Varities of Field Theory  
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| Abstract | Field theory offers a radically alternative view of social life. It is concerned with how a set of actors orienting their actions to one another do so within a meso-level social order. Fields, once formed, are the arenas where the sociological game of jockeying for position constantly plays out. Our purpose is to review contemporary field theory as articulated in three major theoretical statements in sociology. We discuss field theory’s intellectual roots, paying particular attention to the influences of Max Weber and Kurt Lewin, but also phenomenology and symbolic interaction. We next provide an overview of three of the most developed elaborations of field theory from the last half-century – Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of fields (1992), the neo-institutional approach to organizational fields (DiMaggio and Powell, Am Socio Rev 48(2):147–160, 1983), and the theory of strategic action fields recently proposed by Fligstein and McAdam, *A theory of fields*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012. We follow these overviews with more a detailed examination of how each of these theories addresses two of the most fundamental problems in sociological theory: (1) how to conceive of agency and actors in fields, and (2) how social fields emerge, reproduce, and change. We spend the bulk of our essay discussing key differences between the three approaches on these issues. We end by suggesting the next steps forward in elaborating field theory. |
| Keywords (separated by “ - ”) | Field theory - Strategic action fields - Meso-level social theory - Organizational fields - Bourdieu |
10.1 Introduction

The explanation of social action in sociological theory has traditionally focused on either macro- or micro-level analyses. Field theory offers an alternative view of social life. It is concerned with how a set of actors orienting their actions to one another do so in a meso-level social order. Field theory implies that there is something at stake in such an order, that there are rules governing the order, that actors have positions and resources, and that actors have an understanding of the order that allows them to interpret the actions of others and frame a response. Fields, once formed, are the arenas where the sociological game of jockeying for position constantly plays out.

Our purpose in this chapter is to review contemporary field theory as articulated in three major theoretical statements in sociology.1 We begin with a brief description of the core tenets of any contemporary sociological field theory. We then discuss field theory’s intellectual roots, paying particular attention to the influences of Max Weber and Kurt Lewin but also phenomenology and symbolic interactionism. We next provide an overview of three of the most developed elaborations of field theory from the last half-century – Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of fields (1992), the neo-institutional approach to “organizational fields” (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), and the model of “strategic action fields” recently proposed by Fligstein and McAdam (2012). We follow these overviews with a more detailed examination of how each of these theories addresses two of the most fundamental problems in sociological theory: (1) how social fields emerge, reproduce, and change, and (2) how to conceive of agency and actors.

We spend the bulk of our essay discussing key differences between the three approaches on these issues. Although there are some commonalities across the varieties of field theory, there are also some clear differences of opinion. Drawing its model of social action from Berger and Luckmann (1967) and phenomenology, foundational neo-institutional theory downplays the exercise of power in fields and offers us a view of actors who tend towards habit and conformity in their actions and rely on cues from the field to legitimate their actions. In contrast,
Bourdieu’s theory emphasizes the role of power in field construction and focuses on how the structuring of the field gives more powerful actors the tools by which to consistently win the game. He develops a sophisticated model of action predicated on “habitus,” which is a concept to explain how people form cultural frames that inform their ability to interpret the actions of others. While there are clear affinities between the model of actors in Bourdieu and classic neo-institutional theory, Bourdieu’s model focuses on how actors use their existing cognitive frames to engage in strategic yet socially structured action.

On the questions of field emergence and change, Bourdieu and neo-institutional theory focus mostly on the reproducibility of field structure as the outcome of social action. Fligstein and McAdam (2012) theorize emergence and change more explicitly and offer the most fluid and political view of field dynamics. They suggest that even stable fields are constantly undergoing change, as contestation over all aspects of the field is part of the ongoing field project. Fligstein and McAdam advance the idea that fields are embedded in systems of fields that greatly influence the ability of actors to create and reproduce stable worlds. They also provide insight into field emergence and transformation by viewing these as situations in which all aspects of field formation are up for grabs. Finally, they develop the evocative concept of social skill to explain how actors influence, dominate, or cooperate with others to produce and sustain meso-level social order.

We clarify these differences of opinion to suggest two future lines of work. First, it is possible that each of these perspectives captures something plausible about how the world works. What is left unspecified is the scope conditions under which one or the other of these perspectives should be deployed. Second, it may turn out that one of these perspectives in fact offers a better empirical way to make sense of meso-level social orders. Establishing their differences allows scholars to construct tests by which the validity of one or the other of these perspectives can be established. The promise of field theory is its potential to explain interactions in a wide variety of social settings. It offers a set of conceptual tools that can be deployed for many of the most important sociological questions. Progress will be made only by sharpening our understanding of the differences in field theories in order to better understand how they can be profitably used.

10.2 Common Themes in Field Theories

The main idea in field theory is that most of social life occurs in arenas where actors take one another into account in their actions. These interactions occur where something is at stake. But fields also imply a stable order, one that allows for the reproduction of the actors and their social positions over time. This general formulation of a field is sometimes described as a meso-level social order. The term “meso” refers to the fact that actors are taking each other into account in framing actions within some theoretically or empirically defined social arena. This means that the explanation of social action is done in the context of the field. This does not mean that all actors are individuals. Instead, field theory conceives of actors as including individuals, groups, subunits of organizations, organizations, firms, and states. Examples of meso-level social orders made up of both individual and collective actors include groups of individuals who work in an office and cooperate over a task, subunits of organizations that vie for organizational resources, firms that compete with one another to dominate a market, and states that come together to negotiate treaties. The primary unit of analysis is neither a macro-social process that contains some underlying structural logic operating independently of actors (e.g., social class) nor is it a micro-social process that focuses on the idiosyncratic preferences and motivations of individual actors.

Field theorists share a spatial, relational approach to understanding how actors interact with one another. Actors are located in a social space (the field), which is a socially constructed
arena in which actors are oriented toward one another over a common practice, institution, issue, or goal. Being oriented toward one another, field actors frame their actions and identities vis-à-vis one another (i.e., relationally). Actors within a field recognize (if not always follow) shared meanings, rules, and norms that guide their interactions. Fields structure actors’ interests and influence them to think and act in accordance with the rules and expectations of the field. Nevertheless, field actors have the agentic capacity (again, to varying degrees depending on the version of the theory) to accumulate resources and/or seek advantages vis-à-vis others. Such resources and advantages can include legitimacy, the accumulation of various forms of capital in order to exert power over others, and the building of political coalitions to further collective interests.

Field theorists use the field construct to make sense of how and why social orders can be reproduced. They have increasingly become interested in how fields emerge and are transformed. Underlying this formulation is the idea that a field is an ongoing game where actors have to understand what others are doing in order to frame their action. This has caused field theorists to consider issues of agency and action and to develop sociological views of how cognition works, focusing on issues of culture, framing, identity, habit, and socialization. Finally, while the role of actors varies across formulations of field theories, such theories explicitly reject rational actor models and instead rely on phenomenology and symbolic interactionism to understand what actors do under varying field conditions.

