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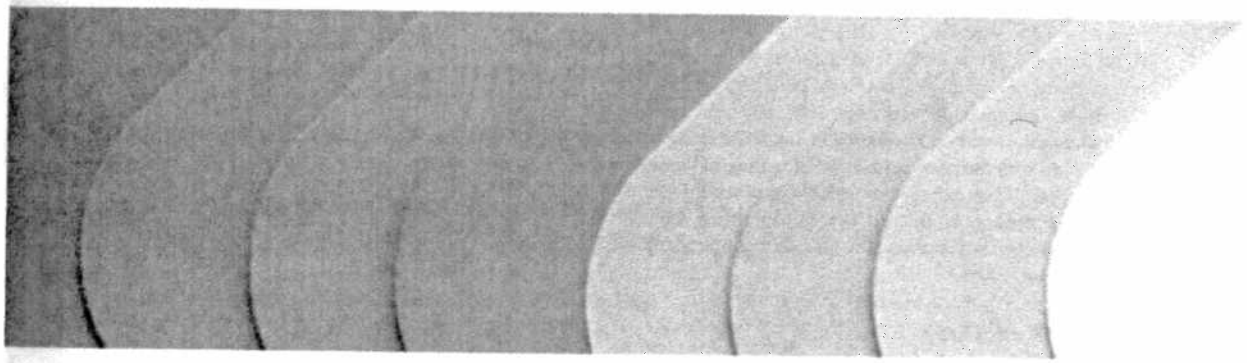

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Organizational Fields: Past, Present and Future

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INTRODUCTION

The term 'institutional theory' covers a broad body of literature which has grown in prominence and popularity over the past two decades. But consistency in defining the bounds of this activity has not always been easy. The lament of DiMaggio and Powell in 1991 still holds true today: 'it is often easier to gain agreement about what it is *not* than about what it *is*' (1991: 1). There are a great number of issues that have and continue to remain divisive within this literature and among related literatures that apply institutional arguments (i.e. economics, political science, and history). What these literatures have in common, however, is an underlying skepticism towards atomistic accounts of social processes, relying instead on a conviction that institutional arrangements and social processes matter in the formulation of organizational action (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991).

At its core, the literature looks to the source of action as existing exogenous to the actor. More than merely suggesting that action is a reaction to the pressures of the external environment, institutional theory asks questions about how social choices are shaped, mediated and channeled by the institutional environment. Organizational action becomes a reflection of the perspectives defined by the group of members which comprise the institutional environment; out of which emerge the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive systems that provide meaning for organizations (Scott, 1995, 2001). Action is not a choice among unlimited possibilities but rather among a narrowly defined set of legitimate options. As an organization becomes more profoundly aware of its dependence on this external environment, its very conception of itself changes, with consequences on many levels. As this happens, Selznick states, 'institutionalization has set in' (1957: 7). Hence, institutionalization represents both a process and an outcome (DiMaggio, 1988).

While not highly emphasized in early institutional analyses (i.e. Selznick, 1949, 1957), the central construct of neo-institutional theory has been the *organizational field* (Scott, 1991). Strictly speaking, the field is 'a community of organizations that partakes of a common meaning system

and whose participants interact more frequently and fatefully with one another than with actors outside the field' (Scott, 1995: 56). It may include constituents such as the government, critical exchange partners, sources of funding, professional and trade associations, special interest groups, and the general public – any constituent which imposes a coercive, normative or mimetic influence on the organization (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991; Scott, 1991). But the concept of the organizational field encompasses much more than simply a discrete list of constituents; and the ways in which the institutional literature has sought to capture this complexity has evolved over the past decades, and continues to evolve. In this chapter, we present this evolution, discussing the past, present and future of this important construct. We illustrate its early conceptualization and present its progression in a way that invites scholars to both consider their work within this historical trajectory and contribute to its further development. We conclude the chapter with our thoughts on promising avenues for future research within this domain.

ORGANIZATIONAL FIELDS: EARLY INCARNATIONS

For early neo-institutional theory, the central unit of analysis was variously referred to as the institutional sphere (Fligstein, 1990), institutional field (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio, 1991), societal sector (Scott and Meyer, 1992), and institutional environment (Orru, Biggart and Hamilton, 1991; Powell, 1991). But the term *organizational field* (Scott, 1991) has become the accepted term for the constellation of actors that comprise this central organizing unit. Like Bourdieu's field (1990, 1993), where an agent's actions within the political, economic, or cultural arena were structured by a network of social relations, institutional theorists conceptualized the organizational field as the domain where an organization's actions were structured by the network of relationships within which it was embedded (Warren, 1967). Warren used the example of community organizations such as banks, welfare organizations, churches, businesses, and boards of education, working in conjunction with one another to elucidate the importance of taking the 'interorganizational' field as a unit of analysis. By focusing attention on this level of analysis, researchers could better understand the decision making processes among distinct organizations that, while having dissimilar goals, felt it necessary and advantageous to interact with one another to accomplish a given task.

