Using a Socio-psychological Approach for Understanding the Influence of Civil Society on Economic Activity*

ANDREA WERNER**

Verstehen zivilgesellschaftlicher Einflüsse auf Wirtschaftsaktivitäten mittels eines sozialpsychologischen Ansatzes

This paper proposes a socio-psychological approach for empirical research into the influence of civil society contexts on the practices of individual economic actors. This methodological approach is based on social theories that explicitly take into account the link between structure and agency, and the paper explains how such framework can be utilised in qualitative interview-based studies. To illustrate the usefulness of such socio-psychological approach, the paper reports on the findings of a research project that used this methodology as it sought to investigate the influence of Christianity on SME owner-managers' conceptualisations of practice.

Keywords: Civil Society, Interview-based Research, Structuration Theory, Discursive Psychology, Christianity, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

1. Introduction

There has been growing interest in recent years in civil society institutions and their potential to solve collective problems and, more specifically, to have a moderating influence on economic activity (e.g. Giddens 1998; Münkler/Fischer 2002). Observers are increasingly concerned over socially and morally unconstrained economic behaviour and its potentially destructive consequences both for society at large and for economic activity itself (Bakan 2004). Moreover, nation states, which have been considered the *main* institutions that have the ability and means to keep economic activity in check, seem to be less and less able (and willing) to provide the desired constraints due to the increasing globalisation of business activity and the proliferation of the free market model (Castells 2003). As a result, greater attention is being paid to those organisations, institutions and activities that make up civil society and their capacity to safeguard the well-being of societies and individuals.

Civil society may be broadly understood as the arena of "uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values" (LSE 2004). As such it is conceptualised against the sphere of the market, where human action is presumed to be guided by

---

* The article has been subject to a double blind peer review process. Date of submission: 6th September, 2007; revisited version accepted for publication: 7th May, 2008.

** Dr. Andrea Werner, Institute of Business Ethics, 24 Greencoat Place, London SW1P 1BE, UK, phone: +44-(0)20-77986062, fax: +44-(0)20-77986044, e-mail: andrea_werner@gmx.net, fields of expertise: the influence of socio-cultural institutions on business practice, ethics of SMEs, cross-national comparative studies in business ethics.

economic self-interest and rational calculation only (Bourdieu 1998: 79), but also against the more coerced structure of the state. Yet civil society is not an autonomous societal sphere, but may interact with both the state and the market (LSE 2004) and so may influence both institutions (Hems/Tonkiss 2000: 5).

However, even though civil society is typically associated with other-regarding norms and values and 'civic virtues', such as co-operative behaviour, solidarity, mutual support and norms of reciprocity (Putnam 2000), there are potential limitations to the effectiveness of civil society as a counterbalance to unconstrained economic activity. Münkler and Fischer (2002) point out, for example, that civil society related activities are often bound up with the societal actors' own life-worlds. This can lead to group egoisms or conflicts with other societal groups. Also, some social problems, for example, those where the effects are not personally and/or visibly felt, might not receive sufficient attention by civil society and might therefore not be tackled (ibid.). Other scholars have observed that societal actors are increasingly engaging with civil society in a more 'individualised' manner, i.e. their involvement is primarily motivated by their own interests and preferences rather than by a desire to contribute to a wider common good (e.g. Offe/Fuchs 2001; Bellah et al. 1996).

This ambiguous nature of civil society raises the important question of how, if at all, this societal arena *does* influence economic activity. This, however, is a question that may only be sufficiently explored through empirical studies.

This paper suggests *one* possible methodological approach for an empirical investigation into the influence of civil society on economic activity. It focuses on the level of the individual economic actor, seeking to understand how their activities might be influenced by the beliefs, norms and values that are transmitted, generated and fostered through civil society and its institutions.

First, a broad epistemological and ontological framework that appropriately captures the research problem will be outlined. Then, a socio-psychological methodology will be introduced, which is based on this epistemological framework and which adopts the framework for interview-based qualitative research. To illustrate how such socio-psychological approach can be applied in empirical research, the next section will outline some findings of a study that utilised this methodology. This study investigated the impact of Christianity – as one example of a civil society institution – on a particular group of economic actors: owner-managers of small and medium-sized companies. The concluding section will discuss how this approach might be adopted for research into other civil society contexts.

2. Giddens' structuration theory as epistemological framework

Social science offers a range of research paradigms or methodological frameworks to the (qualitative) researcher (Lincoln/Guba 2002). Each of these paradigms make different ontological and epistemological assumptions and are informed by and the product of different 'worldviews' (ibid.); and the challenge is to choose frameworks that appropriately capture the research phenomenon (as well as are in line with the researcher's own worldview).

