

The Deterrent of Concepts in Applying Sociotechnical Theories in Research

Irja Shaanika and Tiko Iyamu

Information Technology, Informatics and Design, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Cape Town, South Africa

iyamut@cput.ac.za

Abstract: Researchers and postgraduates are increasingly exploring and applying sociotechnical theories such as structuration theory, actor-network theory, and activity theory for their studies. In the pursuit of selecting and applying the theories to improve rigour, complexities and confusion surge from the lack of understanding of the concepts. The challenges shape research outcomes, including the duration, the valuable time spent trying to ensure the most appropriate use of the theories. This research examines how the sociotechnical theories' concepts are confused and the influence it has on studies. The findings emphasise the implications of Lexicon, selection criteria, and interchangeability while also highlighting the lack of appropriateness in research. By addressing these issues, this research offers original, actionable strategies for researchers who are new to sociotechnical theories and postgraduates in exploring and paying more attention to the concepts. Additionally, it contributes to the wider discourse on the application of sociotechnical theories in research, highlighting the significance of concepts within context and fields.

Keywords: Deterrent of Concepts, Sociotechnical Theories, Information System, Research

1. Introduction

Over the years, there has been an increase in the application of sociotechnical theories in research particularly, in qualitative studies (Shaanika et al., 2025; Iyamu, 2024; Sekgweleo et al., 2017). This could be attributed to the quest to improve the rigour and credibility of qualitative studies (refs). Sociotechnical theories are foundational for gaining a deeper understanding of social systems and structures, and they therefore guide research across various disciplines (Abu Hassim et al., 2024). Walker et al. (2007) describe sociotechnical theories as a set of concepts that speak towards the interrelatedness of social and technical aspects of entities, including objects, subjects, and organisations. Some of the commonly used sociotechnical theories include activity theory (AT) by Vygotsky, structuration theory (ST) by Anthony Giddens, actor-network theory (ANT) pioneered by the French sociologists in the persons of Bruno Latour, John Law, and Michael Callon (1988), contingency theory (CT), technology acceptance model (TAM) and diffusion of innovation (DoI) (Fair & Modafferi, 2022; Iyamu, 2024).

Sociotechnical theories are usually applied as lenses to guide data analysis and the interpretation of findings (Shaanika et al., 2025; Sekgweleo et al., 2017). Through their lenses, sociotechnical theories provide a theoretical basis for describing and explaining complex phenomena and inform practical applications of systems (Abu Hassim et al., 2024). According to Nehemia-Maletzky et al. (2018), sociotechnical theories are employed to guide the analysis of the data, allowing researchers to gain a better understanding of why things happen in the way they do. Dennehy and Conboy (2017) asserted that theories are used as conceptual frameworks for analysing complex and human activities within social systems. There has not been a debate about whether theories should be applied in research. The focus has been on the significance of applying sociotechnical theories, which have been documented in the literature (Bostrom et al., 2009).

The potential benefits have helped to grow the popularity of sociotechnical theories across social sciences disciplines such as healthcare, accounting, education, psychology, and information systems (IS). Even though the theories have been used widely across fields, their application continues to be challenging for researchers and postgraduates (Iyamu, 2024). The challenges inspire further studies. At the time of this study, we could only identify a few works that are closely related to addressing the challenges. Iyamu (2024) proposes a set of guidelines for selecting and applying sociotechnical theories in research. Shaanika et al. (2025) developed a three-step approach to ease the selection of sociotechnical theories. Chirisa and Matamanda (2025) reported on the sociotechnical theory that can be used as a lens to understand the challenges of extreme weather events in the global south. Despite the work, challenges persist. One of the challenges is attributed to confounded confusion and misunderstanding of sociotechnical theories' concepts.

When applying sociotechnical theories, understanding the associated concepts is important and contributes to the plausibility associated with the theory. This is primarily the concepts influence and shape the thinking and outcome of the study. Terminology refers to "the study of and field of activity concerned with the collection,

description, processing and presentation of terms that are lexical items belonging to specialised areas of usage of one or more languages” (Bowker, 2019, p. 5). The concepts lead to ambiguity, multiplicity, and interchangeability, which pose various difficulties in research. For example, ambiguity manifests into misunderstanding of terms or concepts such as actor. In activity theory, an actor is a living being with consciousness (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 1997). While in ANT, it refers to humans and non-humans (Tatnall, 2003). In simplistic terms, structuration theory defines ‘structure’ as rules and resources (Giddens, 1984), while the contingency theory refers to it as an interrelation between levels of entities within an environment (Blanton et al., 1992). These are some of the concepts that cause confounded confusions for many postgraduates and researchers who are new to sociotechnical theories.