As studies of interorganizational relations evolved, scholars broadened the field to include organizations that were not necessarily bound by geography or goals, but instead made up a recognized area of institutional life. These could include organizations that produced similar services or products, suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and others (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). What these organizations had in common was that they comprised a community of organizations that partook of a common meaning system and whose participants interacted more frequently and fatefully with one another than with other organizations (Scott, 1995). Such evolving definitions focused on the organizational field as a means to understand the impact of rationalization on organizations.

The behavior of organizations within fields was said to be guided by *institutions*: the cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative structures that provided stability and collective meaning to social behavior (Scott, 1995). These structures acted as 'social facts' which organizational actors took into account when determining appropriate action (Zucker, 1977; Meyer and Rowan, 1983). The transmission of social facts from one set of actors to another caused them to take on a rule-like and taken-for-granted status and thus become institutionalized (Zucker, 1977). Once a social fact had become

institutionalized, it provided actors with templates for action which created unified or monolithic responses to uncertainty that led to *isomorphism*; a commonality in form and function (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). The central notions of organizational field research focused on understanding the processes that guided the behavior of field members in unconscious ways.

Meyer and Rowan (1977) suggested that the incorporation of elements (i.e. structures, practices, procedures, etc.) from the institutional environment imbued an organization with *legitimacy*. Thus, for example, 'administrators and politicians champion programs that are established but not implemented; managers gather information assiduously, but fail to analyze it; experts are hired not for advice but to signal legitimacy' (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991: 3). An organization that appeared legitimate increased its prospects for survival because constituents would not question the organization's intent and purpose. As increasing numbers of organizations incorporated common institutional elements, most (if not all) organizations at the field level became homogeneous in structure, culture, and output (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Much of the research using this notion of the organizational field centered on the premise that organizations sought survival and legitimacy as opposed to efficiency (Orru, Biggart and Hamilton, 1991).

For example, Fligstein (1990) depicted the industry-wide transformation of executive leadership in America as resulting from shifting pressures from the government. DiMaggio (1991) cited the causes for the accepted form of art museums in American cities in the 1920s and 1930s as the result of efforts by museum workers to define a profession through conformity to demands from foundations, particularly the Carnegie Foundation. Leblebici, Salancik, Copay and King (1991) argued that the generation and acceptance of practices and technologies within the American radio broadcasting industry were the result of the actions of influential industrial actors. And Tolbert and Zucker (1983) looked to the spread of civil service reforms at the turn of the twentieth century as resulting from the pressure of legal requirements or the examples set by fellow cities.

Early field-level analyses allowed some degree of diversity in action, based on primacy in institutional adoption. For example, first adopters within a community of organizations tended to take action out of concerns for efficiency. But, later adoptions followed a different diffusion process with adoption of structures and practices designed to mimic the behavior of prior adopters. Tolbert and Zucker's (1983) study of the adoption of civil reforms by cities provides an exemplar of this phenomenon. Their study found that characteristics such as the percentage of foreign-born residents and the size of the city influenced the adoption of civil service reforms thought to improve city functioning in the early phases of the municipal reform movement. However, over time the city demographics no longer influenced the adoption of such reforms. The authors concluded that, in the later periods, civil service reforms had taken on a legitimated status and as such, became viewed as a necessary signal of a properly functioning municipal system.

Much work in the organizational field arena sought to identify institutionalization by contrasting the adoption of practices for rational or institutional motives, and by detecting how the quest for collective rationality led to homogeneity within field-level populations. Of particular interest was the *role of the state* and the influence of the legal/regulatory environment in leading organizations to collectively develop appropriate responses that ultimately led to uniformity in organizational form or structure.

For instance, Edelman (1992) studied organizations subject to affirmative action and equal employment opportunity legislation. This legislation required organizations to incorporate members from historically underrepresented groups into their hierarchy. Yet, the ambiguity of the legislation did not

specify how an organization should demonstrate its compliance (i.e. how an organization could demonstrate that it had indeed incorporated women, racial/ethnic, and religious minorities into its operations). In response to this uncertainty, field-level actors pushed for the creation of Affirmative Action and Equal Employment Opportunity (AA/EEO) offices as a way to demonstrate their compliance with the new regulations. As other field members – namely the government – took the establishment of an AA/EEO office as evidence of compliance, the adoption of these offices became widespread. A similar process also led to the implementation of grievance systems (Sutton and Dobbin, 1996), internal job markets (Dobbin, Sutton, Meyer and Scott, 1993) and maternity leave policies (Kelly and Dobbin, 1999).

After focusing on the mimetic and regulative forces which led to adoption and isomorphism within an organizational field, institutional research took the so-called 'cognitive turn' (Lindenberg, 1998; Meindl, Stubbart and Porac, 1994). Work within the organizational field domain turned towards understanding the *cultural and cognitive processes* that guided field members' behavior. Researchers sought to uncover the material practices and symbolic constructions that served as organizing templates for field members (Friedland and Alford, 1991). These field-level 'logics' provided organizations with schemas to guide their behavior.