10.3 Classical Roots of Contemporary Sociological Field Theory

We trace the classical roots of contemporary sociological field theory to two primary influences, Max Weber and Kurt Lewin. Then we briefly discuss how phenomenology and symbolic interactionism have provided the foundations of field theories’ models of action. We direct the reader to Mey (1972) and Martin (2003) for more detailed accounts of the classical foundations of field theory that draw from many more theoretical lines of inquiry. In particular, Martin (2003) provides a concise review of field theory’s roots in the physical sciences (particularly classical electro-magnetism), the contributions of the Gestalt school of psychology apart from Lewin, and the contributions of other intellectual ancestors not discussed here, most notably Ernst Cassirer, Karl Mannheim, and Friedrich Fürstenberg.

Max Weber argued that social relationships require meaningful action between two or more actors whose actions are based on an awareness of and orientation to the other (Weber 1978: 28–30). Weber also took the position that social relationships can scale up to higher levels (e.g., organizations, associations, etc.) and become a social order that encompasses a multitude of actors. A social order can simultaneously be its own complex of meaning and part of a broader complex of meaning. Weber identified a small number of orders present in every society: legal, social, economic, political, and religious. He thought that something different is at stake in each order and the struggles over a particular order could only be interpreted from the perspective of groups vying for advantage in that order (1978). For example, honor or status is at stake in the social order, power in the political order, the saving of souls in the religious order, and economic advantage in the economic order. Weber thought that power in one order could bring about power in another. So, for example, economic success could spill over to social honor or esteem. However, Weber also thought that the relationship between orders was the product of history. For example, in a theocracy, the religious order could dominate the political and economic order. With his emphasis on the symbolic in addition to the material dimension of relations, Weber was of fundamental importance to field theorists’ conceptions of fields as socially constructed arenas of action.
As a social psychologist with a background in Gestalt psychology, it was Kurt Lewin who most directly transferred the ideas of field theory from the physical sciences into the social sciences. Lewin applied Gestalt concepts of perception – that stimuli are not perceived as individual parts but by their relation to the whole field of perception – to social psychology and, in particular, human motivation and how social situations influence cognition (Mohr 2005). Lewin (1951: 240) also developed formal models to represent fields, which he defined as the “totality of coexisting facts which are conceived of as mutually interdependent,” and the life space, defined as “the person and the psychological environment as it exists for him” (1951: 57).

For Lewin, the individual’s phenomenological apprehension of the world could be simultaneously influenced by the field environment and his/her navigation of the life space. The life space is made up of regions of experience, the meaning of each being defined by its relations to other regions. And because one’s apprehension of a field also influences the field itself, the effects of one on the other are reciprocal. Individual behavior, then, could be explained only by considering the totality of the interaction between the individual’s navigation of the life space and the environment. Although Lewin has been criticized for, among other things, his ultimately unworkable topological formalizations (see Martin 2003: 18–19), his explicit use of the field metaphor and his emphasis on the co-constitution of fields and actors served as an important foundation on which contemporary sociological field theories were built.

Field theorists have used a variety of sources to construct their model of the actor. For example, Bourdieu’s notion of habitus has many sources – some in philosophy like Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty as well as sociologists who were philosophically inclined and influenced by phenomenology, like Mauss and Elias.² Mauss (1934) defined habitus as those aspects of culture that are anchored in the body or daily practices of individuals, groups, societies, and nations. It includes the totality of learned habits, bodily skills, styles, tastes, and other forms of non-discursive knowledge that might be said to “go without saying” for a specific group.

Elias used the habitus concept to make sense of the changes in personality he detailed in The Civilizing Process (1939).

Neo-institutionalists rely heavily on Berger and Luckmann’s The Social Construction of Reality (1967) for their model of actors (Powell and DiMaggio 1991). Berger and Luckmann drew their inspiration from Alfred Schutz, a sociologist who was trained in phenomenology.

Berger and Luckmann argued that the world is a social construction. It requires effort for this to emerge, effort that implied institutionalization and legitimation. Like the habitus for Bourdieu, an existing social world gets internalized via socialization.

Compared to the neo-institutional elaboration of organizational fields, Fligstein and McAdam (2012) draw more heavily on Mead’s (1934) symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism is a perspective grounded in American pragmatist philosophy (Menand 2001). It bears many resemblances to phenomenology, viewing the social world as a construction and socialization as the main way in which that world is inculcated in individuals. But Mead’s symbolic interactionism also proposes that one of the main goals of social action is for actors to help shape and create their worlds. At the core of interaction is the idea that we have identities that we share with others. These identities provide the basis for our cooperation with others. Bourdieu also cites symbolic interaction as a source for his view of social action. Because he was interested in how power was actually experienced in interaction, he saw symbolic interaction as a way to frame how the less powerful accepted their fate in interaction with the more powerful.

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²Crossley (2004) provides a lengthy discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s deep influences on Bourdieu’s theoretical framework. Interestingly, it was also through Merleau-Ponty’s work that Bourdieu first encountered Weber (Bourdieu et al. 2013: 112).
10.4 Contemporary Elaborations of Sociological Field Theory

10.4.1 Bourdieu’s Field Theory

Pierre Bourdieu is the contemporary sociologist most often associated with field theory. Bourdieu deployed the idea of field as part of a more complex theoretical framework that included two other major concepts, capital and habitus (see generally Bourdieu 1977, 1986; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). For Bourdieu, social life takes place in fields. Fields are arenas of struggle, and Bourdieu frequently uses the game metaphor to describe how action takes place in fields. In fields, players occupy positions relative to one another but have a shared sense of the socially constructed, centralized framework of meaning, or what is at stake in the field. Bourdieu’s fields are relatively autonomous, meaning each tends to have its own logic (or “rules of the game”) and history. Players compete with one another for resources, status, and, most fundamentally, over the very definition of the “rules of the game” that govern field relations. Relations within Bourdieu’s fields are mostly hierarchical, with dominant individuals or groups imposing their power over dominated groups as a result of their ability to control the field, what is at stake, and what counts as rules and resources.

The main source of power for dominant actors is the capital that they bring to the field. Actors within a field are endowed with physical (or economic), social, human, and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986, 1989: 17). One’s position in a field is defined by the volume and form of capital one possesses. Those with similar volumes and forms of capital tend to cluster in similar positions in a field. Actors within a field wield capital in order to improve or maintain their field positions. A field is thus the site where actors carry out and reproduce power relations over others based on their capital endowments.

Habitus is the “strategy-generating principle” that enables actors to apprehend, navigate, and act in the social world (Bourdieu 1977: 78; see also Bourdieu 1990: 53). It is subjective in that it represents the bundle of cognitive and evaluative capacities that make up one’s perceptions, judgments, tastes, and strategies for actions. But habitus is not simply produced or employed subjectively. It is a highly structured system of dispositions. Strategies and actions generated by habitus are not products of motivations for future goals so much as products of past experience (Bourdieu 1977: 72). Habitus is internalized via (mostly early) socialization. But habitus is neither wholly static nor deterministic. It can change as one traverses the life course and interacts within different fields. Because an actor’s habitus-generated perceptions and strategies lead to practices, they have real impacts on capital allocations and field structure. The habitus of actors is both constituted by and constitutive of the social structure of the field.

