Fields in organization studies: relational approaches?
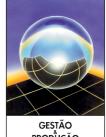
Campos nos estudos organizacionais: abordagens relacionais?

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GESTÃO & PRODUÇÃO

Abstract: This paper analyzes how different approaches of organizational analysis use the notion of 'field'. The philosophical grounds and proposals that motivated the usage of this concept in the social sciences, associated to a specific relational approach illustrated by the sociological approach of Bourdieu, are taken as a reference. Identifying the genesis and paying particular attention to the configuration of scientific concepts in this approach, theoretical tools of sociological institutionalism in organizational analysis and the strategic action field approach are discussed. The paper concludes that overcoming limitations commonly associated to neoinstitutionalism involves reconfiguring its conceptual tools. A broader and more flexible concept of field, intrinsically articulated with conceptions of action and power, is considered to be particularly relevant.

Keywords: Organization theory; Institutionalism; Power in organizations; Organizational dynamics.

Resumo: *Este artigo analisa como diferentes perspectivas teóricas da análise organizacional se apropriam da noção de "campo". Tomam-se como referência as bases filosóficas e as propostas que motivaram a utilização desse conceito pelas ciências sociais, associando-o a uma abordagem relacional específica, que é ilustrada pela sociologia de Pierre Bourdieu. Com base na identificação da gênese e atentando especificamente para o formato dos conceitos científicos dessa abordagem, as ferramentas teóricas do institucionalismo sociológico na análise organizacional e da abordagem dos Campos de Ação Estratégica são discutidas. Conclui-se que a superação de limitações comumente associadas ao neoinstitucionalismo passa pela reconfiguração de suas ferramentas conceituais. Aponta-se, particularmente, a relevância da adoção de um conceito de campo mais amplo, flexível e articulado com conceitos relacionais de agência e de poder.*

Palavras-chave: *Teoria das organizações; Institucionalismo; Poder nas organizações; Dinâmica organizacional.*

1 Introduction

Over the last decades, due to the resumption of sociological institutionalism, the use of the concept of field has spread and has aroused growing interest in organizational studies. The term has been used by authors who emphasize the socially constructed character of what was previously called the "environment" of organizations. As Machado-da-Silva et al. (2006) show, in this relatively rapid process of diffusion, the concept was appropriated in different ways by authors, which makes the term become polysemic, mediating theoretical disputes which are often implicit.

Taking into account that the use of the concept is not restricted to the sociology of organizations, retrieving its genesis and comparing its uses with those of other strands of social thought can contribute to in-depth debates about its usefulness. Analyzing the history of the concept in social sciences, it can be observed

that its use is associated with relatively coherent philosophical bases, deriving, to a great extent, from the philosophy of scientific concepts developed by Ernst Cassirer (2004). Kurt Lewin proposed the first field theory in his social psychology which was based on studies conducted by Cassirer and also attempting to shape the scientific concepts in a relational way. In sociology, authors such as Karl Mannheim, Walter Coutu, Milton Yinger, Harold Mey, Quincy Wright, Friedrich Fürstenberg, Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu were also influenced by Cassirer´s work (Martin, 2003), one of the precursors of one of the strands that nowadays is known as relational sociology (Emirbayer, 1997).

In this paper, the forms in which two influential perspectives of organizational studies appropriate the notion of field are assessed, evaluating its

alignment with proposals from relational approaches. Initially, a brief resumption of the philosophy of Cassirer's scientific concepts and appropriation of the concept of field, originating in physical sciences, through the social sciences is made. In order to illustrate how this approach takes shape, we present the sociological approach developed by Pierre Bourdieu, who stands out for his influence in the contemporary social sciences and for his commitment to Cassirer's proposals. Afterwards, we analyze how the theoretical tools used by advocates of sociological institutionalism and the Strategic Action Fields approach (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012) appropriated the philosophical principles that encouraged the use of the concept of field in the social sciences, which is done by a systematic comparison with Bourdieu's approach.

2 Origins of relational approaches

In order to return to the origins of what is referred to here as relational approaches, the genesis of the concept of field in the social sciences is resumed by associating it with Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of science. Afterwards, to illustrate how a sociological approach based on these philosophical precepts can be configured, the perspective developed by Pierre Bourdieu is briefly presented.

2.1 Cassirer's philosophy of scientific concepts and the notion of field

The appropriation of the concept of field in the social sciences is associated with the philosophy of scientific concepts developed by the neo-Kantian philosopher, Ernst Cassirer (Cassirer, 2004; Vandenberghe, 1999). Cassirer (2001) considered man as a symbolic animal and considered that science, as all human activity, is mediated by concepts. In the positivist approaches to science, this mediation takes place by what he calls substantial concepts, which are forms of classification similar to those adopted in the language of common sense and consistent with Aristotelian theory of the concept. It is a way of elaborating concepts that subsume more specific and concrete ideas into more general and abstract ones, isolating common qualitative elements through the process of abstraction. In these forms of hierarchical classification, the function of a theoretical concept is to isolate substances and group them into classes in order to represent reality as a discrete multiplicity of existing things (Vandenberghe, 2001; Emirbayer, 1997).