For an empirical investigation of the influence of civil society on *individual* economic activity the author proposes that the methodological framework needs to accommodate two basic assumptions about the social world in order to study the phenomenon in a meaningful way:

(1) We must assume that human behaviour is – at least to a certain degree – of voluntaristic nature. In other words, we must presume that the actions of human beings are not causally determined by circumstances alone but that human beings have certain cognitive capabilities that mark them out as 'actors' or 'agents' who can take (some) control over their actions. If this was not the case, the individual would not be a meaningful level for studying said phenomenon.

(2) We must also assume that the actions of human agents are informed by their interaction with their socio-cultural environment. This means that we cannot assume a 'closed' or solipsistic concept of the human mind and consider the norms, beliefs and values that inform human action to be the products of some inner cognitive processes that are based on 'inbuilt' mental mechanisms (cf. Harré/Gillett 1994: 11). We need to regard these beliefs and values as the product of the actor's interaction with her (socio-cultural) environment. Otherwise we would not be able to draw a link between socio-cultural institutions and individual behaviour.

This section will focus on Giddens' (1984) *theory of structuration* as a broad epistemological framework or 'sensitising device' (Macintosh/Scapens 1990) that can be considered to appropriately capture these two assumptions. The following section will then introduce two theories that are compatible with and build on Giddens' theory and that can be applied to interview-based research.

At the heart of Giddens' structuration theory is the duality of agency and structure. Unlike the proponents of functionalism and structuralism, Giddens does not think that the social world should be solely understood in terms of 'objective' structures, a "form of societal totality" (Giddens 1984: 2), and that the actions of individuals should be (merely) regarded "as a result of forces that actors neither control nor comprehend" (ibid.: xvi). On the other hand, he critiques the interpretivist and hermeneutic traditions that focus on the subjective experience of the individual actor only and neglect the structural aspects of the social world. For Giddens, the social world consists of social practices that are ordered across space and time as they are recursively produced and reproduced through specific actions of societal actors (ibid.: 2).

Giddens regards human beings as *knowledgeable* actors that can – at least to a certain extent – reflexively monitor their actions (ibid.: 332, 375). He also views them as 'real' actors or agents, as perpetrators of an action in the sense that they could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently (ibid. 9). At the same time, Giddens holds that the conscious and 'tacit' knowledge[1] that informs the practices of

---

[1] Giddens distinguishes between discursive consciousness and practical consciousness. The former refers to the level of consciousness where agents consciously and discursively reflect about their actions. Giddens argues however that the knowledgeability or reflexive capacities of actors are largely carried in practical consciousness, i.e. on the level of tacit knowledge about "how to 'go on' in the contexts of social life" (Giddens: xxiii). Yet he holds that the line between discursive

human actors in their various action contexts derives from "structural features of wider social systems", which are available to them depending on their location within a societal setting (ibid.: 24). These structural features refer to rules and resources, which enable as well as constrain social action (ibid.: 25) and contain normative elements as well as codes of signification (ibid.: xxxi)[2]. The more often human actors then draw on structural features across time and space and thereby reproduce them in their social practices, the more stabilised or institutionalised they become (ibid.) – the very phenomenon that is implied in Giddens' term *structuration*.

The Giddensian framework can be applied to the research issue as follows: Civil society institutions can be thought of as a particular group of "structural features of wider social systems". These are to various extents available to societal actors who carry out economic activity; and their rules or resources may – or may not – tacitly or consciously inform the actors' practices in the economic sphere.

3. 'Discursive psychology' and 'discursive framing' as methodological frameworks for interview-based research

How can these more general ideas be applied to empirical research, more specifically, to interview-based research? Before we attend to this question some issues and challenges relating to interview-based research will be considered.

Interviews are a widely used qualitative method in social science and organisational research (King 1994). They are a popular method as – compared to other methods such as participant observation – they are relatively easy to carry out both in terms of access and resources. Interviews, however, provide *subjective* insight into the research topic from the interviewees' points of view (ibid.), which needs to be taken into account when drawing conclusions from interview data. Furthermore, a number of scholars hold that interview data should be regarded as *discourse* (e.g. Potter/Wetherell 1987): interviews should not be considered as a medium that provides *direct* insight into the actual experiences and practices of the interviewee as such but only into the *discursive* practices and *discursive* resources that the respondents use and draw on when talking about their life worlds.

Both the recognition that interviews (only) provide subjective insights into the research topic from an individual's point of view and that interview data are *accounts* of

---

and practical is fluctuating and permeable (ibid.: 4) and therefore the practical consciousness is potentially accessible to discursive reflection (ibid.: 26, 328). Giddens holds that the knowledgeability of actors is bounded on the unconscious (which is not accessible) and also on unacknowledged conditions/unintended consequences of action (ibid.: 282).