Bourdieu uses these concepts of field, capital, and habitus to understand why, in general, fields’ structures of dominance tend to be reproduced. Given a field that contains a set of rules and players with fixed capital, the “game” will generally be rigged. Actors will perceive what others are doing and respond to their actions by deploying their capital in such a way as to preserve their current position as much as possible. In this way, both dominant and dominated actors play the game to the best of their abilities, but in doing so tend to reproduce their field positions. The reflexive field-capital-habitus relation gives Bourdieu powerful theoretical leverage to include both agency and structure in his explanation of social order. Bourdieu himself suggests that it gives him the ability to reject what he sees as false antinomies between objectivism and subjectivism (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

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3 All of these forms of capital, when perceived or recognized by others as legitimate, confer symbolic capital (akin to prestige or honor) and thus the ability to exercise symbolic power over others (Bourdieu 1986, 1989).

4 For an extended discussion of Bourdieu’s habitus, see Lizardo (2004).
10.4.2 Neo-institutional Theory of Fields

Scholars across disciplines, most notably sociology, political science, and economics, have developed substantial lines of inquiry, many sharing affinities with field-based approaches, under the broad umbrella of “new institutionalism” (for reviews, see Hall and Taylor 1996; Fligstein and Potter 2008). In order to avoid confusion, and in the interest of space, when we discuss “neo-institutional” theories of fields, we limit our discussions to neo-institutional theory in organizational sociology. Even within sociological neo-institutional organizational scholarship, there is considerable variation in approaches, emphases, and analytical techniques (Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Scott 2013). We focus here on classic neo-institutional formulations of organizational fields (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), first contextualizing when and why neo-institutional scholars formulated the concept then explaining the essential characteristics of organizational fields.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, neo-institutional sociologists began explicitly incorporating field-based principles to theorize the connection between organizations and their environments. Departing from organizational ecologists (e.g., Hannan and Freeman 1977a, b), whose fundamental motivating question was to examine why organizations within populations differ from one another, neo-institutional scholars asked why organizations within fields tend to exhibit similar forms, practices, or cultures. Although others employed similar constructs such as “institutional environment” (Meyer and Rowan 1977) and “societal sector” (Scott and Meyer 1983), “organizational field” (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) is the most widely accepted term used to denote an environment made up of organizations that interact around a given issue and affect one another via institutional processes.

DiMaggio and Powell (1983: 148) define an organizational field as “those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products.” Theirs is a broad definition of fields, encompassing “the totality of relevant actors” in an “institutionally defined” arena of organizations (DiMaggio and Powell 1983: 148). Their account of organizational fields draws primarily on phenomenology (Berger and Luckmann 1967), the structuration theory of Anthony Giddens (1979), and network-based ideas of connectedness (Laumann et al. 1978) and structural equivalence (White et al. 1976). For DiMaggio and Powell (1983), the answer to the question of why organizations within fields tend to look the same is that organizations, once they are part of an organizational field, are usually driven more by institutional concerns (e.g., legitimacy) than by other factors, such as competition. Institutions, defined as “social patterns that, when chronically reproduced, owe their survival to relatively self-activating social processes (Jepperson 1991: 145),” confer legitimacy. Over the course of institutionalization, such self-sustaining patterns become more legitimate and stable, eliciting shared meanings and providing cultural models for organizing and acting (Zucker 1977; Suchman 1995; Berger and Luckmann 1967).

As a field undergoes structuration (see Giddens 1979), organizations within the field tend to become isomorphic, meaning that they become more similar. They do this because the imperative of an institutionalized field is to appear legitimate (Suchman 1995). For neo-institutional scholars, legitimacy is “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman 1995: 574). Mechanisms of isomorphism include coercive force from authorities or resource dependencies, normative sanctioning from experts or professional associations, and mimetic pressure to copy what others are doing, particularly during times of uncertainty (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Scott 2013). Regardless of the mechanism, as something becomes increasingly institutionalized, it takes on an increasingly rule-like or taken-for-granted status. Thus, it becomes
increasingly legitimate in the eyes of the field actors, which serves to reinforce and accelerate its being followed and reproduced by organizations in the field.

10.4.3 Strategic Action Fields

The most recent elaboration of field theory is the theory of strategic action fields proposed by Fligstein and McAdam (2012). Fligstein and McAdam work to synthesize neo-institutionalist insights about fields as being driven by actors who live in murky worlds and seek legitimacy with Bourdieu’s ideas about contestation within fields that reflect mainly the power of dominant actors. Fligstein and McAdam (2012: 9) thus define a “strategic action field” (hereinafter SAF) as “a constructed meso-level social order in which actors (who can be individual or collective) are attuned to and interact with one another on the basis of shared (which is not to say consensual) understandings about the purposes of the field, relationships to others in the field (including who has power and why), and the rules governing legitimate action in the field.” As with the prior two versions of field theory discussed above, the theory of SAFs places utmost importance on understanding how actors, who occupy positions within a socially constructed order, relate to one another within that space.

SAFs are socially constructed in that (1) membership is based more on subjective than any objective criteria, (2) boundaries of the field can shift based on the definition of the situation and the issue at stake, and (3) fields turn on shared understandings fashioned over time by members of the field (Fligstein and McAdam 2012: 12–13). These shared understandings are of four kinds. First, actors share a sense of what is at stake in the field (a shared sense of what actors are vying for or the central issue around which the field revolves). Second, actors have a shared sense of the positions of others in the SAF (a recognition of which actors in the field have more or less power and who occupies which roles). Third, they have a shared understanding of the “rules” that guide what is considered legitimate action in the field. Finally, actors in certain positions within the field share interpretative frames (these frames vary within the field but are shared by actors in similar locations).

Importantly, Fligstein and McAdam propose that the degree of consensus and contention internal to a field is constantly changing. Bracketing a description of how SAFs themselves emerge and change for now (we discuss this in Sect. 10.6.3), the degree of consensus in a SAF depends on the degree to which a field is settled. Contrary to a neo-institutional account of highly institutionalized organizational fields, SAFs are rarely organized around a taken-for-granted “reality.” Although there is more consensual perception of opportunities and constraints in highly settled SAFs, actors constantly jockey for position even in settled fields. Contention is highest when SAFs are unsettled, most often when a field is emerging or when a field undergoes crisis.

Similar to Bourdieu’s fields, SAF membership is structured along incumbent/challenger dynamics, with actors possessing varying resource endowments and vying for advantage. Incumbents claim a disproportionate share of the material and symbolic resources in the field, and their interests and views tend to be disproportionately reflected in the rules and organization of the field. Challengers usually conform to the prevailing order of the field by taking what the system gives them, but they can also usually articulate an alternative vision of the field. Importantly, although SAFs have incumbents and challengers who always compete, SAFs are not necessarily marked by extreme hierarchy and conflict. SAFs can also have coalitions and cooperation.