Interchangeability leads to the loose use of terms or concepts to represent or describe things, thereby misrepresenting or associating different meanings and levels of relevance. Logan et al. (2018) emphasise that interchangeable use of concepts or terms may cause an inaccurate description of an object and affect the fathom of differentiate may be used interchangeably to describe the same phenomenon. Understanding sociotechnical theories’ terminologies is not an easy task, and never has been. van Mil and Henman (2016) draw our attention to some of the influencing factors that the understandings of terminologies, which are shaped by various factors such as language, education and cultural differences. The authors further argued that it’s therefore critical to define terminologies in a study, as readers are often from different backgrounds, where the same terminology has another connotation. Thus, there is a need to provide clarification for the different concepts or terminologies from the various sociotechnical theories perspectives. The objective of the paper was, therefore, to understanding the deterrent to the sociotechnical theories concepts in research and the influence it has on the outcome.

For logical flow purposes, this paper is organised into six main sections. It began with an introduction. The this followed by a comprehensive literature review that covers three critical, core areas of the paper. In the third section, the methodology as applied in the study is discussed. The findings towards achieving the objective of the paper are discussed in the fourth section. We highlight some implications of the study in the fifth section, and a conclusion is drawn in the last section.

2. Literature Review

The review of literature focuses on the two fundamental aspects of the study, which are concepts and terminology. Both entities cut across the sociotechnical theories under discourse. From the concept perspective, the focus is on actor, agency, and structure.

2.1 Concepts in Sociotechnical Theories

Actor is a concept that appears in activity theory, actor-network, and structuration theory. In activity theory, an actor refers to a human with consciousness. Although the word or concept is scarcely mentioned or used in other theories, it is not the focus. The concept of actor in actor-network theory refers to any entity, human or non-human, that has the capacity to make a difference (Callon, 1986). In Rogers (1995; 2003) explanation, the actor is an individual, group, or organisation that plays a role in the process of adopting a social system. Giddens (1984) in structuration theory interchangeably uses the terms actor and agent, as humans with knowledge and reflexivity, meaning they have "have, as an inherent aspect of what they do, the capacity to understand what they do while they do it" (p. xxii).

Agency is a common concept in AT, ANT, and ST sociotechnical theories. AT describes agency as the capacity of an individual or a group to act intentionally towards the transformation of social structure (Engeström, 1999). In ANT, agency is the capacity to act and influence change within a network (Latour, 2005). In Giddens (1984, p. 9). “Agency refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing those things”. Thus, “agency concerns events of which an individual is the perpetrator, in the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently” (p. 9).

Agency in AT, ANT, and ST might seem like the same in meaning because of the verbal or textual similarity in the form of “capability to act”, but the difference is materially more significant to theorists with perennial interest. The fundamental difference lies in their fabrics of ‘intentionality’ (AT), ‘distributed action’ (ANT), and ‘independently’ (ST). Internationality allows for the distinction between humans and things in gaining an understanding of individuals’ conscious actions (Jarzabkowski & Wolf, 2010). From the AT perspective, the notion of intentionality is employed in the construction of human consciousness (Nardi, 1996). In ANT,

distributed agency is described as a situation where no actor acts alone (Latour, 2005). The term independent is used to distinguish the relationship between agents and their actions in ST. According to Giddens (1984, p. 26), “structure has no existence independent of the knowledge that agents have about what they do in their day-to-day activity”.

Structure in its dialectical variety evidently shows that it cannot be viewed from a single perspective. Structuration describes structure as “rules and resources, organised as properties of social systems” (Giddens, 1984 p. 25). From the ST standpoint, Iyamu (2024) emphasises that structure should not be viewed or read from a linguistic point. Structure is viewed as the entity that edifice the design, relationships, and coordination of an environment in CT (Iyamu, 2024).

2.2 Terminology

Terminology refers to specific words and technical lexicons used within a context or discipline. Coancă and Museanu (2010) explained that terminology is purposely to be specific about meaning and ensures unambiguity in fields of activity. It is thus understood to reduce ambiguity among researchers and industry professionals, and to eradicate confusion (Dam & Tarp, 2017). Thus, the use of terminology can, in research, ensure consistency, leading to better and uniform understanding. However, there exist challenges. One of the challenges is that the word ‘terminology’ is usually used synonymously with spoken ‘language’ (Diethelm & Goschler, 2015). Due to the significant role of terminology, Bowker (2017) explores the interdisciplinary relationship between lexicography and terminology to gain a better view of the consequences in fields of study.