Cassirer noted that the format of scientific concepts used in mathematics and modern natural sciences broke with the Aristotelian theory of the concept. Instead of prioritizing the substance of phenomena, the theory in some strands of the modern exact and natural sciences began to emphasize the

relationships between them, with scholars engaging in developing concepts that would represent reality by being interrelated in research practice, generating a generative and synthetic representation of reality.

Cassirer himself and several other social scientists realized that this way of conceiving theory brought about a break with the positivist and empiricist view, which made it particularly useful in the social sciences. This is because substance-oriented theorizing tends to presuppose, to a great extent, the social phenomena it seeks to explain, generating an enormous amount of forms of classification that hide the characteristics of individuals and tend to generate too general concepts, which presuppose the very reality they seek to reveal. This prevents the social scientist from breaking with common sense, limiting him/herself to describing what is visible (*doxa*), without grasping assumptions and generative structures that are the basis of knowledge (*episteme*). The scientific study of social dynamics would thus depend on the constitution of a set of concepts that are intrinsically related and elaborated on the basis of social facts, which would operate as theoretical tools to be used in empirical research and that could be progressively refined.

One of the first authors to use this approach in the human and social sciences was Kurt Lewin (1965), who was Cassirer´s student and was also influenced by the German *Gestalt* philosophy and Einstein's idea of the space field as a totality of coexisting facts which are conceived as mutually interdependent (Rummel, 1975; Martin, 2003). In his view:

> To my mind, it is hopeless to link the different problems involved in social psychology in a proper manner by using classificatory concepts of the type of the Linnean system in botany. Instead, social psychology will have to use a framework of "constructs." These constructs do not express "phenotypical" similarities, but so-called 'dynamical' properties - properties defined as 'types of reactions' or 'types of influences'. In other words, these constructs represent certain types of interdependence. The transition from phenotypical concepts to dynamic (genetic, conditional-reactive) constructs based on interdependence is, to my mind, one of the most important prerequisites for any science which wishes to answer questions of causation. Psychology is in the midst of a process of transition to this type of concept. Social psychology, and sociology too, will have to turn definitely in this direction. It is true that such a transition can be made only if and when there is a sufficient amount of phenotypical 'facts' gathered and classificatory work has been done (Lewin, 1939, p. 884).

Lewin created the first field theory outside the universe of physics seeking to avoid rigid theories and excessively broad and abstract theoretical generalizations. In his approach, concepts such as field or life space, needs, displacements, valences,

barriers, tension and action were conceived in a relational way, and cannot be understood and used in isolation (Lewin, 1965; Rummel, 1975). This is aligned with the quest to understand the behavior of individuals in an interdependent and dynamic way in social psychology.

The application of the concept of field symbolizes the project of translating this form of theorization from the exact sciences to the social sciences, since, in physics, the field idea is notoriously relational (Martin, 2003). It cannot be understood in an isolated way, the concept is particularly useful to compose a relational understanding of social structures (Vandenberghe, 2001).

Martin (2003) identifies some characteristics that have made field theories attractive to social scientists committed to this conception of structure. The first aspect is that it seeks to explain the changes in the state of some elements without resorting to changes in others as their causes, which implies a rupture with the explanatory model of mechanicism. Instead, it refers to the characteristic of the field and the position occupied by the element under its influence.

Another point is that changes in the state of a field involve interactions between the existing states of elements with particular attributes that make them susceptible to their effects and that "[...] the 'force' that impinges upon some object in a field is a function of the field effect and of some characteristic of the object itself [...]" (Martin, 2003, p. 7, our translation). In sociology, this implies assuming that the field effects are felt only by individuals who are socialized in a given sphere and that the attributes of the individuals or organizations that comprise the field matter, and are vectors of their transformation.

At the same time that this effect is generated by the components, the force potential is in the field, which mediates the relations of force between the elements that compose it. The fields, therefore, explain the transmission of forces in cases where the alternative form of explanation would involve action at a distance. They cannot be measured by themselves and their existence can only be proven by their effects, which organize space differentially. In the social sciences, the concept consists of a way of explaining the verified regularities, which is commonly called social structure.

Martin (2003) also argues that this approach has similar aspects to both mechanicism and functionalism, but it results in a way of explaining that it is very different from these approaches. As in mechanicism, it focuses on the understanding of concrete reality, respecting the specificities of the cases studied. On the other hand, it is rejected that the explanations of social phenomena are based on causal threads as they require adopting more or less explicit presuppositions about

"human nature", which is always complicated and potentially dangerous.

As in functionalism, such approaches attempt to understand social phenomena in terms of global standards. These standards, however, are seen as constructs that can only be understood empirically and not based on the specification of a function defined in relation to the environment. Thus, while a system can only be understood as opposed to its environment, a field can be understood independently from the larger social space, which does not mean that they are fully autonomous. Each field has its own logic, rules, and regularities, and they define the very boundary of the field, which is socially constructed.

In order to illustrate how this relational epistemology shaped social science approaches, one of the most rigorous applications of its principles is analyzed below: the one developed by Pierre Bourdieu. The purpose of the next section is not to discuss its approach in all its complexity, which would require much more effort and would divert from the scope defined for the study, but to highlight how the configuration of its theoretical tools and, in particular, the use of the notion of field in his work, is consistent with relational epistemology.