Fligstein and McAdam suggest that the higher the degree of inequality in the distribution of initial resources at field formation, the more likely the field will be organized hierarchically, with incumbents exerting their dominance over challengers.

Fligstein and McAdam introduce an important new actor to their fields – “internal governance units.” These actors, often present within SAFs, generally serve to maintain order within the field. In practice, they usually serve to reinforce the position of the incumbents in the field, whether it
be to stabilize a field settlement, respond to crises in order to produce stability, or act as a liaison to other fields (Fligstein and McAdam 2012: 94–96). Examples of internal governance units include certification boards set up by professional organizations in a newly formed SAF, the World Bank, which often disproportionately serves the interests of more developed economies, and a trade association that lobbies on an industry's behalf.

Fligstein and McAdam (2012: 34–56) also propose a novel micro-foundation of action based on collective meaning-making and belongingness. This foundation is what they term the “existential function of the social” – the profoundly human need to create meaningful social worlds and feelings of belongingness. In order to build political coalitions, forge identities, and fashion interests in service of that need, actors in SAFs use “social skill” (Fligstein 2001) to appeal to shared meanings and empathetically relate to others so as to induce cooperation and engage in collective action.

Another novel contribution of the theory of SAFs is its deep conceptualization of inter-field relations. Instead of attempting to explain only the internal dynamics of fields, Fligstein and McAdam (2012: 59) conceive of fields as embedded in complex, multi-dimensional webs of dependence with other fields. Such linkages most often result from resource dependencies or from formal legal or bureaucratic authority. These ties are also multi-dimensional. First, like a Russian doll, fields can be nested hierarchically within broader fields, meaning that the nested field is highly dependent on the broader field. Second, fields can also be linked via interdependencies, meaning that the fields are roughly equally dependent. Third, fields can be tied to any number of other fields. Of course, a field need not be connected to another field at all. The extent of dependency and quantity of ties can have implications for field emergence, stability, and change, which we discuss later in the chapter.

10.5 Agency and Actors

10.5.1 Bourdieu's Field Theory

Bourdieu’s theoretical project has a complicated relationship with agency and actors. Although we are sympathetic to the difficulty of trying to account for structure and agency within social fields, we contend that Bourdieu’s theory of fields is more deterministic than he was willing to admit. Ours is not an oversimplified, oft-repeated charge of determinism and, as we discuss below, Bourdieu’s account of agency, via the habitus, is richer than classic statements in neo-institutional theory. (If we were to rank the three theories we discuss based on the agency they accord to field actors, we would place Bourdieu’s actors somewhere between neo-institutional field actors on the low end and actors in SAFs on the high end.)

In Bourdieu’s words, agents are “bearers of capitals and, depending on their trajectory and on the position they occupy on the field … they have a propensity to orient themselves actively either toward the preservation of the distribution of capital or toward the subversion of this distribution” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 108–109).

Indeed, his field actors do have their own goals and do act to further their own interests vis-à-vis others in the field. Thus, actors in his fields do act strategically and engage in meaningful action.

Nevertheless, actors in Bourdieu’s theory are not particularly reflective nor are they very capable of going against the constraining structural forces of the field. The “rules of the game” and what is at stake in the field are a product of social structure and are tacitly agreed upon by members of the field (what Bourdieu calls the illusio). Field actors’ interests are defined by their position in the field (i.e., their capital endowment) and the historical trajectory that led them to the field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 117). Most field actors “know their place,” and if they engage in competition with others, they are more likely to compete with those who are closest to them in social space than try to change the underlying social order (Bourdieu 1984).
Moreover, the habitus, which Bourdieu invokes to account for subjectivity and agency, is itself an embodied, structured set of dispositions that operates somewhere below the level of consciousness. It is socially structured as a function of one’s field position, and it is passed on to subsequent generations through mostly non-conscious relations and processes of cultural transmission. Habitustends to be durable and, if it does change, tends to align (or correspond) with one’s field position and the field’s particular logic.

True, Bourdieu’s actors do have the ability to transpose their habitus to other fields, but even here, the habitus tends to correspond to that of homologous positions in other fields. Indeed, Bourdieu’s individuals tend to become embedded within habitus classes, “the system of dispositions (partially) common to all products of the same structures” (Bourdieu 1977: 85). Thus, habitus, and as a consequence actors themselves, will usually operate to reproduce the very structures from which it arises (Bourdieu 1977: 78; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 121–22).5

10.5.2 Neo-institutional Field Theory

Classic neo-institutional accounts of organizational fields provide a rich account of institutional persistence and constraint on actors, but they under-theorize how actors who are subject to institutional effects could nevertheless enact agency to affect those institutions. Neo-institutional scholars identified this problem relatively early on (see DiMaggio 1988; DiMaggio and Powell 1991). Others have termed it the ‘paradox of embedded agency’ inherent in neo-institutional theory. That is, if action in a field is constrained by the prescriptive, taken-for-granted scripts and rules of the institution in which actors are embedded, then how can actors conceive of, contest, and enact endogenous change to a field (see Battilana 2006)?

Responding to this criticism, a second wave of neo-institutionalists began to develop a literature on actors with the agency to initiate institutional change. The earliest and most developed idea of actors and agency within fields is the concept of institutional entrepreneurship (DiMaggio 1988, 1991). In general, an institutional entrepreneur is some actor (whether individual or collective) who initiates and participates in change to an institution.

Although DiMaggio (1988) is frequently cited as inspiration for the idea of institutional entrepreneurs, its main argument is that the neo-institutional theory of Meyer and Rowan (1977) and DiMaggio and Powell (1983) lacks an adequate theory of agency, power, and conflict. DiMaggio (1988) posits the idea of an institutional entrepreneur because he is trying to make sense of how a field comes into existence or experiences dramatic transformation. He suggests institutional entrepreneurship occurs when someone (or some group) comes along and figures out how to do something new and is able to convince others to go along with them. For DiMaggio (1988), institutional entrepreneurs are especially important early on in the institutionalization process, when organizational fields are being constructed. Then, as institutionalization takes hold, field participants usually settle down to playing their part as actors who operate mostly by habit or by watching and imitating others.

Scholarly interest in institutional entrepreneurship has grown considerably since DiMaggio’s (1988) formulation, particularly
among organizational sociologists and management scholars. Neoinstitutionalists have conducted numerous empirical studies across domains and made important theoretical advances on the concept (for recent reviews, see Garud et al.’s (2007) introduction to a journal issue on institutional entrepreneurship; Hardy and Maguire 2008; Battilana et al. 2009). However, we take the position that institutional entrepreneurship has become a concept so all-encompassing with regard to agency and change that it is not the most useful concept to employ to theorize agency within and across fields. As Sudaby (2010: 15) noted of the current state of the literature: “Any change, however slight, is now ‘institutional’ and any change agent is an ‘institutional entrepreneur.’”