The computing fields (computer science and information systems) have, over the years, witnessed a revolution of terminology, which are sometimes confused with or by lexicography (Bowker, 2017). From a language perspective, terminology can be misinterpreted or incorrectly used if the lexicon or dictionary is consulted primarily because both facets are broader in associating meanings (Dam & Tarp, 2017). Diethelm and Goschler (2015) emphasised that terminology must be appropriately used or applied and highlighted one of the problems as limited research about the use of terminology in the computing field. Another challenge, identified by Veisbergs (2023), is that terminologies have entities, which are multidimensional in character and sometimes affect meaning. This could be attributed to why and how computing terminologies have often been used loosely interchangeably, incorrectly or ambiguously (Khuwaileh & Khuwaileh, 2011).

3. The Significance of Sociotechnical Theories Appropriateness in Research

Sociotechnical theories are defined by concepts. These concepts are unique and are used to distinguish theories. Even with this special characteristic, researchers often face challenges in applying socio-technical concepts. The challenges are attributed to many reasons. 4 Sometimes the concepts portray different meanings other than those found and applied in everyday language, such as English. For example, in structuration theory, structure has a different meaning from the word structure found in English.

This study focuses on the most commonly applied sociotechnical theories in information systems studies to understand their underlying concepts. These sociotechnical theories include activity theory (AT), structuration theory (ST), actor-network theory (ANT), contingency theory (CT), technology acceptance model (TAM) and diffusion of innovation (DOI).

Sociotechnical theories are used to underpin studies where the social and technical aspects are intertwined (Hoda, 2025). According to Shaanika et al. (2025), socio-technical theories provide a holistic view of the interconnectedness between human actions and technological capabilities. Booth et al. (2016) explain that reality is complex, nonlinear, and developed through interaction between various humans and technical objects. Thus, without the socio-technical theories, the holistic view will be impossible to attain, as researchers' understanding of the phenomenon is limited to their natural views. A researcher's natural view consists of the objects and subjects as seen and experienced through the five senses: touch, sight, hearing, smell and taste. As a result, researchers gain meaning in the process and activities beyond the conventional interpretivist approach by applying socio-technical theories (Shaanika et al., 2025).

In many studies, socio-technical theories are known for guiding data analysis and interpretation. The socio-technical theories provide a lens through which one or more types of context can be understood (Bostrom et al., 2009). The lenses act as a microscope, enabling researchers to see things differently and think more deeply.

In addition to data analysis and interpretation of findings, socio-technical theories can be useful in guiding data collection, too. Grounded theory (GT) is an inductive approach to theory development that offers a systematic approach for data collection and analysis (Morse et al., 2021). During data collection, GT provides an iterative process which fosters a dynamic dialogue between data and emerging concepts (Adaba, 2026). Shaanika and Iyamu(2025) developed a five step guidelines for the iterative data collection in GT. The concurrent data collection and data analysis in GT distinguishes it from other qualitative approaches, making it a useful approach for studying complex socio-technical phenomena.

Socio-technical theories are very important as they shape how researchers view and understand the world. The sociotechnical theories provide a holistic view by providing a framework to guide data collection, analysis and interpretation of findings. Graham et al.(2007) argued that sociotechnical theories are useful as they provide an organisation for thinking, observing and interpreting what is seen. Sociotechnical theories act as an important heuristic devices that enable researchers to make sense of large amounts of data (Sovacool & Hess, 2017).

There is a need for researchers to know and understand the sociotechnical theories concepts before using them as a lens to underpin studies. This is because the researcher's understanding of the concepts shapes how the researcher applies socio-technical theories. Without a good understanding of the theory's concepts, the researcher risks being misguided and applying the theory incorrectly. This limits the researcher from using the theory correctly for its intended purpose. Consequently, this affects the outcome of the study, which is informed by how the theory concepts were applied during data collection, analysis and interpretation of the findings. Mueller and Raeth (2012) asserted that the conclusions that are drawn from empirical observations are influenced by the choice of a theoretical lens. Thus, based on the data analysis that was guided by a theory, findings are identified, which are then interpreted to gain a higher understanding that will inform the development of the solutions towards addressing the problem initially identified.

4. Methodology

This study applied a qualitative research strategy. This is because the study was concerned with understanding how researchers and postgraduate students are challenged with the application of sociotechnical theories concepts. According to Saunders et al. (2023), a qualitative research helps researchers understand complex systems, behaviours and processes that cannot easily be measured using numbers.