2.2 The notion of field in Bourdieu's relational sociology

Bourdieu, who was a philosopher, drew on the contributions of Cassirer (2004) and was inspired by Lewin's approach to propose his theoretical framework to understand the "structuring structures" of the social world. The influences of Gaston Bachelard's "applied rationalism", a way of combining rationalism and realism in order to overcome common sense, and of Blaise Pascal's criticism of the foundation of knowledge, are also highlighted, which makes his approach marked by strong empirical and historical bases (Bourdieu et al., 1999; Bourdieu, 2001b). As Vandenberghe (1999) shows, it is from these philosophical bases and from the quest to transpose the format of relational concepts from the natural to the social sciences in a non-positivist way, that an original synthesis of sociology classics emerges (Weber, Marx, Durkheim, Elias, Mannheim, Goffman), of phenomenology (Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty) and linguistic philosophy (Wittgenstein, Austin). This synthesis, embodied in relational concepts, can be seen as the core of a research program (Lakatos, 1999), seeking to provide a basis for the accumulation of knowledge in the social sciences.

To generate a relational understanding of reality, Bourdieu proposes concepts characterized by their generality and flexibility that, when articulated by researchers in the practice of empirical research, help the researcher to produce sociological explanations.

Thus, to a large extent, to understand the Bourdieusian perspective is to understand how generative concepts such as those of fields, *habitus*, capitals, among others, are related to facilitate the practice of socioanalysis.

Although he was not the first sociologist to make use of the concept of field, Bourdieu was undoubtedly the one who most applied it to empirical studies, defining it as "[...] structured spaces of positions (or posts) whose properties depend on the positions within these spaces [...]" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 89). These social orders are always situated within the global social space and characterized by their relative autonomy. They are spaces of relations and disputes between positions, occupied by agents and structured based on a distribution of specific capitals.

Fields comprise agents who have a series of dispositions that make up their *habitus*, whether it be their values and practical principles that govern morals on the basis of which they act (*ethos*), their bodily aptitudes (*hexis*) or ways of thinking and interpreting the specific reality (*eidos*). These dispositions are incorporated along their trajectory, from the most basic socialization processes that take place in the family and at school, relating to the social origins and the different spaces through which it transited. It is on the basis of these dispositions that agents interpret and act in the fields, developing strategies to reproduce and transform them (Bourdieu, 1990).

The concept of *habitus* attempts to overcome the dualism between agency and structure, proposing that social structures are within the agents, incorporated in their cognition, and that they not only restrict action but also make it possible. It maintains a dialectical relationship with the field, which implies assuming that if on the one hand the field generates effects with which agents must adapt, on the other, the agents are what configure it.

The ideas of field and *habitus* are strictly articulated with capital, another key concept for Bourdieu, which are resources recognized as valid for disputes in the field and which can be more or less incorporated into the *habitus* of agents. They are accumulated along the trajectory of the agents and have the capacity to produce "profits" for the individuals or groups that hold them, determining their chances of success of their practices (Bourdieu, 1985). They can also be transmitted as inheritance between different generations of agents, enabling the reproduction of social groups and structures of the fields.

Unlike the view of economists and Marx himself, however, economic capital is only one of the types of resources that structure the fields and fit into the *habitus*. The cultural, social, and symbolic capitals are other basic types of capital identified by the author (Bourdieu, 1985). The different kinds of capital are activated by agents in a combined way and their

positions depend on both the total capital and the distribution of specific resources.

Capital conversions are part of the reproductive strategies of agents in the field, but generate risks of losses (Bourdieu, 1985). Agents with high capital endowments dominate the field, possessing greater power over the definition of beliefs and rules that organize the social space and its disputes (*doxa*) and tending to act in a way that preserves its privileges (orthodox posture). Agents with smaller endowments are challengers and tend to adopt subversion strategies of the established order (heterodox).

The concept of field in Bourdieu necessarily implies the existence of disputes. For them to occur, however, dominant and challenger agents need to share fundamental assumptions about the functioning of the field and "believing in the game", as well as the value of what they are disputing (*illusio*). Disputes define the legitimacy of the different definitions of the field, which makes its boundaries fluid.

Field analysis is an arduous process in which the researcher must maintain a permanently reflexive posture and it involves at least three distinct moments (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Initially, it is necessary to situate the field in its broader social space, especially in relation to what the author calls the field of power, defined as a "meta-field" comprising agents from various fields who dispute among themselves the transformation or conservation of the relative value of different kinds of capital. It must also be considered that the fields have different degrees of autonomy, presenting barriers that protect them from external interferences.

A second step in the analysis is mapping the objective structure of the relationships between positions that compete for the legitimate form of authority in the field. The specific capitals that structure the space must be identified and the extent of its effects analyzed. For the analysis of the relative distribution of capital, Bourdieu proposed using the statistical technique of Multiple Correspondence Analysis, seen as a particularly suitable technique for "relational thinking". Through it, it is possible to represent the global effects of the agents´ capital structure, which cannot be reduced by combining the multiple pure effects of the independent variables (Lebaron, 2009).

A third fundamental moment is the analysis of the agents' *habitus*, which is done considering their positions in space and based on the analysis of relevant aspects of their trajectories. *Habitus* does not consist of a replica of a single field, but is the fruit of the influence of the various spaces of socialization that are recurrently experienced by the individual, and can generate reproduction or transformation if it is more or less aligned with its structures (Wacquant, 2007).