2 Giddens proposes three dimensions of structure: signification, domination and legitimation, which in the realm of human interaction correspond to communication (of meaning), power and sanction respectively, through the modalities of interpretative schemes, facility and norms (Giddens 1984: 28). However, he argues that these dimensions are only analytically separable but practically always interrelated (ibid.: 28, 32). With his emphasis on the reflexive (cognitive) capacities of human actors, Giddens regards 'signification' (meaning) as a crucial element of structure (ibid: 30).

experiences and practices need to be considered when choosing methodological frameworks.

Two frameworks that capture the peculiarities of interview-based research and are also compatible with Giddens' structuration theory are Harré and Gillett's (1994) *discursive psychology* and Watson and Harris' (1999) *discursive framing*.

Giddens – coming from a sociology perspective – is interested primarily in the specific *social* practices through which societal structures are recursively produced and reproduced. Although *discourse* is inseparable for him from social practices (Hendry 2000: 968) – as these are informed by "structural features", which, among other properties[3], contain codes of signification whose meanings can be communicated (Giddens 1984: 28) – he does not elucidate in great detail how discourse might impact on the level of the individual actor.

Harré and Gillett (1994) expound a socio-psychological approach that mirrors Giddens' theory but focuses on the *individual*, more specifically, on the role of discourse in the shaping of individual cognition (Hendry 2000: 968) and, subsequently, *conceptualising* of practices. As such, Harré and Gillett's (1994) *discursive psychology* can be understood as a theory that complements Giddens' theory of structuration (Hendry 2000: 971).

Like Giddens, Harré and Gillett grant individuals cognitive, reflexive capabilities, but they are critical of research traditions in psychology that assume a 'closed', solipsistic model of human cognition based on Cartesian thought (Harré/Gillett 1994: 4). Building on the work of Wittgenstein (1953), Harré and Gillett argue that *concepts*, the basis of thinking, are expressed by words which are located in languages (Harré/Gillett 1994: 21). But since language is a system of symbols or signs that is by implication shared with others, one cannot assume that human beings are "isolated cogniser[s] or interpreter[s] of the world" (ibid.) Human beings use language to jointly (re-)construct discourses within socio-cultural groups, and those discourses should, in Harré and Gillett's view, be regarded as an important part of the framework through which individuals interpret the world and conceptualise their worlds of practice (ibid.: 20-22).

In Harré and Gillett's approach, Giddens' "structural features of wider social systems" are conceptualised as "discourses" or "discursive contexts". Harré and Gillett hold that human beings are exposed to and inhabit a number of socio-cultural discourses or discursive contexts that arise from the historical, political, cultural, social and interpersonal settings that individuals find themselves in. Each of these discourses, which embody clusters of signification as well as norms, rules, conventions etc. (ibid.: 20, 25f.), have the potential to shape the individual's thoughts and – subsequently – behaviours (ibid.: 27). Harré and Gillett further point out that people adopt or commit themselves to certain positions within the discourses they inhabit (ibid.: 140), which might also be influenced by the interaction with other discourses. The cognitive 'task' of the individual consists then in 'managing' those interacting discourses and their positioning within those discourses (ibid.: 26). To what extent an individual can actually engage in such kind of mental activities depends however on the individual's abil-

---

3 See footnote 2.

ity to (discursively) reflect on the contexts that she finds herself in (ibid.: 180). This ability, again, may be influenced by her social environment (Bourdieu 1998: 136).

In Harré and Gillett's framework, civil society institutions in their various different forms can be regarded as "discourses" and "discursive contexts" containing various codes of significations, rules, norms etc. that individual actors inhabit or are exposed to and that may (or may not) influence the way they conceptualise their worlds of business practice.

Watson and Harris' (1999) *discursive framing* approach, finally, builds on the thoughts and ideas that are part of Giddens' (1984) structuration theory and Harré and Gillett's (1994) discursive psychology, and apply them to interview-based research[4].

Similar to Harré and Gillett, who attribute importance to linguistic concepts as concepts through which individuals interpret the world, Watson and Harris argue that human beings need language or talk both to make and to understand the realities of the world around them (Watson/Harris 1999: 20), but that *how* they make sense of the world depends on the discursive resources that are available to them in their culture (ibid. 6).

Watson and Harris' use the term *discursive framing* to describe this human sense-making activity:

> "Discursive framing is a process whereby human beings draw on sets of linguistic resources, categories, and concepts made available in their culture to make sense of a particular aspect of their lives and are thereby influenced in the way they conduct themselves in that part of their life." (ibid.: 6)

For them, interviews are specific social situations in which such sense-making process can take place (ibid.: 20). In the interview process, respondents talk about the aspects of their lives in which the researcher is interested. The way they talk about these or frame their accounts discursively, gives the researcher an insight into *what* and *how* culturally available discursive resources impact on the respondents' conceptualisations of practice.