For example, Marquis (2003) highlighted the cultural-cognitive templates that guided the construction of inter-corporate network ties. Firms located in communities that began before the era of auto and air travel had more locally based director connections than firms located in communities that began after auto and air travel became prevalent. Moreover, this logic of locally based network ties continued to guide the behavior of the firms in older communities long after auto and air travel became prevalent.

In other work, Thornton (2001) studied the evolution of logics within the higher education publishing industry and found that acquisition patterns varied according to which logic dominated the industry. When a market-logic dominated the industry, publishers that followed an imprint strategy and those with distribution contracts faced a greater risk of acquisition than other publishers. Yet, when an editorial-logic dominated the industry, imprint and distribution strategies had no significant effect on a publisher's likelihood of being acquired, suggesting that, as the field-level logic changed, the acquisition behavior of the organizations within the field changed as well.

While the Marquis and Thornton studies highlighted the temporal dimension of cognitive processes, another study by Davis and Greve (1997) highlighted the corresponding spatial dimensions by noting that cognitive perceptions regarding the legitimacy of a corporate practice varied based on the social and geographic distance among managers and board of director members. The implementation of the golden parachute, a practice that provided protection to top managers in the event of a hostile takeover, spread among firms within the same region, whereas the adoption of a poison pill, a practice that made hostile takeover prohibitively expensive, spread among firms that shared a board of director tie. Their investigation suggested that the proximity of actors affected the diffusion of firm behavior within a field.

Throughout this early stream of research, the overarching emphasis on similarity remained a constant. The organizational field was conceived as predominantly static in its configuration, unitary in its makeup and formed around common technologies, industries, or discrete network ties (DiMaggio, 1995; Greenwood and Hinings, 1996). Regulative, normative and cognitive influences bred homogeneity in the aggregate. But this emphasis within the literature soon became the subject of criticism.

ORGANIZATIONAL FIELDS: PRESENT CONFIGURATIONS

Beginning in the late 1990s, scholars argued that the institutional literature placed too

much emphasis on the homogeneity of organizational populations and not the processes that created this outcome (Hirsch, 1997). This focus on isomorphism as the 'master hypothesis' (Hoffman and Ventresca, 2002) was seen by many as an unfortunate outcome of early theory development and the misrecognized empirical insights possible from institutional analyses. Critics contended that it facilitated a popular misconception of the theory as embodying stability and inertia as its defining characteristics. Homogeneity of form and practice was treated as evidence of institutional theories of organization (Kraatz and Zajac, 1996). DiMaggio, reflecting on 'what theory is not' (1995) suggested that core institutional claims in his oft-cited 1983 paper (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) suffered asymmetric attention:

> Somewhat to my surprise, ... papers ... cited our paper as support for the proposition that all organizations become like all others, regardless of field. Somehow the network argument that we authors regarded as so central had been deleted in the paper's reception. Within a few more years, the paper had turned into a kind of ritual citation, affirming the view that, well, organizations are kind of wacky, and (despite the presence of 'collective rationality' in the paper's subtitle) people are never rational (DiMaggio, 1995: 395).

Scholars called for efforts to 'end the family quarrel' between old and new institutionalism (Hirsch and Lounsbury, 1997) and to bring agency, politics and change 'back' into the institutional literature (DiMaggio, 1988; Brint and Karabel, 1991; Hirsch and Lounsbury, 1997; Perrow, 1986; DiMaggio, 1995; Greenwood and Hinings, 1996), resurrecting it from the earlier traditions of macro-organizational literature (i.e. Selznick, 1947). In all, these criticisms were aimed at redressing the over-socialized view (Granovetter, 1985), that depicted recipients of field-level influence as a homogenous collection of organizational actors, each behaving according to a social script designed by the social environment.

In response, emergent studies examined organizational field member actions in light of their institutional contexts (i.e. Holm, 1995; Kraatz and Zajak, 1996; Greenwood and Hinings, 1996). This new line of reasoning attended to several key aspects of field-level processes: moving beyond stability and inertia to introduce notions of change within the field; considering the role of organizational self-interests and agency within that context (Covaleski and Dirsmith, 1988; DiMaggio, 1988; Perrow, 1985) and advancing the view that some firms can respond strategically to institutional pressures (Oliver, 1991) to become what might be called institutional entrepreneurs (DiMaggio, 1988; Fligstein, 1997; Zucker, 1988; Lawrence, 1999).

The first target for reconfiguring conceptions of the field addressed the notion of *change*. As observers of the social world, scholars knew that change happened even within highly institutionalized contexts. Yet prevailing theory did not handle such occurrences adequately, in part because of the way in which scholars defined and operationalized organizational fields. Where previous definitions of the field centered around organizations with a common technology or market (i.e. SIC classification), the field began to be seen as forming around the issues that became important to the interests and objectives of a specific collective of organizations (Hoffman, 1999). Issues defined what the field was, drawing linkages that may not have been previously present.