Field positions and agent arrangements structure practices and should be analyzed together. In stabilized fields, with already well-established structures, the

positions occupied tend to command the positioning space. Otherwise, there is a mismatch between positions and dispositions, which create transformational tendencies (*hysteresis*).

In Bourdieu's conception, a relational approach requires the mediation of theoretical tools consisting of concepts that are not substantially defined, but rather relationally operated as a tool to understand the empirical reality (Vandenberghe, 1999; Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008). According to the author, theory is not a "kind of prophetic and programmatic discourse" through which we end up imposing and simplifying reality, but a program of perception and action comprising temporary constructs that take shape for and by empirical work (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 161). Hence, their concepts cannot be considered to be "things" as they are loosely defined, nor operated independently, but always in relation to each other, providing a rigorous but never rigid scientific reading of the processes and social relationships.

3 Fields in organizational analysis

As presented by Machado-da-Silva et al. (2006), the concept of field was appropriated in different ways by various authors of organizational analysis. In this section, two main approaches are focused on, considered particularly influential and sufficiently developed: the dominant view of sociological institutionalism, developed based on DiMaggio & Powell (1983), and recently formalized by Fligstein & McAdam (2012). It seeks to evaluate how these approaches align with the relational epistemological bases previously discussed and analyzes to what extent the relational conceptions of structure, agency and power are integrated to understand action. The Bourdieusian approach is a reference, from which institutionalism incorporated important insights and with which it has evident affinity (Dimaggio & Powell, 1991; Wang, 2016).

3.1 Fields in sociological institutionalism

In their seminal work, DiMaggio & Powell (1983) discussed how the field shapes organizational practices forcing them to follow established standards of conduct, identifying three types of institutional isomorphisms. The first, called coercive, occurs, for example, when certain practices are imposed by the State or other external actors as conditions for the survival of organizations. In mimetic isomorphism, due to uncertainties, organizations mimic other views as successful or adhere to trendy fads. Appropriate, professionally accepted conduits also influence organizational practices, characterizing the third type of isomorphism, called normative.

In this seminal article, of the new institutionalism in organizational analysis, the organizational field is defined as "[...] those organizations which, in the aggregate, constitute a recognizable area of institutional life [...]" (Dimaggio & Powell 1983, p. 148). It is a meso-level social order, an analytical instance indicated as key to understanding how institutions influence organizational life, as it allows for the analysis of an instance between the abstract macroenvironment and the organization in which changes usually occur (Dimaggio, 1988). In a widely quoted passage, the authors argue further that:

> [...] the virtue of this unit of analysis is that it directs our attention not simply to competing firms, as does Hanann and Freeman's (1977) population approach, or to networks of organizations that actually interact, as does the interorganizational network approach of LAUMANN; GALASKIEWICZ; MARSDEN (1978), but to the totality of all relevant actors. In doing this, the field idea comprehends both the idea of connectedness (see LAUMANN; GALASKIEWICZ; MARSDEN, 1978) and structural equivalence (WHITE; BOORMAN; BREIGER, 1976) (Dimaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148).

As Bourdieu, the authors present the structure of the fields as dynamics, with their boundaries only being defined by empirical research. They also indicate that structuration or institutionalization of these spaces consists of four parts:

> [...] an increase in the extent of interaction among organizations in the field; the emergence of sharply defined interorganizational structures of domination and patterns of coalition; an increase in the information load with which organizations in a field must contend; and the development of a mutual awareness among participants in a set of organizations that they are involved in a common enterprise (DIMAGGIO, 1983) (Dimaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148).

In this process, powerful forces begin to act in the field, restricting the action of the actors and making them become very similar to each other, enhancing homogeneity. While in Bourdieu's approach, the positions are the building blocks of the fields, and are defined relationally, here fields comprise organizations, which form a recognizable community of the environment and adopt common patterns of legitimation. It is interesting to note that the organizational field is directly associated with the extent and patterns of direct interaction between actors, which defines a linear causality pattern (Wang, 2016) and means that many of the authors of institutionalism use network analytical techniques to address fields. However, these techniques are mostly used without proper theoretical clarification concerning the concepts of networks and organizational fields and

the relationship between them (Powell et al., 2005; White et al., 2004; Candido et al., 2016).

The focus of early institutionalists in comprehending stability influenced the format of the theoretical-conceptual framework proposed by them, marked by the absence of clear conceptions of power and agency. This has led to criticisms, which have been answered in at least three main ways.

The first group of authors sought to develop a notion of agency based on the idea of institutional entrepreneurship. Proposed by DiMaggio (1988), this concept points out that some actors, despite institutional pressures, contribute to the formation of new institutions in order to pursue their interests. Battilana et al. (2009) reviewed subsequent contributions showing that various authors developed this idea by analyzing the field conditions that propitiated entrepreneurial action and the extent to which the actors' individual position and characteristics in the field influence their ability to act. They also emphasize that the process of institutional entrepreneurship involves the articulation of external partnerships, discursive frameworks that need to account for specifying and justifying the proposed changes in order to legitimize them and the mobilization of tangible and intangible resources necessary for the development and sustainability of political actions. Similarly, Lawrence et al. (2011), based on the concept of institutional work, propose to bring individuals and agencies back to institutional theory and bridge gaps with critical studies of organizations.