Indeed, as contemporary neoinstitutional scholars have pointed out (e.g., Powell and Colyvas 2008: 277; Lawrence et al. 2011: 52), the institutional entrepreneurship literature now tends to replace the actors of foundational neoinstitutional theory – over-socialized and with relatively little reflexivity and agency – with actors who seem to have prescient views about new possible worlds, the motivation to contest institutional arrangements, and the power to enact change. In addition, institutional entrepreneurship’s focus on divergent institutional change has resulted in a tendency to conflate agency with wholesale field-level change. Consequently, there is a selection bias in the institutional entrepreneurship literature of analyzing only situations in which contestation leads to change (Denrell and Kovács 2008). This produces a strange conception of institutional agency: actors are thought of as agentic only when they “successfully” form new fields or change existing ones, and only a few such actors really matter for field-level change. This idea flies in the face of commonsense experience, where we see people acting strategically all of the time.

Finally, institutional entrepreneurship’s overly heroic view of actors tends to shift focus away from fields and avoid questions such as what alternative paths fields might take, why entrepreneurs choose the strategies of field contestation that they do, and what field-building projects are likely to win and lose. In essence, we submit that despite its substantial theoretical development over the last three decades, the concept of institutional entrepreneur lacks an adequate conceptualization of fields that would explain structural conditions enabling agency within and across different types of fields and during different stages of a field’s existence.

10.5.3 Strategic Action Fields

Flegstein and McAdam’s addition of “strategic action” to the term “fields” is an important theoretical development, as it incorporates Flegstein’s (2001) concept of “social skill” into their theory of action and therefore provides a new, more systematic way to think about agency, actors, and field relations. Strategic action is “the attempt by social actors to create and maintain stable social worlds by securing the cooperation of others” (Flegstein and McAdam 2012: 17). The primary micro-level mechanism through which fields are constructed, transformed, and even maintained is “social skill,” which is the cognitive capacity for reading people and environments, framing lines of action, and mobilizing people in the service of broader conceptions of the world and of themselves (Flegstein and McAdam 2012: 17). Some are endowed with greater social skill than others and are thus more likely than others, all else being equal (which of course, in reality, is hardly the case), to realize their interests and exert control vis-à-vis others in a field.

This may beg the question of why social skill is so important as a driver of field relations. In other words, if social skill is the mechanism for stepping into the shoes of the other and mobilizing collective action, what is the motivation for doing so? Like Bourdieu, Flegstein and McAdam recognize that actors pursue their interests in the name of power. Indeed, SAFs are organized

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6 It remains an empirical question as to the distribution of social skill in given fields or across the population. Flegstein and McAdam (2012: 17) only offer an unsupported speculation that social skill could be distributed normally across the population.
along incumbent/challenger dimensions and are sites of struggles for power and influence. However, their answer is not simply that actors draw on social skill in the pursuit of material self-interest. Fligstein and McAdam provide a second, deeper motivation that is deeply rooted in our evolutionary psychology — the basic human need to fashion a meaningful world for oneself and to engage in collective action. They call this the “existential function of the social.” They argue that even the exercise of power and conflict with others are often manifestations of the more fundamental pursuit of collective meaning-making, identity, and belongingness. Innumerable examples of this abound. To list a few of the more extreme ones, the various religious crusades and wars waged throughout history were fundamentally about identity (“I am a Christian; I am a holy warrior.”) and meaning-making and belongingness (“This is a battle between good (us) vs. evil (them).” However repulsive Nazism is from a moral standpoint to most in society, there is no question that Hitler was a supremely skilled social actor who could frame unambiguous “truths” in ways that valorized the lives of believers and serviced his interest in attaining power. Of course, the focus on intersubjectivity, collaborative meaning-making, identity, and collective mobilization does not mean that power relations, conflict, preferences, and the pursuit of those preferences (whether or not to the exclusion of others pursuing theirs) are not characteristic of SAFs. The point is that social skill is deployed for both kinds of pursuits.

The dual motivations in SAFs of the pursuit of material interests and the existential function of the social represent a key point of departure from neo-institutional and Bourdieu’s explanations of what drives field relations. For neo-institutionalists, the basic driver of action within institutionalized organizational fields is the concern for legitimacy (Suchman 1995). Whether through coercive force, normative influence, or mimetic pressure to follow others in times of uncertainty, organizational field actors tend to act similarly in order to appear legitimate (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Fligstein and McAdam agree with neo-institutional theorists that field actors tend to cohere in their actions, but instead of arguing that this is due to a mostly unreflective concern for legitimacy, they posit this is due to the existential function of the social. By combining symbolic interactionist approaches to empathetic understanding and identity (Mead 1934; Goffman 1974) with social movement theory’s insights into framing processes as a path to collective action (e.g., Snow et al. 1986; Snow and Benford 1988), Fligstein and McAdam provide an answer to the “paradox of embedded agency” that has plagued neo-institutional accounts while managing to avoid the overly heroic correctives proposed by theories of institutional entrepreneurship.

Importantly, however, Fligstein and McAdam (2012, 109–110) do not reject outright the idea of institutional entrepreneurs. Instead, they situate the role of institutional entrepreneur within the broader SAF environment and theorize that in the moment of field emergence or transformation when things are more or less up for grabs, such actors may emerge to help create a field. Institutional entrepreneur is thus a role that highly skilled social actors can play in unorganized social space to help produce a field. They do so by convincing others to accept their own cultural conception (via an appeal that resonates with others’ identities or meaning), fashion political coalitions of disparate groups, and establish new institutions around which a field is ordered. If a field is in a more settled state, incumbents, who set the rules of the game and exert their power to reproduce the social order, are more likely to thwart attempts by an institutional entrepreneur to usurp the established field order. That said, actors even in settled SAFs are able to construct alternative understandings of the dominant field order and can act strategically to identify with others and engage in collective action.

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7 Here, they join Bourdieu in his critique of Marxist materialist conceptions of interaction. Like Bourdieu, they argue that interests themselves only have meaning because they are socially constructed and thus have symbolic meaning to field participants.
The theory of SAFs also differs from Bourdieu’s in its conception of actors and agency. For Bourdieu, fields are sites of conflict, striving, and the pursuit of one’s interests over another’s. True, Bourdieu recognizes that what one’s interests are and how they are pursued are outcomes of social dynamics; they correspond to the one’s position in the field, one’s own habitus, and one’s unique allocation of forms of capital. But the defining features of internal field relations for Bourdieu are no doubt conflict and domination. The theory of SAFs shares Bourdieu’s conception of fields as sites of struggle between incumbents and challengers over resources and the ability to define the “rules of the game,” but it goes further to make room for the crucial micro-foundations of meaning, identity, cooperation, and collective action that are pursued by socially skilled actors. Actors can both engage in struggle and fashion cooperative coalitions. Fligstein and McAdam (2012) thus present a more agentic actor than the other two theories of fields discussed here.