This important clarification led to a conception of the organizational field that would bring together various field constituents with incongruent purposes, not common technologies or industries that assured some commonality of interests. Rather than locales of isomorphic dialogue, the field became *contested*; a 'field of struggles' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) where constituents engaged in 'a war or, if one prefers, a distribution of the specific capital which, accumulated in the course of previous wars, orients future strategies' (Calhoun, 1993: 86). Organizations engage in field-level conflict, out of which they gain skills and capital for future conflict.

Thus, the organizational field became seen as *dynamic* and capable of moving towards something other than isomorphism; evolving both through the entry or exit of particular organizations or populations (Barnett and Carroll, 1993; Hoffman, 1999; Scott, Reuf, Mendel and Caronna, 2000) and through an alteration of the interaction patterns and power balances among them (Brint and Karabel, 1991; Greenwood and Hinings, 1996). Others added that fields remained conflicted even when institutional norms were apparently 'settled' because powerful actors were continually working to maintain their legitimacy (Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001). With the field defined more in terms of contestation and debate, institutions were seen more as 'the products of human design, [and] the outcomes of purposive action by instrumentally oriented individuals' (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991: 8), such that we may expect to find more opportunity for deviance and *agency* among field members (Hirsch, 1997).

Several authors developed theoretical accounts of the sources of agency, change, and variety within institutions and organizational fields. Oliver (1991) suggested that organizations crafted strategic responses and engaged in a multitude of tactics when confronted with the pressures presented by the institutional environment. She argued that an organization's willingness and ability to conform to institutional pressures depended on why these pressures were being exerted (cause), who was exerting them (constituents), what these pressures were (content), how or by what means they were exerted (control), and where they occurred (context). From this perspective, all organizations within a field did not march quietly down the path towards homogeneity.

Greenwood and Hinings (1996) pushed further to combine thoughts from both the old and new institutionalism literatures by developing a framework for understanding how the internal interests and conflicts of an organization's members influenced the organization's response to institutional pressures. Seo and Creed (2002) highlighted an important interest that served as an impetus for change: field members' need to reconcile contradictory institutional arrangements. According to the authors, organizational fields were connected to and embedded within other and conflicting institutional systems. As field members tried to reconcile these differences by bringing the various institutional rules in line with their needs and interests, the fields inevitably changed.

Most recently, Schneiberg (2007) has suggested that change and variation comes from within fields. If fields are indeed places where struggle and contestation take place, then inevitably these struggles leave behind organizational practices and forms that suffer defeat. These ideas may lay dormant for a time, but field members often resurrect these expired forms of organization and practice which in turn, leads to increased variation within the field.

These theoretical accounts of change were used to develop new empirical insights. Emergent research looked not at homogeneity but at variation and change among organizations within a field as signs of institutional processes. For instance, by investigating the decline of the conglomerate organizational form among the 500 largest American industrial firms, Davis, Diekmann and Tinsley (1994) studied the abandonment of a well-institutionalized practice among organizations within a field rather than the adoption of such practices. Lounsbury (2001) provided an explanation of the institutional factors that influenced variation in the adoption of two recycling practices among U.S. colleges and universities. The study highlighted the internal organizational dynamics of colleges that chose to incorporate recycling duties into current waste management policies in relation to those colleges that chose to create a new recycling administrator position.

This newfound emphasis on institutional change culminated with the publication of a special issue of the *Academy of Management Journal*, with each article in this volume

seeking to interpret change and agency within an organizational field through the lens of institutional theory (Dacin, Goodstein and Scott, 2002).

But, despite the insights that this new area of research brought to bear on organizational fields, early notions which implied that individual organizations can respond strategically to field pressures (Oliver, 1991) or may strategically influence the process of field change (Lawrence, 1999) treated the organization and the field as separate and distinct. The firm 'responded' to pressures by either adapting to or resisting those pressures. Critics argued that the interaction between firm and field was not unidirectional nor was it free from interpretation and *filtering processes*. This introduced concerns for sense-making, issue interpretation, selective attention, and cognitive framing among field members (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Scott, 1994; Hoffman and Ocasio, 2001; Hoffman and Ventresca, 2002). The demands of the field were not uniformly understood by all members. Organization-level dynamics caused field members to filter and alter environmental demands. Further, members transmitted their interests back towards the field. The process of interaction became recursive as the social structure of the field became both the 'medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices. Structure enters simultaneously into the constitution of social practices, and "exists" in the generating moments of this constitution' (Giddens, 1979).