A sense-making process is usually considered to be a retrospective activity (Weick 1995: 24) because human actors seek to make sense of an aspect of their lives through recounting experiences, events and practices that have already occurred. Yet Watson and Harris hold that those discursive resources that respondents use to make (retrospective) sense of a certain aspect of their lives also influence the way "they conduct themselves in that part of their life" (see definition above). In other words, they hold that one can, through a sense-making process that takes place in an interview situation, also draw some conclusion as to how those discursive resources might influence the respondents' behaviour in the present and perhaps also in the future.

Of course, there are a number of limitations to interview based research: Respondents may be selective in their accounts and as they usually have access to different sets of discursive resources they might frame events differently in different situations (Gid-

---

[4] Watson and Harris (1999) used this approach to investigate how managers make sense of their worlds of managerial practice.

dens 1984: 4), which may make it difficult to judge which discursive resources are actually more relevant to the respondent. Moreover, there is also the possibility that the language people use to explain their behaviour – even if they seek to be truthful in their accounts – may not always correctly describe what actually prompts them to engage in such behaviour, for example, if they do not have access to those discursive resources that would provide a more appropriate explanation for their behaviour (Harré/Gillett 1994: 178). A final possible 'gap' is between 'conceptualisation' and 'practice'. Even if the way the respondents conceptualise their practices provides them with a strong motivation to act in a particular way, they might not always do so, for example, because of the 'weakness of the will'.

All this makes talk a rather uncertain phenomenon but it might serve as an indicator that provides "uncertain, but often interesting clues for the understanding of social reality and ideas, beliefs, values and other aspects of 'subjectivities'" (Alvesson/Karreman 2000: 1146).

In summary, a socio-psychological approach can be considered a suitable methodological framework in interview-based research for the investigation of social phenomena that have an explicit structure-agency dimension, such as the influence of civil society institutions on individual economic actors[5]. The accounts that respondents produce can provide insight into how they draw on linguistic and conceptual resources made available through civil society (and other) discourses to frame and rationalise their practices. The findings of such research will then allow the researcher to draw some conclusions as to how these discursive contexts may affect the individual's attitudes and behaviours.

4. An example: A study on Christian SME owner-managers conceptualisations of practice

To illustrate how this methodological framework can be applied in empirical research, this section reports on some findings of a research project that utilised this socio-psychological approach. This study sought to empirically investigate how adherence to the Christian faith – as one example of a civil society institution – might impact on the way SME owner-managers – as one specific group of economic actors – conceptualise their worlds of business practice (Werner 2006).

The reason to focus on this group of economic actors lay in the fact that in SMEs ownership and control coincide and that therefore owner-managers are thought to be in a better position to bring their personal values[6] to bear on their business compared, for example, to managers who act on behalf of absent shareholders (Spence 1999). In other words, it was assumed that if Christian identity does have an impact on economic activity, this group of economic actors is relatively likely to reveal such effects.

---

5 The framework's explicit consideration of the micro-macro dimension of the research phenomenon makes it distinct from other approaches and techniques in qualitative research such as *symbolic interactionism, grounded theory* or *circular interviewing techniques*. Their starting points, or foci, are micro-sociological or inter-personal phenomena and they do not overtly take the structuring influence of macro-contexts into account.

6 As informed by their socio-cultural environments.

Christianity was singled out for investigation because it has been one of the longest-standing civil society institutions in Western societies that have – based on transcendent beliefs – espoused other-regarding norms and values. As such, Christianity can make a considerable impact on the way societal and economic activities are carried out. At the same time, secularisation and other societal processes in Western societies have impacted Christianity in a way that calls its 'positive' influence into question. Firstly, fewer and fewer people actively practice Christianity, as the strong decline in church attendance indicates (Offe/Fuchs 2001: 433; Putnam 2000: 72), and as a result at least the *overt* influence of Christianity has been waning. Furthermore, a number of scholars observe a "privatisation of religion" (e.g. Herms 1991; Fort 1999) among those who (still) regard themselves practising Christians. It means, for example, that religious moral tenets might only be considered to be relevant for one's private sphere but not for one's participation it the public sphere; or that the Christian faith is primarily being looked at as a source of spiritual fulfilment and psychological comfort but not as a framework that could 'transform' society. This ambiguity of the Christian faith, which resembles the ambiguity around civil society in general, makes it an interesting civil society institution to study.

The study was based on qualitative interviews with the aim to gain an in-depth understanding of *how* and *why* Christianity might make an impact on SME owner-managers. The research was carried out among 21 SME owner-managers in Germany and the UK, which embedded the research in a European context but also enabled the researcher to explore possible national differences. The respondents chosen for the investigation would describe themselves as practising Christian and came from 'traditional' and 'evangelical' strands of Protestant mainstream and free churches[7]. The sample contained a range of sectors and company sizes. Some efforts were made to match the set-up of the two country samples in terms of sectors, as it was thought that sector-specific features might play some role in the way owner-managers conceptualise their business practices (Curran/Blackburn 2001: 16-19).