A case study was employed as a research design. Yin (2024) defines a case study as an empirical method used when the research focuses on a real-world process. Iyamu and Shaanika (2025) claimed that selecting a research design is not always straightforward because it is influenced by various factors, such as the objective and focus of the study. Based on the objective of this study, which was to examine how the sociotechnical theories' concepts are confused and the influence it has on studies, researchers and postgraduate students from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) were used as a case. The following criteria were used in selecting the researchers and post-graduate students: (1) all students were using sociotechnical theories to underpin their studies, (2) all students attended a research symposium where they shared views of challenges encountered.

Data was collected using the focus group discussion technique. A focus group discussion allows participants with common experiences to examine a particular subject of interest(Lune & Berg, 2017). During the discussion, the students were grouped according to the theories they used. This was to enable students with the same knowledge and understanding of the theories to be in the same group. The students were grouped into six groups according to the theories used to underpin their studies, namely: ANT, AT, DOI, CT, TAM and ST. The table below shows the group compositions

Table 1:

Program	Participants	Level	Codename	Theory
• Postdoctoral fellow	1	1 st	POD_01	Structuration Theory(ST), Activity Theory (AT)
• Doctoral Students	7	2 nd	DoS_01	Actor Network Theory (ANT)
		2 nd	DoS_02	Contingency Theory (CT)
		2 nd	DoS_03	Diffusion of Innovation(DOI)
		3 rd	DoS_04	Structuration Theory(ST),

Program	Participants	Level	Codename	Theory
• Master Students	7	3 rd	DoS_05	Technology Acceptance Model(TAM)
		3 rd	DoS_06	Actor Network Theory (ANT)
		4 th	DoS_07	Structuration Theory(ST),
		1 st	MoS_01	Activity Theory (AT)
		1 st	MoS_02	Technology Acceptance Model(TAM)
		1 st	MoS_03	Structuration Theory(ST),
		2 nd	MoS_04	Activity Theory (AT)
		3 rd	MoS_05	Actor Network Theory (ANT)
		3 rd	MoS_06	Technology Acceptance Model(TAM)
		4 th	MoS_07	Structuration Theory(ST),
Total	15			

5. Finding and Discussion

Lexicography, material implication, and selection criteria are found to be the most common and fundamental factors influencing the challenges being encountered in applying sociotechnical theories in research.

5.1 Lexicography

Often, lexicon is thought of and applied instead of the terminology. This confuses my emerging researchers and postgraduates. Terminology can be misinterpreted or incorrectly used if a lexicon or dictionary is consulted primarily because both facets are broader in associating meanings and are not limited to translation equivalents only. There is a strong relationship between lexicon and translation (Dam & Tarp, 2017). This makes the line between them thin, leading to confusion.

5.2 Material Implication

Material implication focuses on value within context. This requires distinctive attention because the value an agent brings to `problem-solving in a social system is highly significant. In structuration theory, an agent can induce discursive or practical consciousness, which can shape interaction and lead to a particular outcome. While in CT, material implication only focuses on direct sentences between entities. The implication is essential in formal reasoning and argumentation, such as data analysis and interpretation of findings. Material implications imbibe logic into reason, which is critically crucial in research.

5.3 Selection Criteria

A dichotomic understanding of the concepts from each sociotechnical theory perspective is crucial. Shaanika, Nyikana and Iyamu (2025) identified some of the challenges and proposed an approach to ease the selection of sociotechnical theories for research. This study fortifies the existing selection criteria by making it essential to avoid misunderstandings that lead to incorrect choices of theories for research. For example, the relation between structures in structuration theory and structures in contingency theory, including organisational setting are vastly different. So, if they are loosely applied, interchangeably used or misinterpreted, the outcome of the analysis will be skewed or produce false narratives.

6. Conclusion

This research examined the deterring factors in the application of Sociotechnical theories in research, revealing both opportunities and challenges emerging researchers and postgraduates often encounter. Our findings indicate that while sociotechnical theories have significant potential to improve the rigour of studies, it relies heavily on deterring factors, which are dynamics and fundamental to their successful applications. One key insight from our research is linguistic has major role to play in avoiding confusion in the context of each theory. Also, it is critical to gain an understanding of implications often fuel the confusion and shape the outcome of the study.

Additionally, gaps in technical expertise present further barriers, limiting emerging researchers and postgraduates' ability to advance the application of sociotechnical theories in their studies. Despite these challenges, emerging researchers and postgraduates that understand the deterring factors and how to select the theories will be better equipped to overcome the confusion caused by Lexicography and material implications. For emerging and postgraduates to improve the rigour of their studies through sociotechnical theories, they need to gain a better understanding of understanding the deterrent to the sociotechnical theories concepts in research and the influence it has on the outcome.

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