Another important approach is the one that is based on the concept of institutional logics, first developed by Friedland & Alford (1991) and revitalized and revised by Thornton et al. (2012). The central idea here is that the existence and integration of various differentiated and potentially contradictory institutional spheres in society enables actors to promote institutional transformations. The authors propose that the diversity of institutions that organize social life and its operation at multiple levels is the way out of the agency-structure paradox. In this view, the actors activate various logics in certain fields, which means that institutions do not only constrain action, but also enable them. In these authors´ opinions, as in the view of other institutionalists, the field idea refers to multiple levels of analysis, what is an indication of their adherence to a substantial view of concepts.

These perspectives relate to, and in some cases overlap with, a third emergent way of approaching the agency in organizational studies: the one that establishes bridges between the institutionalism and the theory of social movements (Davis et al., 2008). In this case, the processes of contestation and collective mobilization are considered as precursors of institutional changes, treating more systematically the relations between action, collective organization

and institutional contexts. Some authors treat movements as forces against institutions, operating from the field to propose new views and challenge existing arrangements. Others understand them as institutional forces or infrastructures for processes that arise based on the exploration of contradictions arising from the multiple logics operating in the fields (Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2008).

The last approach presented, developed by Fligstein & McAdam (2012), follows this path to systematize an approach focused on the explanation of the emergence and transformation of fields. In it, the field idea is conceived and used quite differently from neoinstitutionalism.

3.2 Strategic action fields

This approach has recently been formalized, after having been used in various empirical studies by Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam, who define Strategic Action Fields (SAF) as "[...] socially constructed arenas within which actors with varying resource endowments seek advantages [...]" (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012, p. 10). The authors propose three fundamental aspects in the fields that are socially constructed: (i) the sense of belonging, more based on subjective aspects than on objective criteria; (ii) the boundaries of the field, which change according to the definition of the situation and the issues in dispute; (iii) the understanding that underlies the field operation, including the shared understanding of what is at stake in the field, who are the incumbent and challenger actors, what the field rules are, and how the actors in each field should act.

The concept of social skills (Fligstein, 2001), based on symbolic interactionism, is key to the foundation of its approach. Reviewing historical and archaeological literature and linking them with the sociological conceptions of classical authors such as Weber, Durkheim and Mead, they propose that the foundation of human sociability is related to the collaborative symbolic activity associated with the advent of language, culture, and the construction of identities and shared meanings (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). This ability is what makes cooperation among the actors possible, according to the definition of the concept presented below.

> Social skill can be defined as the ability to induce cooperation among others. Skilled social actors empathetically relate to the situations of other people and, in doing so, are able to provide those people with reasons to cooperate (MEAD 1934; GOFFMAN, 1959, 1974). Skilled social actors must understand how the sets of actors in their group view their multiple conceptions of interest and identity and how those in external groups do as well. They use this understanding in particular situations to provide an interpretation of the situation and frame courses of action that appeal to existing interests and identities (Fligstein, 2001, p. 112).

These skills are distributed more or less homogeneously among the actors in the field and function as a specific type of resource, which may or may not be leveraged by the endowment of other capitals, and which is distributed in a more or less random way among the members of the fields. Socially skilled actors act in the fields and have a broad capacity for mobilizing and building coalitions to produce shared readings about situations, enabling collective action (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012).

The authors also propose macro-considerations on how to understand the rooting of fields in the wider social space and the interconnection between fields. A set of bureaucratic fields of fundamental importance to modern society are highlighted, which are brought together in what we call the State. This set of fields that defines or ratifies the rules of public life and imposes them on a certain territory, including through physical violence, has, in this view, a fundamental role in the emergence, stabilization and transformation of other fields.

Nevertheless, it is theorizing the dynamics of stability and change in the fields that is central to the SAF approach. It is proposed that the analysis of the fields involves identifying the state in which they are, describing three ideal states: the emergent, stable, and in crisis.

Emerging fields are spaces which are not very institutionalized in which the meanings, identities and forms of organization are fluid, and are in dispute. Drawing on concepts from the theory of social movements, the authors propose that these social spaces arise through mobilization processes in which actors develop new lines of action, tracing their first contours. This process is often triggered by exogenous shocks from nearby fields, which alter the perceptions of opportunities and challenges of those involved. Players with higher resource endowments have greater influence and tend to bias the structures of the field, and the greater the inequality of the distribution of resources at the time of formation, the greater the tendency of the fields to be organized hierarchically. This moment is conducive to socially skillful action, which helps overcome the situation of initial disorganization, contributing to the construction of the senses of the field. The emergence of SAFs also has some level of facilitation of State fields, and it is common to result in the constitution of Internal Governance Units.

A second state is that of stability. Here, the established arrangements become institutionalized and are taken as given by the actors. This does not mean that the challengers agree with the logic of the fields, but they generally adopt a cautious stance, adhering even partially to the institutions. Although the fields are systematically reproduced, they are not static and are characterized by a constant dynamic of incremental changes. The strong inertia of this state restricts the performance of socially skilled actors, especially those from the challenger groups.