An *inductive* approach was pursued in order to ensure that the phenomenon was captured from the respondents' point of view. In other words, the interviews were not used to test any hypotheses which could be derived from theological literature or to impose any other theoretical frameworks on the respondents, but to identify relevant Christian concepts and beliefs from the interviewees' responses to more general questions.

The interviews thus followed a semi-structured format. In the first part, the respondents were asked some open-ended questions concerning the respondents' business and faith/church background. The main part of the interview consisted of a number of general questions concerning the impact of faith on the respondent's business practices, for example:

- Where and how do you bring your faith to your business? Can you give me some examples?

---

[7] This particular group of Christians was chosen largely for reasons of access, respondents being contacted mainly through Christian business networks and personal contacts.

- What role does your faith play in decisions that you take in your business life? Can you give me some concrete examples?
- Do you sometimes perceive a contradiction or conflict between your faith and your role as owner-manager? If so, to what extent and where? How do you deal with it?
- To whom do you feel to have a responsibility as a Christian with regards to your business?

A third part explored the respondents' wider civic engagement.

Not all questions were covered in each interview, it was rather more important to encourage the respondents to talk freely about their experiences. In cases where conversation 'dried up', more specific questions were asked, e.g. concerning specific stakeholder relationships. In a follow up interview, which took place about six months after the first interview, the researcher used leads from the first interview to probe the respondents further for examples and incidents that could illuminate the relationship between faith and business practice.

In the data analysis stage, the socio-psychological framework that was outlined above was used to identify from the interview material a number of different facets concerning the relationship between the respondents' beliefs and their practices. The following sections will outline some of these findings[8]. The first section will look at the range of Christian conceptual frames that were used by the respondents and the effects these concepts had on the owner-managers. Next, the different kinds of practices that the respondents linked with their faith will be outlined; thereby exploring the space between beliefs, attitudes and behaviour. Then, the interacting influences of other discursive contexts will be described. The final section will report on the impact of the church as a *social* context.

4.1 Engagement with Christian conceptual frames

The main finding of the study was that the Christian context clearly does have an impact, as it provides Christian owner-managers with a range of distinctive (discursive) resources, which can have considerable implications for the way they structure their practices.

Some of these resources were conceptual frames, all of which rooted in Christian doctrine, which the respondents used to rationalise and explain their actions. Five such frames were identified from the data: *calling, stewardship, witness, holiness* and the reference to *general Christian moral tenets*[9]. Each of these had distinct significations, relating in different ways to the presence of the 'transcendent' and providing the respondents with different sets of distinct constraints and enablers.

---

8 The full findings can be found in Werner (2006). Werner (forthcoming) outlines and discusses some of the findings in more detail.

9 Most of the respondents referred to more than one of these conceptual frames in their accounts. They are therefore not to be regarded as elements of a typology.

For example, a number of respondents referred to the concept of *stewardship*, which entailed the belief that the business was entrusted to them by God or that God/Christ was the Lord of their business. This created a strong sense of accountability to God and the imagined presence of the transcendent 'other' (cf. Weick 1995: 39) provided a strong motivation to be responsible in their business dealings and/or use the entrusted resources responsibly and effectively. Interestingly, the respondents differed enormously in the way they linked the stewardship concept to business practices. For some, it related primarily to the way sought to provide their service, for others it related to the way they sought to treat their employees, to the financial management of the business, and even to environmental responsibilities.

The engagement with the *witness* concept, by contrast, created a different symbolic pattern of accountability. The belief that Christians are/should be a witness of their faith had a strong effect on a number of respondents, particularly on those who were very upfront to others about their faith. They felt that other people will judge the credibility of Christianity through the way they conduct themselves and that they therefore should not do anything in their business that might discredit their faith. Here, the 'other' against which one's actions were judged was the presence of other people and their presumed role expectation towards Christians, which exerted a strong constraint on them and motivated them not to do "anything wrong" in their business dealings (e.g. not cheat on their customers or on the taxman, not exploit their employees etc.).

The Christian concept of *calling*, on the other hand, provided a positive motivation or enabler for some respondents to relate faith to business activities. However, the effectiveness of the concept, which refers to the belief that God calls believers to carry out specific tasks or fulfil a particular role, depended on the way it was interpreted. For some, the concept was interpreted in terms of 'narrow' spiritual responsibilities and related to the ability to raise money for church-related purposes through the business or to the opportunity to verbally communicate about their faith to their employees or business partners. Here, the concept of calling made less of a difference in a wider societal context. For others, by contrast, the concept of calling was applied to the way they sought to run their business. One respondent said that he believed that God had called him to "live out the Christian faith in the workplace". This sense of calling led him to apply a spiritual perspective to a wide range of practices, and he phrased most of them as *stewardship* responsibilities (see above). Two other respondents stated that they felt called "provide a service to the community" with their business, which also had far-reaching consequences for the way they sought to run their businesses. In these cases, *calling* made a lot more of a difference.