Scott (1994) claimed that the essence of the field perspective was its ability to analyze the ways in which organizations enact their environment and are simultaneously enacted upon by the same environment. The work of Bansal and Penner (2002) illustrated this process by investigating the interpretive processes among four newspaper publishers. The authors highlighted the importance of regional networks in influencing the frames and enactment processes developed to address the recycled newsprint issue. They found that the way in which feasibility, importance, and organizational responsibility for recycling were interpreted within these networks helped account for variation in organizational response to this issue. By linking theory and argument from cognitive strategy theory on issue interpretation to institutional analysis, the authors provided an explanation of heterogeneity in field-level behavior.

Other work focused on the interconnectedness of organizations and the field by analyzing the role of *institutional entrepreneurs* (DiMaggio, 1988; Fligstein, 1997; Lawrence, 1999) in shaping the discourse, norms and the structures that guide organizational action (Maguire, Hardy and Lawrence, 2004). As in all field-level debates, certain organizations have the ability to influence the rules of the game (Fligstein, 1990). Yet, even powerful actors cannot simply impose new logics and norms on a field. At some level, the norms must be accepted by other actors (Beckert, 1999). The actors that lobby for the acceptance of these new logics, norms, and practices illustrate the work that institutional entrepreneurs engage in to create and build legitimacy.

Suddaby and Greenwood's (2005) study of the creation of multidisciplinary practices provided insight into this process. The establishment of practices that included both accountants and lawyers threatened the previously agreed upon boundaries between the accounting and legal professions. Thus, creating a firm that included both lawyers and accountants within the same hierarchy required institutional entrepreneurs to provide a legitimating account for this organizational form. To build legitimacy entrepreneurs developed rhetorical strategies which served two purposes. First, they included institutional vocabularies that articulated the logic behind new organizational practices and forms. Second, these rhetorical strategies included language which accounted for the pace and necessity of change within the organizational field.

Recent discussions have taken the notion of the institutional entrepreneur further by

acknowledging that institutional entrepreneurs do not act alone or in isolation. Individual agents form political networks and coalitions to act as 'important motors of institution-building, deinstitutionalization, and reinstitutionalization in organizational fields' (Rao, Monin and Durand, 2003: 796). This conception provided a bridge between institutional theory and *social movement* theory (Davis, McAdam, Scott and Zald, 2005), focusing attention on the ability of social movements to give rise to new organizational fields and change the demography of existing organization fields (Rao, Morrill and Zald, 2000).

Social movement scholars have long recognized the connection between their work and organizations (McCarthy and Zald, 1977; Strang and Soule, 1998; Campbell, 2005). McCarthy and Zald (1977) incorporated concepts from organization theory to develop their resource mobilization perspective. According to this perspective, the availability and accumulation of resources served as an impetus for the formation of social movement organizations that bear a remarkable resemblance to other goal-directed, hierarchical organizations. Moreover, those social movement organizations with similar preferences for change constituted the social movement industry, a unit of analysis not unlike the organizational field. Organizational change agents became parts of these collective movements, using shared and accumulated resources and power to 'overcome historical inertia, undermine the entrenched power structures in the field or triumph over alternative projects of change' (Guillen, 2006: 43). These actions were often conducted in opposition to others in similarly configured collective movements (Zald and Useem, 1987; Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996).

Other work sought to understand the bidirectional influence of organizations and fields built on the linkages between organizational fields, culture, and societal institutions. In particular, researchers sought to explain how ideas and beliefs about organizational strategies and practice became standard and spread in highly-structured fields of activity (Edelman, 1990; Guthrie and Roth, 1999; Washington and Ventresca, 2001). For example, Zilber's (2006) study highlighted the ways in which Israeli society, culture, and fields are intertwined. High technology was mythologized as a tool, enabling the creation of useful products, an area where gifted individuals excelled, and as a vehicle for national development and societal progress within the Israeli popular press. Each of these myths was found at the level of the organizational field as high technology companies incorporated elements of these myths in the job descriptions contained within employment advertisements. As a result, rationalizations of the benefits and purposes of high technology to Israeli society were incorporated within the employment activities of the high technology organizational field.

In sum, the critiques of new institutional theory led to streams of field-level research that focused on change, variation, and agency discussed above. But, while the past and present of organizational research differed from one another in terms of the outcome studied, they were connected by their conceptualization of fields as 'things' that produced outcomes. More recent critiques have suggested that the future of field research lies not in the further emphasis on outcomes but instead in conceptualizing fields as mechanisms (Hoffman and Ventresca, 2002; Davis and Marquis, 2005). This refocus allows for the specification of collective rationality and the possibility that fields serve as mechanisms for bringing about phenomena other than similarity (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Washington and Ventresca, 2001). We address these themes in the third section of this chapter.

ORGANIZATIONAL FIELDS: THE FUTURE

In the final portion of this paper, we offer our thoughts on the future of organizational field

research. We develop our arguments regarding future directions based on the critiques of past and present research as focusing on the outcomes of field membership as opposed to the processes that hold the members of a field together. We encourage those involved in organizational field research to focus on collective rationality within fields: how it is developed, which field members contribute to its development and maintenance, how it is transmitted to other actors, and how it changes over time.