The fields are not doomed to reproduce or undergo only incremental changes; there being a third state described by the authors: that of crisis. Most crises in SAFs are due to exogenous shocks that generate moments of contention and may or may not lead to ruptures with the prevailing structures. There are also cases where small and constant internal disputes end up leading to sudden mobilizations aimed at changes in the balance of forces. The resulting transformations depend, to a great extent, on the social skills of actors from groups with greater or lesser resource endowments, who tend to take as reference the previous state of the field to define their future. In general, incumbents adopt a conservative stance, seeking to preserve their privileges. Challengers, in turn, act on a shared view of how the field can be organized. Incumbents and challengers can even build alliances with external actors from nearby State and non-State fields.

Next, the presented approaches are compared and discussed.

4 Analyzing the alignment of organizational approaches with relational proposals

Based on the discussion of the fundamental characteristics of relational epistemologies and their implications concerning how to think about theoretical concepts and presenting focused approaches, it is possible to discuss the extent to which approaches to organizational studies are close to this view. This will be done by comparing Bourdieu's approach. In Chart 1, the main characteristics of the sociological approaches presented and discussed are summarized. Key concepts are considered, including the level of analysis to which the concepts apply, the way in which the field is defined, how the field is related to its exterior and how this concept is articulated with the concepts of power and agency.

The first and fundamental point based on which approaches can be compared refers to the levels of analysis to which the field concepts apply in the different approaches. In Bourdieu's approach, the field is an abstract concept on the basis of which researchers can construct their research object. It can be used for sociological analyses at different levels, focusing on either power and class structures from whole countries (Hjellbrekke et al., 2007; Bourdieu, 2007) or specific company structures (Bourdieu, 2001a). These spaces are not considered as parts of a whole with a common dynamic. Each field or subfield "[...] is governed by its own logics, rules, and each stage of the division of the field involves qualitative changes [...]" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 103).

Chart 1. Comparative synthesis of approaches.

KEY ASPECTS	BOURDIEU´S SOCIOLOGY	SOCIOLOGICAL INSTITUTIONALISM	STRATEGIC ACTION FIELDS
Configuration of the scientific concepts	- Relational	- Substancial	- Relational, despite ambiguities
Levels of analysis to which the concept of field applies	- Multiple - Non-categorical structure of levels of analysis	- Meso analysis - Field as level between macro (social structure) and micro (organization)	- Multiple, despite focus on meso analysis
Defining the scope of the field	- Narrow, defined on the basis of the analysis of valued capitals	- Broad, including all relevant actors for analysis	- Narrow, defined by identities, meanings and value attributed to resources
Relation of external space field	- Field inserted in the social space - Analysis should always situate the field in relation to the "field of power " - Field can be more or less autonomous - Homologies between fields	- Generally not covered due to the broad way the scope is defined - More recently, different institutional logics influencing the field	- Fields rooted and associated with other fields - Analysis should situate the field in relation to nearby fields - Resource dependences between fields - Sources of transformation (exogenous shocks)
Field components	- Individuals or organizations - Organizations as fields	- Relevant organizations ("organizational field")	- Organizations or individuals - Organizations as fields
Relation with power concept	- Power distribution defines the structure of the field - Agents have different capitals, more (economic, cultural and social capital) or less (symbolic capital) objectifiable - Capitals at the origin and arrival - Field dominance in dispute based on capital endowments (dominant × challengers)	- No clear concept of power or power is not directly related to the structure of the field - Some authors associate power with centrality in networks.	- Power defines structure - Actors rely on different resource endowments - Emphasis on the symbolic aspects of power - Field dominance in dispute based on capital endowments (incumbent × challenger)
Relation with action	- Focus on individual action - Habitus as a way of historicizing agents - Strategies - Agents	- Organizational field not very articulated with conceptions of action - Entrepreneurship and Institutional Work - Institutional Logic - Social movements - Actors	- Focus on collective action - Shared identity as a way of historicizing collective agents (existential function of the social) - Social skills - Social movements - Actors

Source: compiled by the authors.

The Strategic Action Fields approach adopts a similar position to the Bourdieusian one. Despite its focus on the meso analysis, Fligstein & McAdam (2012) acknowledge that the field concept can be used at multiple levels. Thus, the department of an organization, an organization as a whole or the sector in which it is inserted could be understood as a strategic action field. The authors also emphasize that the concept can also be used to address the connections of these different instances.

Whereas in sociological institutionalism, organizational fields are a unit of interorganizational analysis. The concept, in this case, apprehends the specificity of the object of study, serving as a representation of what is termed in other approaches as an organizational environment. It is a unit of analysis between the organization and broader social

structures and not a more abstract concept and can be applied at different levels. Although some authors and more recent approaches to institutionalism tend to conceive the field differently from that proposed by DiMaggio & Powell (1983), they follow them in this respect. In the approach to institutional logics (Thornton et al., 2012), for example, four levels of analysis are considered: the individual, the organization, the field and the corporate. According to Stinchcombe (1991), the authors also consider that the construction of theory demands that researchers identify the mechanisms that connect these different levels (Thornton et al., 2012, p. 13). This research makes the substantial setting of their theoretical concepts evident and is clearly related to a distinct conception of causality. While Bourdieu adopts a circular conception of causality, emphasizing the interdependence of causal series, neoinstitutionalists see causality in linear terms (Wang, 2016).