The concept of *holiness* as a more general Christian concept[10] created a pattern of accountability similar to the stewardship concept, i.e. an 'inner' accountability to God for one's action but also provided a positive motivation, as respondents stated that they saw Christ as their role model that they sought to emulate in their actions. The latter also partly overlapped with another interpretation of the *witness* concept, where respondents felt that their actions should tell others something positive about their

---

10 I.e. not as strongly business or work related as *stewardship* or *calling*.

Christian faith. As such, these frames were related to a range of different practices. The reference to *general Christian moral tenets* was the least distinctive one. Here the respondents merely said that they felt they *should* act in particular ways because they were Christians, but did not overtly refer to a wider spiritual rationale as was the case with the other 'frames'. The distinctiveness of this frame also depended on the kind of practices that were framed that way. Referring to reliability in business dealings as a Christian principle seemed to be less distinctive than referring to the Christian commandment to forgive others in relation to specific encounters with business partners or employees.

4.2 Reported practices

Beyond gaining insight into the different rationales for action that Christian owner-managers derive from their faith, the data material also provided an 'indirect' insight into the different kinds of practices on which the respondents reported[11]. The practices – which were framed in a variety of ways by the respondents (see section above) – could be categorised as follows.

A few practices could be regarded as specifically Christian. These included the refusal to trade on Sundays or refusal to engage in (marketing etc.) practices that were linked with perceived sexual immorality.

More frequently, however, the respondents linked their faith to practices that were not in themselves specifically Christian. They talked about matters of morally correct business conduct such as being honest, open and fair in their business dealings, paying correct wages, being reliable and standing by one's commitments, but also about legal obligations such as paying correct taxes and adhering to health and safety standards. Others stated that they sought to provide a good service in their business. These practices do not necessarily stand out from those of other (secular) owner-managers, but they might become 'extraordinary' practices if competitors do not have the same standards or if adherence to moral principles or the law puts the respondents at a disadvantage.

A third group of practices, finally, related to attitudes and behaviours that may make 'some difference'. They were not exclusively Christian but the Christian framework of belief provides a distinct rationale for engaging in such practices. The areas of practice where Christianity might make a particularly strong difference was when respondents alluded to the Christian belief that everyone is created equal and that everyone is made in the image of God. For example, some respondents stated that they sought to provide a good service to *all* customers independent on the size of business or that they sought to treat their employees as equals. Others said that they sought to interact with customers and business partners beyond a transactional relationship and treat them "as people" or that they wanted to give their employees attention in a way that these felt valued as people. Another example of 'distinct' practices was the direct application

---

11 Following the methodology framework, the assumption was made that whereas the researcher had no guarantee that the respondents actually carried out their business activity in the way they reported the rationales they provided suggested that they had a strong motivation to display certain attitudes and behaviours.

of Christian-based concepts such as *service for the community*[12] and (God-given) *gifts and talents*. The former led the respondents who referred to this concept to put service before profit by, for example, providing a range of services for free or at a discount. The latter often referred to the way the respondents sought to engage with their employees as they stated, for example, that they sought to further and develop their employees' potential. Finally, a number of practices could be regarded as 'other-regarding' practices. Here, respondents referred to practices where they sought to be considerate of other people's (employees, customers, business partners etc.) circumstances or where they actively sought to help others (e.g. employees, disadvantaged people in the community etc.).

4.3 Interacting influence of other discourses

Furthermore, the study uncovered a range of other (often interacting) discourses – some linked to other civil society institutions –, which also had an impact on the respondents' conceptualisations of practice.

In some respondents' accounts the economic discourse related to their identity as *business* people played a significant role as they framed their 'Christian' practices in terms of enlightened self-interest. These respondents would, for example, argue that honesty and reliability in business dealings enhances their reputation or that looking after their employees also contributes to the well-being of the business.

Another important influence was, for some respondents, their professional identity. They stated, for example, that they wanted to provide a good, high-quality service because they wanted to be seen as being professional in their business. Others referred to the (ethical) standards of professional institutions of which they were a member. Furthermore, those two respondents who stated that they sought to "provide a service to the community" were probably also influenced by their professional identity. Both of them ran health-care businesses and were aware that their profession is associated with a 'caring image', even though they insisted that what they did in their business went beyond what is expected from health-care professionals.

A further influence that was mentioned by a number of respondents was their upbringing, Christian or otherwise. They stated that the values that they had been taught by their parents were formative for their behaviour. This confirms the view that the family is an important context for a person's moral development (Bellah et al. 1996). Also, a number of respondents framed a number of their practices by referring to certain character traits (e.g. having a 'soft' character) or to their conscience. These rationalisations were often used when the respondents alluded to *general Christian moral tenets* and it might be a matter of debate whether conscience, character and upbringing influence the way the Christian faith is interpreted and applied or whether religion shapes character and conscience.

