help establish this, I have introduced the device of a theorised contextual frame that can provide a systematic point of critical reference by which to assess the arguments and evidential bases of particular accounts. Combining SST with elements of critical realism, I have also argued for the need to take conceptual methodology seriously when negotiating the journey, in both directions, between contextual frame and empirical evidence. The two ideal types of text incorporating hermeneutic-structural issues – contextualising and floating – were presented to help sharpen a sense of the value of the theoretical tools presented for the critical appreciation of the status and quality of particular research accounts. Ewa Morawska's recent structuration-inspired account of migration to America from Polish villages from the 1870s onwards was drawn on to briefly illustrate and exemplify the added value and significant potential of the approach.

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