Finally, the theory of SAFs differs from both neo-institutional and Bourdieusian accounts of field actors in that it explicitly accounts for individuals and collectivities as field actors and expressly theorizes each of their roles within their fields. Neo-institutional field theory, being born out of organizational theory, tends to focus on organizations as the actors within a field space. As such, neo-institutional accounts of organizational fields care very little about individuals’ positions in fields and must abstract up to the organizational level when explaining an “actor’s” subjective orientations, strategies for obtaining legitimacy, struggles for resources, etc. Although we take no issue with this abstraction (we very much view organizations as actors in social space), we recognize that it is less intuitive to think only of organizations as social actors in a field. Bourdieu’s theory of fields, on the other hand, deals primarily with individuals as field actors and locates dispositions and practices primarily in individuals’ trajectories through social space.8 The consequences for the theory of SAF’s flexibility in scaling up or down is non-trivial, as it forces Fligstein and McAdam (2012) to develop a more general, yet still workable, theory of relations between field actors, no matter whether they are individuals or organizations.

10.6 Field Emergence, Stability, and Change

We turn now to a discussion of how each theory deals with field-level emergence, stability, and change. In short, Fligstein and McAdam’s theory of SAFs depicts fields as more changeable than neo-institutional field theory or Bourdieu’s theory of fields. Moreover, we argue that, compared to the other accounts, the theory of SAFs provides the most comprehensive, systematic conceptualization of field emergence, stability, and change. As with the prior section, we develop these arguments by first analyzing how Bourdieu and neo-institutional theorists deal with the issue then juxtaposing those accounts against the theory of SAFs.

10.6.1 Bourdieu’s Field Theory

Bourdieu’s theory of fields is primarily one of social stability and reproduction. This is intentional, as it is Bourdieu’s goal to understand and solve the agent-structure problem by positing how both actors (whether consciously or unconsciously) and structures correspond to one another and are complicit in the reproduction of social order. For Bourdieu, although fields are the sites of constant struggle and competition between the dominant and dominated, the social order ultimately tends to be reproduced. True, it is not uncommon for groups to succeed their prior equivalent group in terms of their place in the social order; this is what Bourdieu calls the “order of successions.” (Bourdieu 1984: 163). The key here, however, is that relations between example, he identifies firms as the key players in the economic field and speaks of the importance of their interactions with the state (Bourdieu 2005). He also links elite universities, corporations, and the state to the field of power (Bourdieu 1996a).

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8 We acknowledge that Bourdieu did not solely study fields in which individuals were the primary participants. For
groups in a field (i.e., the social distance between them) remain mostly unchanged.

Bourdieu touches upon the conditions for how field logics could change when he mentions crisis as a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the questioning of doxa. Doxa is the undisputed, taken-for-granted aspect of the social world. Within it are those systems of classification, traditions, and rules for interaction that are so legitimate and ingrained that they are taken for granted as self-evident ‘truths’ about the world (Bourdieu 1977: 169). Crisis can lead to the arbitrariness of the doxa being revealed to field actors’ consciousness and thereby finding its way into the universe of discourse, where orthodox and heterodox opinions can be expressed and contested. However, Bourdieu does not systematically theorize what brings about such moments of crisis, nor does he explicitly theorize the additional condition(s) besides crisis that result in a critical discourse.

Even when the doxa is brought into the universe of discourse, such questioning does not necessarily lead to challengers displacing the dominant class at the top of the field hierarchy. Indeed, challengers with heterodox views of the world rarely displace the dominant group, who work to preserve the “official” ways of thinking and speaking about the world and who aim to censor heterodox views. Finally, and most importantly, on the rare occasions that challengers do manage to displace incumbents as the dominant actors in a field (e.g., Bourdieu 1996b), they tend to do so by using, and therefore reproducing, the underlying “rules of the game” on which the field is based. For example, in Bourdieu’s studies of the fields of cultural production (e.g., art, literature, theatre), one of the most fundamental principles of these fields, especially for the dominant, is an outward indifference to or disavowal of the profit motive. Not coincidentally, the best strategy for challenger groups to unseat the dominant cultural producers within the field is to disavow the commercial and promote their own activities and products as “purer” art than that of the dominant group. In doing so, however, the fundamental logic of the field only gets reinforced. “Thus,” Bourdieu writes, “[challengers’] revolutions are only ever partial ones, which displace the censures and transgress the conventions but do so in the name of the same underlying principles” (Bourdieu 1993: 83–84).

### 10.6.2 Neo-institutional Field Theory

Although recent efforts by institutional scholars have improved the situation, the neo-institutional theory of organizational fields continues to lack a well-developed and empirically tested theory of field emergence and change. The majority of neo-institutional research on organizational fields since DiMaggio and Powell’s (1983) seminal article has pertained to how isomorphism among organizations occurs after an organizational field exists and, relatedly, how fields are stable and reproducible. In our view, then, the neo-institutional formulation of field theory has accounted for field stability and field reproduction quite well. However, from the outset, it lacked a systematic theory of field emergence and divergent field-level transformation. A new generation of neo-institutional scholars has partly corrected for these limitations by proposing that institutional change can occur by way of institutional entrepreneurship, but, as we have argued, this is less a systematic theory of field change and more a thinly veiled “heroic man” theory of change that does not link entrepreneur-led change to broader field conditions.

The under-development of theories of field emergence and divergent change can be traced back to DiMaggio and Powell’s (1983) all-too-brief discussion of the formation of an organizational field (or in their words, how it is that a set of organizations come to be “institutionally defined”). Using Giddens’s (1979) terminology, they propose that a set of organizations comes to

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9 We note the affinities between Bourdieu’s doxa and a highly objectivated and internalized social reality, as defined by Berger and Luckmann (1967), or a highly institutionalized social institution (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Jepperson 1993).

10 Neo-institutional scholars have provided a wealth of theoretical and empirical insights into convergent change (i.e., isomorphism) once a field exists.
be a field through a process of “structuration.” (1) interaction among organizations involved in some area of social life increases, (2) hierarchies and coalitions develop, (3) the amount of information with which field members must contend increases, and (4) awareness among field members that they are involved in a common enterprise develops. However, the remaining focus of their article centers around institutional isomorphism in an already-existing organizational field and, as a corollary, how actors follow rules or scripts, either consciously by imitation or coercion or unconsciously by tacit agreement (Jepperson 1991).

Of course, we do not mean to say that neo-institutional literature has failed to elaborate any other concepts of field emergence and change after DiMaggio’s (1988, 1991) seminal works on institutional entrepreneurship. Indeed, since that time, several subfields within the neo-institutionalist literature have developed lines of inquiry that account for the possibility of institutional contestation and change. Examples include the continued development of the aforementioned institutional entrepreneurship literature as well as the institutional work (Lawrence et al. 2009) and institutional logics (Thornton et al. 2012) perspectives. There has also been a concurrent increase in empirical studies of institutional change (for reviews, see Clemens and Cook 1999; Schneiberg and Clemens 2006: 217–220). However, we maintain that a field theory of field emergence and divergent field change, cast specifically within the classic neo-institutionalist framework of organizational fields, is underdeveloped compared to its theories of field stability and isomorphic field change.