Lastly, the data also provided some insight into the influence of the respondents' national identity. Despite the different socio-institutional frameworks in which business

---

[12] This interpretation of the concept of calling in the context of the workplace was particularly promoted by Luther (cf. Pawlas 2000).

activity takes place (Lane 1992), the accounts of the German and British respondents were rather similar in terms of the Christian conceptual frames that they used to rationalise their practices and in terms of the kind of practices that were related to the Christian faith. This implied that the shared religious identity might be stronger than the national identity. However, the study found that in a few places the national context seemed to make some difference in the way practices were conceptualised from a faith perspective. For instance, even though the German respondents seemed generally more concerned about environmentally friendly practices than their British counterparts, only British respondents would use strong religious language to frame their engagement for environmentally sustainable practices. This finding implied that if national culture provides certain societal structures (such as high environmental standards in Germany) Christian owner-managers may not consider particular practices from a spiritual point of view. Conversely, the absence of such structures, as is the case in the British context, might make a spiritual motivation to engage in certain practices stronger – *if* some spiritual significance is recognised there.

4.4 The influence of Christianity as a social context

Finally, the study provided insight into the influence of Christianity as a *social* context. Here, business practices were influenced by the fact that the respondents were member of a particular community with which they shared a particular identity but also very likely by some Christian concepts that relate to the community of faith.

The respondents' accounts implied that membership of the Christian community of faith both created opportunities and obligations for them. With regards to the former, a number of respondents reported of their ability to (formally and informally) advertise their business through their churches and through Christian business directories, which generated substantial business for them. Their accounts further implied that Christians might prefer to trade with Christian business people because they can be trusted on the basis of shared values, or simply because of a shared religious identity. Others stated that the Christian community was a good place to recruit suitable employees. At the same time, some respondents were aware that their trading with other Christians was motivated by a sense of solidarity rather than 'good' business sense.

The faith community also figured highly when respondents reported on how they sought to help others through their business. For example, they would offer fellow Christians who were in need of a job employment through their business or they would use part of their profits to financially support faith community members in need or provide practical help through their business. Here the commandment to 'Love one another' (1 John 3, 11), which refers to fellow believers only, seemed to have guided the respondents' actions.

Finally, the community of faith also played quite a significant role in most respondents' reports about their civic engagement. For example, a lot of respondents referred to the Christian concept of 'tithing' when they explained that they would finan-

cially support their church or church-related causes[13] through their business. Others reported that they sought to help the faith community through business-related practical support (e.g. through offering free services or advice).

These findings show a lot of parallels to studies on social capital within other types of communities (e.g. Portes 1998). They suggest that even though the focus on the community of faith may be regarded as a specific faith-related behaviour, the outcome of such engagement is often no different to other people's engagement with communities in which there is a strong sense of shared identity.

5. Conclusions

The findings of the study on Christian SME owner-managers and their conceptualisations of practice showed that using a socio-psychological framework can provide 'rich' and interesting insights into how one specific civil society institution or socio-cultural context can impact on individual economic actors: It uncovered a range of different context-specific discursive resources as *rationales* for practice, revealed different *types of practices* that the respondents linked with their faith, and also provided insights into the impact of Christianity as a *social* context.

Most importantly, the study provided insight into how the meaning that Christians attach to faith-specific concepts (significations) – all of which relate in one way or another to the presence of the 'transcendent' – resulted in specific motivations and symbolic patterns of accountability (i.e. enablers and constraints). At the same time, it found that the respondents differed in the way in which they engaged with and interpreted these conceptual resources, which resulted in different habits in both thought and action. The study also uncovered how other discursive contexts might interact, which points to the fact that actors are often influenced by a range of different discourses and contexts and that the co-presence of these can also influence an actor's engagement with a specific civil society context.

How might this approach be used to investigate the impact of other civil society contexts? The contexts that are most obviously suitable for this kind of socio-psychological analysis are other religions (Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism etc.), as they are particularly 'rich' contexts containing many 'resources' that might influence the way economic activity is carried out. These studies can, similarly to the study that was outlined above, uncover what faith-specific concepts are meaningful and relevant to economic actors that are adherents of these faiths, what effect these concepts have on them and how they are linked with practices, and what impact religion makes as a social context. The findings could then be compared with those of above study.

The approach, however, can also be used to investigate how other civil society contexts (e.g. professional bodies and institutions, family, particular geographical communities) influence economic actors' conceptualisations of practice. It would be interesting to uncover what motivations for action and symbolic patterns of accountability these contexts produce in the mind of economic actors who are exposed to these

---

[13] These may have had a narrow spiritual focus (e.g. missionary work) or a wider social focus (e.g. Christian social work geared at disadvantaged people).

contexts, and how these might be part of particular conceptual resources linked with the context. It would be of particular interest to find out whether the *social* dimension that is part of these contexts provides a similarly strong 'constraint' on the actors as the imagined presence of the transcendent, which seemed to significantly influence *Christian* owner-managers' conceptualisations of practice.