Concerning the context of the field, i.e., how the approaches see the relationship of the field with its "environment", the approaches of Bourdieu and the SAFs are also convergent and different from the institutionalist view. In the former, society is understood as various relatively autonomous spheres of action, and a specific field is always embedded in a broader social space comprising a set of other fields. One of the first steps of the analysis is, therefore, to identify other spaces that are strong enough to exert influence on the sphere that is the focus of analysis. In this sense, Bourdieu proposes that the first step of analysing a field is to situate it in relation to the "field of power", which can be understood as a specific field that is formed between parts of two or more fields that compete among themselves and defining what he calls "conversion rates" between the capitals that characterize each space (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In both approaches, a field may be more or less autonomous in relation to the social space, being more or less subject to external interferences that are potential sources of transformation, the "exogenous shocks" of the SAF approach. The fields may still be within other fields, such as "Russian dolls" (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012)

In the approach advocated by DiMaggio & Powell (1983), the organizational field is seen as a *locus* of autonomous institutionalization, which is a consequence of the way in which it is conceived. It is proposed that they are constituted by all actors identified as relevant to the analysis, i.e. everything that matters for analysis should be seen as part of the organizational field. Obviously, then, what is not part of the field is not taken into account in the analysis. The institutional logics approach (Thornton et al., 2012) breaks with this view of the field as an autonomous space by considering that the fields are inserted societies that are interinstitutional systems, with multiple forms

of legitimate rationalities that can be used by field actors. However, the authors of this approach do not recognize that social systems can also be viewed and analyzed as sets of interconnected fields.

In Bourdieu's and SAF's approach, which follows it at this point, the boundary of the fields is defined on the basis of the capitals/resources recognized as valid, which shape identities and meanings in the field. Thus, its scope is more "narrow", as indicated by Fligstein & McAdam (2012, p. 167-168):

> So, for us, field membership consists of those groups who *routinely* take each other into account in their actions. This from membership a host of other groups that may be very important for the everyday functioning of the strategic action field. Consider the case of product markets. Producers in a market frequently orient their actions to their competitors (FLIGSTEIN, 1996, 2001; WHITE 2004). Producers are obviously dependent for success of their suppliers, but suppliers generally do not command all that much of producers' attention. Instead, the suppliers comprise a field of their own.

Recognizing that the field maintains relations with other spaces is different from defining it based on the function it plays in relation to the environment, as it does in the systemic analysis of functionalist origin. The occupants of different positions in the field have different concepts about it and, as a result, when the distribution of power changes, the boundaries of the field itself can change. This space of relations of forces can even, at a moment of stability, be oriented to a common function, however, one should not lose sight of the fact that this function is socially constructed (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

The institutionalist theoretical framework of organizational sociology has been criticized for not including clear concepts of agency and power (*e.g.:* Misoczky, 2003). In order to respond to these criticisms, the main focus of the authors of this field has been to understand institutional change, widening the attention given to conflicts when defining institutions.

Although various highly relevant empirical studies have been produced by neoinstitutionalists, the advances have not been translated into general concepts that facilitate a more flexible and relational reading of reality. One of the main problems is precisely the rigid way in which the spheres of action themselves (the organizational fields) are conceived. This is clear when analyzing the limited advances generated by using the concept of institutional entrepreneurship (Battilana et al., 2009). As Fligstein & McAdam (2012, p. 28) observed, without taking into account that many of the field transformations are due to the relations between fields that generate exogenous shocks, the concept of institutional entrepreneurship ends up leading to a theory of a "superman". While the perspective of institutional logics promotes advances

in the understanding of action, the authors of this strand continue to adopt the concept of organizational field as a reified level of analysis and its theoretical tools are not well articulated, tending to emphasize the substance of phenomena.

The neoinstitutionalist sociological apparatus also lacks a relational conception of power, marginalizing the forces acting in the field as explanatory variables. One consequence is that fields, instead of being seen as relations between positions, are seen as relations between organizations, gaining concreteness and becoming more similar to networks (Wang, 2016). Although more recent authors recognize that the fields are spaces of dispute, the tendency is to use a concept of interactional power (Emerson, 1962), similar to that adopted in dependence of resources (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003) and in the analysis of social networks. The adoption of this view is based on the opinion that measuring power is problematic and potentially tautological (Emerson, 1962), what is associated with a difficulty in recognizing the existence of social structures and aligns the conception of power with instrumental and functional imperatives (Lounsbury & Ventresca, 2003). Thus, power relations are reduced to dependency relations arising from the direct interaction structure between agents. There is not a mediating concept of power, capable of capturing its multiple forms and the way they operate in society and on the basis of which the position of actors in the field can be constructed. Only one of the various forms of resources that can influence the construction of positions in the field and it is associated with what Bourdieu calls social capital, in an incomplete view of how the distribution of resources influences the dynamics of the field and shapes its institutions (Candido et al., 2016).