One particularly promising avenue for correcting this weakness, however, has been the integration of social movement theory with neo-institutional theories of organizations. A few sociologists have bridged social movements and organizational analysis for decades (Zald and Ash 1966; see Zald and McCarthy 1987). Moreover, some of the classic works in the social movement literature took field-like approaches even if they did not cite field theories at the time. For example, McCarthy and Zald (1977) developed a multi-leveled approach to social movement organizations and theorized meso-level “social movement industries” (McCarthy and Zald 1977), which are like fields of social movement organizations oriented to the same general social issue. Additionally, McAdam (1999) took a field-like analytic strategy by situating the American civil rights movement within the broader political and economic environments in which it was embedded and the institutions that fostered black protest.

Since the early 2000s, however, we have witnessed an increase in such scholarship (Davis et al. 2005). Because of that, what we may still label neo-institutional studies have increasingly incorporated ideas from social movement theory and have more directly linked institutional emergence to field emergence (Rao et al. 2000; Lounsbury et al. 2003; Morrill 2006). An exemplar of this line of scholarship is Morrill’s (2006) analysis of the “interstitial emergence” of the court-based alternative dispute resolution field. The key to the institutionalization of alternative dispute resolution was the innovation of practices, mobilization of resources, and championing of ideas by networks of actors who were located in overlapping fields. Their ideas and practices gained legitimacy because they resonated with different players across overlapping fields. As we discuss below, the importance of field linkages and borders to the emergence of new fields is an insight developed further in the theory of SAFs.

10.6.3 Strategic Action Fields

Of the three contemporary field theories discussed here, the theory of SAFs provides the clearest yet most nuanced conceptualization of field emergence, stability, and change (see Fligstein and McAdam 2012: 84–113; Fligstein 2013). Not only does it depict SAFs as sites of constant internal change due to conflict and jockeying for position (similar to Bourdieu’s fields),

11 Morrill borrows the term “interstitial emergence” from Mann (1986).
it also sees entire field structures, especially at certain points in their evolution, as being more subject to change than the other two theories. We discuss each of these issues in this section.

SAFs emerge through a process akin to a social movement. An emerging field is a socially constructed arena in which two or more actors orient their actions toward one another but have not yet constructed a stable order with routinized patterns of relations and commonly shared rules for interaction. Similar to Morrill’s (2006) interstitial emergence thesis, SAFs begin to form typically after some kind of exogenous change, more often than not in nearby proximate fields. This happens through “emergent mobilization,” a social movement-like process in which actors begin fashioning new lines of interaction and shared understandings after (1) collectively attributing a threat or opportunity, (2) appropriating organizational resources needed to mobilize and sustain resources, and (3) collectively engaging in innovative action that leads to sustained interaction in previously unorganized social space (McAdam 1999; McAdam et al. 2001).

As it is at every stage in the life of a SAF, social skill is vitally important here, as actors fashion the shared understandings that we discussed in our overview of the theory of SAFs. The state can also facilitate field emergence through processes such as licensing, passing/repealing laws, and the awarding of government contracts. Internal governance units, also discussed earlier, can further encourage stability. Actors organize the structure of their emerging field along a continuum of cooperation and coalition on one end and hierarchy and differences in power on the other. Whether an emerging field will become a stable, reproducible field depends, in part, on how it gets organized; as one moves toward either extreme of this continuum of field organization, the likelihood of stability increases because both extremes imply clear role structures for the actors.

A field becomes settled when its actors have a general consensus regarding field rules and cultural norms. Like highly institutionalized organizational fields, highly settled SAFs typically get reproduced. Because incumbents and challengers continue to engage in conflict even in settled SAFs, however, they share more similarities to Bourdieu’s fields. Incumbents in such a settled field will have an interest in maintaining field stability. They will also have the resources to exercise power over challengers and will enjoy the benefit of the rules of the field, which they likely constructed, being slanted in their favor. Perhaps even more importantly, because actors in settled fields are more likely than those in unsettled fields to share common understandings and have similar conceptions of possible alternatives, even challengers in these fields usually will not mount serious challenges to the social order absent an exogenous shock to the field.

However, not all SAFs are highly settled. In the theory of SAFs, settlement is a matter of degree. As the degree of settlement decreases, SAFs become increasingly subject to change. SAFs are subject to two distinct kinds of field-level change: (1) continuous piecemeal change, the more common situation in which change is gradual and due to internal struggles and jockeying for position, and (2) revolutionary change, in which a new field emerges in an unorganized social space and/or displaces another field. Both kinds of change occur, but under different conditions.

Change is constantly occurring within SAFs because actors constantly jockey for position within fields, whether through cooperation with allies or conflict with adversaries. Actors can occasionally shift strategies, forge subtle new alliances, and make small gains or losses in their position relative to others. However, from a field-wide perspective, these are usually piecemeal changes because incumbent field actors, who have access to relatively more resources and control the “rules of the game” in a SAF, can usually reinforce their positions and therefore reproduce the field order. Fligstein and McAdam (2012: 103) do note, however, that these gradual incremental changes, even if they usually result in overall field reproduction, can have aggregate effects. Eventually, they can undermine the social order to a ‘tipping point’ and begin the process of emergent mobilization discussed above or to ‘episodes of contention,’ in which the shared understandings on which fields are based become
in flux and result in periods of sustained contentious interaction among field actors. Change is more possible in both situations than in settled fields.

The more common sources of transformative field change, however, come from outside of the field. First, fields may be transformed by invading groups that had not previously been active players in the focal field. These outsiders will not be as bound by the conventional rules and understandings of the field as challengers who had already been field players. The success of outsiders at altering the field order may depend on many factors, including their strength prior to invasion, the proximity (in social space) of their former field to the target field, and their social skill in forging allies and mobilizing defectors. Second, transformative change can be due to large-scale, macro-level events that disrupt numerous field linkages and lead to crises. These often, but not always, involve the state. Examples include economic depressions, wars, and regime change.

The third and final exogenous source of transformative change for SAFs emanates from Fligstein and McAdam’s emphasis on inter-field linkages. The effects of a field’s relations with other fields traditionally have been under-theorized, as field-level studies tend to examine only the internal dynamics of a focal field or else capture the structure of external field relations without developing a general theoretical framework for field interrelations. Bourdieu, for example, stated: “I believe indeed that there are no trans-historic laws of the relations between fields, that we must investigate each historical case separately” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 109) (emphasis in original). However, for Fligstein and McAdam (2012: 18, 59, 100–101), fields are not isolated social systems; they stand in relation to other fields in a broader social space. These relations play a key role in whether a field will change or remain stable. The authors conceptualize field-to-field linkages mostly based on the extent to which fields are dependent or interdependent with other fields in social space. Because fields are often tied, via dependencies or interdependencies, to other fields, a destabilizing change in one field is “like a stone thrown in a still pond, sending ripples outward to all proximate fields” (Fligstein and McAdam 2011: 9). Usually, such a ripple is not so disruptive as to lead to an episode of contention within a field. But dependent field relationships yield unequal power relations and unidirectional influence by the dominant field, making a field particularly susceptible to change when there is rupture or crisis in the field on which it depends.¹²

In contrast to the idea of dependent field relations leading to change to a focal field, interdependent field relations can also buffer against change to the focal field Fligstein and McAdam (2012: 59–61). This is because that field can count on the reciprocal legitimacy benefits and resource flows that it shares with related fields to resist change from within. Fligstein and McAdam (2012: 61) cite Bourdieu’s (1996a) study of elite universities, corporations, and the state in France as an example of how fields depend on one another to reproduce their positions – elite universities depend on the state and elite corporations to hire their graduates into prestigious jobs, and the state and corporations depend on the credentialing process that elite universities provide. We note, however, that Bourdieu’s interdependencies here ultimately serve to reproduce order in an even-higher, more abstract field (the “field of power”); his is not a direct account of interdependencies buffering against change within a focal field.