Scott (2001) defined the field as a community of organizations that partake in a common meaning system and whose participants interact more frequently and fatefully with one another than with actors outside the field. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) defined the field as those organizations that in the aggregate represent a recognized area of institutional life. While both of these definitions treat the field as a collective of organizations, they also present an underlying notion that represents a future conception of the field; one where the field is a locale in which organizations relate to or involve themselves with one another. A definition that in some ways brings us back to the influence of Bourdieu – where a field is as much about the relationship between the actors as it is about the effect of the field on the actors.

To move away from the current focus on field outcomes and towards an understanding of why field-level interactions remain vital to organizations, fields must be seen, not as containers for the community of organizations, but instead as *relational spaces* that provide an organization with the opportunity to involve itself with other actors (Wooten, 2006). Fields are richly contextualized spaces where disparate organizations involve themselves with one another in an effort to develop collective understandings regarding matters that are consequential for organizational and field-level activities.

Moving beyond the notion of fields as being constructed around the physical proximity of actors (Warren, 1967) or issues (Hoffman, 1999), fields as relational spaces stresses the notion that organizations become connected within the same field when they begin to take note of one another. This does not mean that actors formalize their relations via hierarchical arrangements or network ties (Djelic and Sahlin-Andersson, 2006). Instead, one actor takes note of another and through this process of referencing one another, actors bring a field into existence. Out of a relational notion of the field emerge several critical issues concerning formation, evolution, and boundaries.

- Why does one relational space with this set of actors form and not another? Why do disparate organizations and populations come together at the field level? How and why do fields form? What processes drive some organizations to interact more frequently and fatefully with one another than with other organizations, thus creating the boundaries of a field?

Research must highlight the organizational dynamics that lead actors to engage one another and start the field-level structuring or restructuring process. It is not evident, for example, why petrochemical companies would willingly engage environmental groups without understanding the dynamics of field-level engagement in field studies (i.e. Hoffman, 1999). Future research should investigate the dynamics that lead to field creation and the contextual factors that lead to one field form over another. For example, relations that form around a common technology, say coal production, are not likely to be similar to those relations that form around an issue such as environmental protection. Such differences will undoubtedly influence the character of the field (Stinchcombe, 1965) and the specification of collective rationality.

Entrance to or engagement within the field is often precipitated by disruptive events such as exogenous shocks that provide the impetus for organizations to make sense of a reconfigured environment. Disruptive events,

such as the threat of a hostile takeover (Davis, 1991), regulatory changes (Edelman, 1992), environmental catastrophes (Hoffman and Ocasio, 2001) or rituals (Anand and Watson, 2004) create contradictions within the environment (Seo and Creed, 2002) and force organizations to (re)analyze their surroundings. Fields serve as the sites in which organizations come together to do this sense-making work. Future research will address what drives organizations to interact with one another and how those configurations are formed. It will also hold open the possibility that the field is not always in use. Instead, the field comes alive when organizations decide to interact with one another and this is the moment that researchers are encouraged to direct their attention towards as it provides tentative answers to the questions now being posed.

- Once formed, how do fields evolve and change? What are the dynamics by which engagement takes place?

The essence of a field is its ability to serve as the meeting place where organizations have the opportunity to involve themselves with one another. Positioning fields in this manner brings scholarship back to the core concepts of the literature, refocusing on the development of 'collective rationality' (Scott, 2001), rather than the impact that collective rationality has on the field. But that field structure is not static. It evolves in makeup, interconnections and conceptual frames.

For example, Anand and Watson's (2004) study of the Grammy Awards illuminates this emerging conception of the organizational field. In addition to providing the music industry's members with an opportunity to meet annually and celebrate one another's accomplishments, the music industry as a field is engaged at this event. Artists fight for the creation of categories particular to their genre to legitimate their status as field members. The addition of new genres to the music industry causes the boundaries of the field to become contested. Thus, the Grammy Awards represent the site where conflicts among members are engaged and resolved. The petition for new categories represents a disruptive event and the current members engaging with the relational space of the field (i.e. the Grammy Awards) develop a new collective rationality about which artists belong within the field and which do not.

An actor's attempt to gain membership strains the existing order within an established field. Field members that once had limited interactions with one another may band together because of a common interest in locking a particular actor out of the field, thus changing the pre-existing coalitions. Under such circumstances, every aspect of a field's character is challenged. As new actors push for admittance, the interorganizational structures and coalitions that once supported the field no longer make sense and the mutual awareness among the field members that they are involved in a common enterprise must be revisited.

This leads to an appreciation for contending logics as a force for institutional change (Seo and Creed, 2002; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005). Reay and Hinings (2005), for example, develop a theoretical model to explain change in mature organizational fields by emphasizing the role of competing institutional logics as part of a radical change process. Rather than explaining the sources of change, they investigate how a field becomes re-established after the implementation of a radical structural change. Studying fields at these moments of restructuring increases our understanding of how collective rationality is developed.