Such studies will yield multi-faceted in-depth insights into *how* civil society may influence economic activity, which will be useful for social scientists, business ethicists and policy makers who seek to understand this phenomenon.

References

Alvesson, M./ Karreman, D. (2000): Varieties of Discourse: On the Study of Organizations through Discourse Analysis, in: Human Relations, 53(9), 1125-1149.

Bakan, J. (2004): The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power, London: Robinson.

Bellah, R./ Madsen, R./ Sullivan, W./ Swidler, A./ Tipton, S. (1996): Habits of the Heart – Individualism and Commitment in American Life, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1998): Practical Reason – On the Theory of Action, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Castells, M. (2003): Global Informational Capitalism, in: Held, D./ McGrew, A. (Eds.): The Global Transformations Reader, Cambridge: Polity Press, 311-334.

Curran, J./ Blackburn, R. (2001): Researching the Small Enterprise, London: Sage.

Fort, T. (1999): The First Man and the Company Man: The Common Good, Transcendence, and Mediating Institutions, in: American Business Law Journal, 36(3), 391-435.

Giddens, A. (1984): The Constitution of Society, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Giddens, A. (1998): The Third Way – The Renewal of Social Democracy, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Harré, R./ Gillett, G. (1994): The Discursive Mind, London: Sage.

Hems, L./ Tonkiss, F. (2000): Introduction, in: Tonkiss, F./ Passey, A. (Eds.): Trust and Civil Society, Houndmills: Macmillan, 1-11.

Hendry, J. (2000): Strategic Decision Making, Discourse, and Strategy as Social Practice, in: Journal of Management Studies, 37(7), 955-977.

Herms, E. (1991): Der religiöse Sinn der Moral. Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen zu den Grundlagen einer Ethik der Unternehmensführung, in: Steinmann, H./ Löhr, A. (Eds.): Unternehmensethik, Stuttgart: Pöschl, 69-102.

King, N. (1994): The Qualitative Research Interview, in: Cassell, C./ Symon, G. (Eds.): Qualitative Methods in Organizational Research, London: Sage, 14-36.

Lane, C. (1992): European Business Systems: Britain and Germany Compared, in: Whitley, R. (Ed.): European Business Systems – Firms and Markets in their National Contexts, London: Sage, 64-97.

Lincoln, Y./ Guba, E. (2002): Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences, in: Denzin, N./ Lincoln, Y. (Eds.): Handbook of Qualitative Research, London: Sage, 163-188.

London School of Economics – Centre for Civil Society (LSE) (2004): What is Civil Society?, http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what_is_civil_society.htm, accessed 2/6/2006.

Macintosh, N./ Scapens, R. (1990): Structuration Theory in Management Accounting, in: Accounting, Organizations and Society, 15(5), 455-477.

Münkler, H/ Fischer, K. (2002): Gemeinwohl und Gemeinsinn in der modernen Gesellschaft, in: UNIVERSITAS Orientierung in der Wissenswelt, 57(9), 888-896.

Offe, C./ Fuchs, S. (2001): Schwund des Sozialkapitals? – Der Fall Deutschland, in: Putnam, R. (Ed.): Gesellschaft und Gemeinsinn – Sozialkapital im internationalen Vergleich, Gütersloh: Verlag Bertelsmann Stiftung, 417-514.

Pawlas, A. (2000): Die lutherische Berufs- und Wirtschaftsethik – Eine Einführung, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag.

Portes, A. (1998): Social Capital: Its Origins and Applications in Modern Sociology, in: Annual Review of Sociology, 24, 1-24.

Potter, J./ Wetherell, M. (1987): Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour, London: Sage.

Putnam, R. (2000): Bowling Alone – The Collapse and Revival of American Community, New York: Touchstone.

Spence, L. (1999): Does Size Matter? The State of the Art in Small Business Ethics, in: Business Ethics – A European Review, 8(3), 163-174.

Watson, T./ Harris, P. (1999): The Emergent Manager, London: Sage.

Weick, K. (1995): Sensemaking in Organizations, Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Werner, A. (2006): An Investigation into Christian SME Owner-managers' Conceptualisations of Practice, Doctoral Thesis, Brunel Business School, Uxbridge: Brunel University.

Werner, A. (forthcoming): The Influence of Christian Identity on Christian SME Owner-managers' Conceptualisations of Practice, in: Journal of Business Ethics (Special Issue EBEN Annual Conference 2007), accepted for publication.

Wittgenstein, L. (1953): Philosophical Investigations, Oxford: Blackwell.