In conclusion, Fligstein and McAdam (2012) provide a more detailed, systematic account of field emergence and divergent change than neo-institutional theorists of organizational fields. They are also much clearer than Bourdieu on the conditions under which field change can occur. Whereas Bourdieu really only points to rare times of crisis, in which the doxa may be revealed and questioned by the dominated members of a field (as discussed above), Fligstein and McAdam (2012) elaborate a clearer and more elegant

¹²As we noted in our overview of the theory of SAFs, field dependencies can be based on legal or bureaucratic authority and on resource dependencies (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978).
framework for the mechanisms of field stability and change.

10.7 Discussion and Conclusion

In this essay, we have pursued two goals. First, we have tried to show that a general notion of field can be gleaned from the work of neo-institutionalists in organizational theory, Bourdieu, and Fligstein and McAdam. That consensus emphasizes the nature of fields as meso-level social orders populated with actors who take one another into account in their actions. Second, while these idealtypical versions of field theories have many agreements, they differ dramatically in terms of how they understand the role of actors, power, consensus, and the dynamics of fields.

In order to make progress on understanding the significance of these disagreements, our basic message is that these differences should be confronted and explored not just theoretically, but empirically. Scholars should then be reflexive about how to revise theory in light of the differences. Instead of treating these ideas as separate schools of thought about fields, we should place them more directly in conversation with one another by examining which way of thinking about fields makes more sense in certain kinds of situations.

It is useful to consider how to proceed to adjudicate these differences of opinion. What should be done next is both conceptual and empirical. The concepts of field theory have been fleshed out in an abstract manner. The degree to which they differ needs to be made more explicit in order for them to be empirically useful. At the same time, while we have many studies that employ field theory in one form or another, we have very little general sense of how to produce measurement and comparability in observation in order to evaluate the conceptual disagreements. So, for example, Bourdieu published Distinction in English in 1984. Thirty years on, it remains one of the few comprehensive field-level studies of social life. The issues it raises have simply not been addressed consistently from a specifically field-theoretic point of view. Instead, scholars have picked and chosen aspects of Bourdieu’s framework and ignored the general issue of the degree to which such a field of cultural production exists and how stable it may be across time and place (Sallaz and Zavisca 2007).

Moreover, scholars should clarify whether or not the disagreements between field theories is a matter of specifying more clearly the possible scope conditions of each of these perspectives or of their fundamental incompatibility. Again, this issue is both conceptual and empirical. From a conceptual point of view, it may be that there are conditions where one or the other perspective operates to make better sense of the world. Our ability to specify the mechanisms by which these concepts actually operate need to be clarified. This is certainly also an empirical question. So, for example, figuring out how to tell if a particular field is more driven by legitimacy, power and dominance, or identify and cooperation, is a difficult question that we have little experience in working with empirically.

Field theory also can occupy an ambiguous epistemological status. On the one hand, field theorists may assume that fields are real, they can be measured, and their effects discerned. This would imply a more positivist or realist approach to fields that would emphasize common structures and mechanisms that researchers could look for and model across settings. But, one can also view field theory as a set of concepts, ideal types that help researchers make sense of some historical situation. Here, analysts deploy the sparse ideas of which field theory consists to help them put a structure onto empirical materials, be they historical, ethnographic, or quantitative. We are comfortable with either version of field theory. But some scholars will find it difficult to take seriously those who opt for one or the other view of fields.

Field theory also makes very general claims about its empirical scope. Given our view that one can observe fields in most of organized social life, it is necessary to consider what field theory does and does not apply to. Indeed, one can see field theory as a nascent attempt at a general theory of society. While Bourdieu tried to maintain
his perspective was not such a theory, it is difficult given the wide-ranging character of his work and the myriad topics he investigated not to see field theory in this way. The theory of SAFs is a useful model because it builds upon not only the other field theories discussed in this chapter but also incorporates other lines of inquiry like social movement theory, social psychology, and identity theory to create a novel and general theory of action and structure.

Another way to test the generalizability of field theory is to engage other perspectives that posit processes that occur at the meso-level but do not use the field idea. We have only mentioned network analysis and the institutional logics perspectives. But there are others. For example, population ecology in organizational theory, with its conception of constructed organizational populations, shares affinities with field theory (see Haveman and Kluttz 2015). Additionally, much of the work done on policy domains and policy entrepreneurs in sociology and political science could also fit into the field perspective (e.g., Kingdon 1984; Laumann and Knoke 1987).

There are two logical possibilities here. First, field theory might aid other perspectives by providing them with a well-conceived concept of a meso-level social arena that would make such theories richer. Situating one’s analysis of the social world at this meso-level has distinct advantages. To say that action and meaning occurs in fields – social orders made up of individual and collective actors in discernible social positions and centered around mutually recognized resources, issues, and/or goals – gives the theorist an orienting lens with which to test field-level hypotheses or explain social phenomena within a conceptually or empirically bounded arena. Such a meso-level framework recognizes the importance of both macro-level structural influences and micro-level exchange and meaning-making processes without favoring one to the exclusion of the other.

Alternatively, ideas from other theories might also enrich field theory. Take, for example, recent literature on institutional logics (see Thornton et al. 2012). A blind spot of field theory is how ideas move across fields. The role of ideas or institutional logics has been a focus of work in political science and organizational theory. But this literature tends to reify ideas or logics in a way that makes it difficult to tell what they are and how they are or are not transported into new arenas of action. Many of these discussions also underspecify the conditions under which this is likely to happen or not. Field theory, with its ideas about the institutionalization (settlement) of social spaces and how they work, offers researchers social structures that can be used to identify when logics may or may not transfer across such spaces. It would be profitable to think through how field theory and the institutional logics perspective are complementary.

In conclusion, field theory is one of the most general theoretical accomplishments of the past 40 years in sociology. Although the complementarities between versions of field theories outnumber the differences, we should allow for recombination and synthesis in order to build on those complementarities and reconcile the differences. In doing so, we can avoid the theory fragmentation that has characterized sociological subfields over the last several decades and continue our path toward a comprehensive, contemporary theory of fields. As we hope we have shown, we are closer now to such a theory than ever before.

References