- How can the activities within field-level populations be identified and defined? How do field members relate to one another?

While field constituents' actions may be initially conducted in opposition to one another (Zald and Useem, 1987; Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996; Davis, McAdam, Scott

and Zald, 2005), protracted institutional engagement can yield a gradual merging of interests with a concurrent alteration in the structure of the field itself. However, until that happens, the field is not a collective of isomorphic actors, but an intertwined constellation of actors who hold differing perspectives and competing logics with regard to their individual and collective purpose (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). As such, an appreciation for the diversity of activities and beliefs must be incorporated into field-level arguments, directing attention towards the development of a terminology for the differing roles that field members play.

Every social group has roles that members must adopt to perpetuate the group's existence. Moreover, these roles typically confer different responsibilities for the actors within them. For instance, the role of 'mother' has a different set of behavioral expectations than the role of 'brother.' Within field research, we have been neglectful of the differing roles that field members have. The exceptions may be our focus on entrepreneurs or change agents. Yet, even in this case, we label a member as an entrepreneur or not, a change agent or conversely a protector of the status-quo. Conceptualizing the field as a relational space dictates that we take a closer look at the way in which actors relate to one another, especially the roles that certain members adopt to advance the field.

Lawrence and Suddaby's (2005) review of institutional theory provides a typology of the different types of activities that actors engage in to create, maintain, and disrupt institutions. For example, during the creation stage actors advocate on behalf of an institution by mobilizing political and regulatory support. During the maintenance stage, advocacy becomes less important and actors instead aim to police the activities of others to ensure the institution's continuation. This suggests that at the level of the organizational field, different actors engage in various tasks. For example, during the creation stage of the field, it is highly unlikely that all members of an organizational field would need to advocate on the field's behalf. A more feasible scenario would involve a select number of field members devoting their time and energy towards this task while other field members focus their attention on other activities also vital to the field's emergence. With greater focus on the different types of work that actors perform comes a need for a language to articulate these distinct institutional roles. Labels for each member of the community of organizations become necessary according to the type of institutional activities performed. General terminology like buyer, supplier, or regulatory agency will no longer provide a sufficient explanation of the role organizations adopt or the work they perform within the field.

Labeling organizations in this manner will provide deeper clarity on the collective understanding held by each field member regarding which actors perform what roles within the field. Just as organizational members can reduce uncertainty over work roles by developing agreement about the responsibilities that come with organizational roles, field members can also reduce the level of uncertainty they face by developing a corresponding understanding of what type of work each field member is responsible for given their role within the field.

Though we strongly encourage scholars to move away from the focus on outcomes within field research, we recognize that it may be difficult to wean ourselves off of this line of inquiry. Therefore, we highlight several avenues of research based on the relational space perspective on fields.

- Beyond discerning appropriate behavior, what do the disparate organizations hope to gain from their involvement with one another?

As we move beyond the depiction of organizations as mere recipients of institutional pressures, it is also time to advance

conceptions of what organizations take away from field membership. If we take the field as a relational space, we can envision other uses for the field beyond discerning appropriate behavior. Field-level interactions are best understood as mechanisms by which other organizational phenomena occur. For example, some have begun to investigate the field-level processes by which organizational identities are formed. Within the organizational literature, identity is typically presented as an organizational-level property developed internally by the members of an organization. While research has suggested that organizational identity is influenced by outside parties (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Elsbach and Kramer, 1996), the general consensus holds that an organization's identity is what members see as central, distinctive, and enduring about the organization (Albert and Whetten, 1985). Wedlin (2006) challenges this conception of organizational identity formation by positioning the organizational field as the site in which organizations develop their identity. In this view, identity formation is seen as an inherently social and interorganizational process and the field is the place in which organizations take on this task.

Other work has sought to understand how field membership influences phenomena such as hiring (Williamson and Cable, 2003) and collaborative tie formation (Kenis and Knoke, 2002), both processes that had been thought to be reflective of dynamics internal to the organization. This is not to suggest that scholars recast every organizational process as being dependent upon field-level membership, as this would push the literature towards an over-socialized view once again. However, it does suggest that envisioning organizational fields as influential to the development of intra-organizational processes exposes a host of possibilities for research projects that shed light on the institutional factors that influence an organization's daily functioning.

- How is field-level interaction affected by mechanisms and structures internal to the individual organization, and how does this interaction change those mechanisms and structures?

Future organizational field research will focus on the processes of participating in a field and what this participation ultimately means for the inner workings of an organization (Hoffman, 2001). To date, field research has largely provided an explanation of macro to macro transitions; field-level interactions lead to changes in structure, culture, and output at the aggregate field levels. Moving forward, field research will serve as a bridge between the macro and micro by providing detailed explanations of how field-level interactions influence internal organizational phenomena. This direction acknowledges that the field is made up of various actors that constitute a community of organizations (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Scott, 1995, 2001) while simultaneously acknowledging that organizational and field-level factors are interconnected in a reciprocal relationship.