In the approaches developed by Bourdieu and Fligstein and McAdam, the field concept is necessarily and systematically articulated with concepts of agency and power in the practice of research, which makes it possible to overcome the paradox between agency and structure. Despite this common aspect, approaches embody different ways of understanding agency/action. Fligstein & McAdam address the need to adapt Bourdieu's approach to understand collective action, proposing to replace the notion of *habitus* with that of social skills. According to the authors, the Bourdieusian approach was conceived to understand fields formed by individuals and emphasizes the dispute too much, underestimating the importance of cooperation, as explained in the following extract:

> Actors in Bourdieu's theory are generally only responsible to themselves and motivated by a desire to advance their interests within the constraints of the situation in which they find themselves. But fields also turn more centrally on coordinated action, which requires that actors not simply focus on their own position in a field but to seek cooperation with others by taking the role of the other and framing lines of action that appeal to others in the field. We view these collective dynamics as complementary to the generally individual action that is Bourdieu's central concern (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012, p. 25).

The idea of *habitus* is closely linked to the trajectory of the agents and spaces in which they were socialized, defining the limits and possibilities of individual action. Here, the attempt is to overcome the agency-structure paradox by proposing the existence of a dialectical relationship between field and *habitus*. Based on symbolic interactionism, Fligstein & McAdam (2012) focus on collective action, which, in a way, justifies the fact that they do not include in their referential a way of historicizing individuals, as Bourdieu does.

Both the Bourdieu and SAF approaches provide a basis for understanding fields as spaces of relationships between positions. Fligstein & McAdam (2012) distinguish only the material resources from the symbolic ones and assume that the forms of power are varied and specific to each field, not investing in their detailing and systematization. The authors emphasize the interpretation shared by the field actors themselves about the asymmetries of in the domain of resources and the definition of incumbents and field challengers, leaving aside a more formal analysis of the objective distribution of resources, which indicates a greater influence of symbolic aspects in their approach.

Bourdieu proposes the existence of basic and measurable sources of power in modern societies (symbolic, cultural, economic, social capitals) associated with class structures, which acquire specificity in specific fields. These forms of capital are defined relationally, which causes Bourdieu to deny that their effects are irreducible to multiple pure effects of independent variables and advocate the use of the statistical technique of multiple correspondence analysis rather than regression techniques (Lebaron, 2009). Bourdieu outlined the structure of fields, in the objective moment of his approach, in which he proposes a rigorous and formal analysis of power, which needs to be reintegrated through the *habitus* in the analysis of particular practices and situations.

Finally, we should consider that Bourdieu adheres to critical sociology, proposing that his analyses reveal and denounce forms of domination, while Fligstein and McAdam have a pragmatic position, implying a less negative view of the exercise of power. In a similar way to the authors of the pragmatic sociology of French criticism (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Boltanski, 2011), American authors suggest that challengers, although undermined by the dominant

order, to some extent benefit from the stability and existential refuge it generates, and places a greater emphasis on the situation and experience of the actors than on the objective structures. In doing so, they propose that actors' experiences should be "taken seriously," rejecting the view of critical sociology that structures distort their reality and their capacity for judgment and reflection, in what Bourdieu calls symbolic domination.

Incorporating an agency concept that resolves the dilemma of action and structure is recognized as one of the greatest challenges of sociological neoinstitutionalism in the analysis of organizations since its emergence (Dimaggio & Powell, 1991). However, the very configuration of theoretical institutionalist concepts was conceived to understand stability, maintaining the most up-to-date strands attached to its foundations. Incorporating the foundations of relational approaches more decisively in the constitution of their theoretical tools is a fundamental step so that this important contemporary strand of organizational studies can advance.

5 Final considerations

The origins of the notion of field in the social sciences are associated with a relational theoretical concept that enables the theory to serve as a tool to analyze processes without the analyst generating a rigid discourse and a passive posture. Therefore, the concept of field, which corresponds to a relational form of designing structures, must operate in an articulated way with the concepts of action and power, composing theoretical reference in which the concepts can only be understood in relation to each other. It is the articulated operation of these genetic concepts that make rigorous empirical analysis of the diverse organizational phenomena possible.

By emphasizing these central aspects of the genesis of the concept, the paper was able to show that the way it was appropriated in sociological institutionalism in organizational analysis is strongly associated with indicated limitations of this approach. Despite the authors' commitment to relational analysis in their empirical studies, their theoretical tools tend to take on static, substantial forms. It was pointed out that the notion of "organizational field" of the neoinstitutionalism is particularly problematic, as it is used as a fixed analytical instance, which ends up inducing the understanding of the substance of organizational phenomena. The development of relational sociology in organizational analysis depends on understanding the field concept as a more general and abstract tool that helps integrate the multiple spheres of action taken as the object of its studies. Looking at concepts in this way reveals

the enormous potential of analyzing the organizations themselves as fields.

Adopting a relational concept can help organize organizational studies around a common agenda, promoting the integration of different streams of thought and levels of analysis. In research on internal dynamics of organizations, it is possible to integrate streams that lean towards the study of culture, power, conflicts and organizational strategy. This internal understanding can still be connected to understanding external dynamics, integrating streams that see organizational reality as socially constructed, such as institutionalism, organizational ecology, resource dependency approach, social movement theory, social network analysis and aspects of economic sociology. One way to develop these potentialities is to maintain rigor in the relational form of theory, made possible by focusing on understanding the practices and avoiding scholastic and substantialist theorization, which Bourdieu warned us so much about.

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