Future research will continue to bridge the old and new institutionalisms in an effort to understand how field membership aids other intra-organizational processes. As discussed earlier, prior attempts to connect these literatures imported the concepts of agency and interests from the old-institutionalism to explain how organizational field members resisted isomorphic pressures. While this represents progress on one front, problems still remain with the way in which agency and interests are conceptualized in the institutional domain. Currently, both the old and new institutionalisms present the concepts of agency and interests in an atomistic fashion. Each holds that an organization's self-interests are developed internally and cause the organization to undertake some action such as cooptation or resistance (Oliver, 1991). Yet, Scott (1991) insisted that institutions define the ends and shape the means by which interests are determined and pursued. The formation and

pursuit of interests must be seen as the product of field-level engagement. Just as research has recast organizational identity formation as a field-level process, so too will research reconceptualize organizational agency and self-interests by focusing on the possibility that field-level engagement enables an individual organization's pursuit of self-interests. This will redirect more attention to the way in which the field provides an organization with a context to enact agency.

- How do institutions spread or diffuse within field-level populations?

Just as institutional scholars (particularly within North America) emphasized mimetic or taken-for-granted forces as the primary mechanism by which organizational field members became homogeneous to one another (Mizruchi and Fein, 1999), we have also emphasized the diffusion model as an explanation for how institutional rules are adopted and spread throughout an organizational field. Theoretical and empirical works in the institutional literature imply that organizational practices spread through fields like wild-fires, with members succumbing to pressures to adopt these practices. Moreover, field members adopt these practices intact without adjusting or manipulating them to fit their specific needs or context. Yet, more recent research suggests that the uncritical adoption of practices encouraged by the diffusion process accounts for the failure of these practices to deliver the promised benefit to organizational functioning (Kitchener, 2002).

As we begin to view the field as a highly interactive relational space, relying so heavily upon the diffusion model will no longer suffice. Work within the European tradition provides an alternative understanding of how institutional norms and rules take hold at the field level. Instead of diffusing through a field, organizational practices are translated from the institutional level to the organizational level (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996; Zilber, 2006). In the process of translation, the original meaning of an organizational practice changes as individual field members incorporate these items into their own organization. Much like literal translations from one language to another often have no meaning, incorporating a prevailing practice 'as-is' into an organization may not yield the intended consequences. Instead, field members must determine how to bend and shape a prevailing organizational practice such that it will hold meaning for their own organization and the field facilitates this translation process. As organizations relate to one another within the field, they can determine how other members incorporated the predominant practices and use this knowledge to determine how best to mold these practices for use within their own organization.

Another byproduct of the emphasis on the diffusion model has been that theoretical and empirical work using this model leaves the impression that the widespread adoption of a practice within an organizational field equals institutionalization. Zeitz, Mittal and McAulay (1999) caution us to reconsider. The authors suggest that, just as organizations adopt a practice *en masse*, they may also abandon the practice with the same vigor in a short amount of time. Instead of focusing on the presence of a practice at a finite moment in time, the authors implore researchers to focus on the micro-processes that allow a practice to take hold and become 'entrenched' within an organizational field (Zeitz et al., 1999). Future research will draw attention to the relational dynamics which facilitate not only the widespread adoption of certain practices over others, but also provide greater understanding of the intra-organizational processes (i.e. identity, interests, agency) that facilitate the entrenchment of certain practices over others.

CONCLUSION

This chapter offers views on how the central concept of institutional theory – the

organizational field – has changed over the past three decades. It presents a trajectory that began by focusing on the dynamics that led to conformity in behavior among organizations and evolved towards understanding the dynamics that allow for heterogeneity, variation, and change. The chapter ends with thoughts on where the future of organizational field research lies, suggesting that scholars orient their research towards the processes that encourage field formation and collective rationality. The future of organizational field research is linked to the future of organization theory in general.

In speculating about the prospects for organization theory in the twenty-first century, Davis and Marquis (2005) suggest that research in this area has moved away from being paradigm driven to being problem driven. As such, field-level research is ready to make the transition from testing the core ideas of the new institutional theory paradigm to investigating fields as sites where problems of organizing are debated among disparate actors. The domain of organizational fields is now ready to move away from the simple outcomes of institutional processes, to instead explain why the field remains integral to understanding how organizations construct solutions to the problems of the twenty-first century. This moves beyond notions of institutions as barriers, as always taken-for-granted and as leading towards isomorphism and, instead, refocuses on field-level dynamics, collective rationality within these fields and the behavior of individual organizations as integral parts of these processes. Researchers will return to a focus on the structuration processes with a particular interest in understanding how the structuring of fields contributes to intra- and interorganizational processes. While not a complete agenda for future research, this represents a starting point for researchers wishing to understand the processes that lead organizations to relate to one another and to ultimately do so within the space we have come to know as an organizational field.

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