10 Revisiting field theory

On taking Bourdieu to envisioned futures

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Introduction

The question of how social forces intersect with human conduct has puzzled social scientists for centuries. The founders of American and European sociology welcomed the emphasis on the impact of social forces as *the* research programme for sociology. In the early twentieth century, such emphasis matched well the efforts to 'institutionalise' sociology as an academic discipline and in parallel distinguish it from behavioural psychology. Behaviourists consider human conduct as resulting from precisely controllable stimulus–response events. Similar to behaviourism in this respect, neoclassical theories have not sufficiently accounted for social forces in human conduct. Rather, they stayed locked into a mechanistic conception of economic and social processes (Mirowski 1991). This mechanistic view is embedded in an institutional structure in which empirical evidence provides the make-up for a Kabuki dance, i.e. an event that is designed to create the appearance of conflict or uncertainty where outcomes are decided upon beforehand. As a critique to such mechanistic view, the work of Pierre Bourdieu has stimulated new interest in the intersection between social forces and human behaviour. His concept of field has become a leading reference in the growing literature on theories of human action and social context.

This chapter is dedicated to revisiting Bourdieu's concept of field as a framework to link the wider social context, social relations, and cognitions without analytically merging them. Its aim is to show the position of the concept of field with respect to major schools of sociological thought, and in particular to the embeddedness tradition which also addresses similar questions on the social structuring of human conduct. This debate goes counter to the way that methodological individualism is used in economics. In what follows, the discussion will focus on key authors of an embeddedness approach, such as Marc Granovetter (1985) and Karl Polanyi (1944, 2001), whose arguments on social relations and structural regulation of action seem most valuable to show in what way economists and social scientists may have full gain if adopting a Bourdieusian field perspective for their analysis of human behaviour.

By 'embedding action' in social structures and processes, economic sociologists and also some heterodox economists have repeatedly elaborated in their

works on what one can label the structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions of human action (Fligstein and Dauter 2007; Dobbin 2004; Beckert 2009). Whereas structural and relational forces reflect the idea that social action is embedded in pre-given social structures and networks, the argument of existing cognitive forces is that only the individual can interpret what goes on in the social world (Granovetter and Swedberg 2011). Empirical applications in network analysis do show either how the structure of action is conceived or how external factors influence the action processes ongoing within networks and finally to relate these to certain outcomes (e.g. flow of information, distribution of power in networks). The subsequent section addresses continuity and change of fields. It builds on previous arguments that the field notion provides a framework that accounts for mediating field effects on behavioural outcomes, and at the same time enables scholars to address field opportunities and constraints which are mediated by human conduct (Swartz and Zolberg 2005). The notion of habitus is revisited by focusing on the role of imagination as a key to better understand the intersection between field and human behaviour. John Dewey's study of moral imagination is central in this respect – in particular as concerns the sociology of habit and its malleability. Even if Bourdieu was sceptical towards moral or normative explanations as found, among others, in Dewey's works, his explanations of the malleability of the habitus deserve some reflection about possible parallels and to question how agents seize upon possible new relations for thought and action from social, unconscious experience (that shapes their 'practical sense' embodied in the habitus) on the one hand, and from their conscious physical experience on the other hand.

Bourdieu's field notion as critical response to the embeddedness tradition

The notion of field grows out of Bourdieu's attempt to address the following question: How do social forces influence human action? More precisely, how do social forces mould human conduct even to the point of reproducing regular patterns by generating new ones? With the concept of field, Bourdieu developed an important theoretical framework. Its origins are directly linked to Bourdieu's later strategy of situating himself in the French intellectual world in the 1950s and early 1960s, and of developing a critical distance vis-à-vis purveyors of other traditions, such as behaviourism (Skinner 1953; Watson 1924), structuralism (Lévi-Strauss 1947, 1958), and existentialism (e.g. Sartre 1943) or, more generally speaking, narrow forms of materialism and idealism (see also Pinto 2002). A main argument in Bourdieu's field theory is that individual action is for the most part not conditioned by some stimulus–response sequence.[2] Rather, human behaviour is fundamentally motivated by a continuous (re-)enactment of past learning that is adaptive to external structures as well as constitutive of the field itself. As such he also distinguishes himself from the *structuralism* of Lévi-Strauss that lacks agency, and in particular the generative power of human conduct. For Bourdieu, fields do not only structure human conduct but are

constituted by the fundamental human capacity of its agents to see and generate new opportunities and ideas through their past experiences to present and future situations. At the same time, Bourdieu takes distance vis-à-vis Sartre's *existentialism*, because he rejects analyses accounting for behaviours only in terms of reasons and wills (Bourdieu 1987a trans. Wacquant 1990).

On these grounds, one may expect similarities between Bourdieu's field theory and *embeddedness approaches*, which are familiar to most economists. Because Bourdieu's theory of fields suggests a way to link social structures and relations to human agency, *Polanyi's structural approach* and *Granovetter's relational approach* to embeddedness are of particular interest to show why economists and social scientists will all gain if adopting a field perspective. I will develop this argument by looking first at the two conceptions of embeddedness and show how Bourdieu's field notion differs from and eventually goes beyond these conceptions, especially when cognitions and its link to the wider macro-structures are considered. The concept of embeddedness was first invoked by Karl Polanyi (1944, 2001), and received wider attention in the early 1980s with the publication of a theoretical essay by Marc Granovetter (1985). In the sociological discourse, purveyors of the Polanyian understanding of embeddedness are concerned with integrating the economy into broader social systems and share a focus on the mutual constitution of state and market (Polanyi 1944, 2001; Polanyi *et al.* 1957). Polanyian scholars reject the idea that markets can exist outside of state action, and adhere to the argument that economic actions become destructive when they are 'disembedded', or not governed by social or non-economic authorities. What partly exempts Polanyi's concept from a strict sociological critique of the neoclassical model of economic action is his acceptance of the generic notion of *homo economicus* as (historically specific) institutionally based.

Instead, the Granovetterian understanding of embeddedness involves identifying the relational basis of social action in economic contexts. In his view, transactions are entangled in a net of personal relationships that explain economic action (Granovetter and Swedberg 2011). A Granovetterian embeddedness approach rejects the *homo economicus* in its purely determinist version that disallows any influence of social structure and social relations. Granovetter went even so far as to say that 'behaviour and social institutions are so constrained by ongoing social relations that to construe them as independent is a grievous misunderstanding' (Granovetter 1985: 482). The Granovetterian conception of embeddedness was empirically tested by using network analysis, which examines the structure of relationships between social entities. Nevertheless, network analysis focused on 'objective structures' rather than on social content and subjective expectations. One prominent exception is Brian Uzzi (1997, 1996), for instance, who stressed the quality of network connections by differentiating between 'arm's length ties', i.e. corresponding to anonymous market exchange, and 'embedded ties' based on enduring exchange relationships shaped around non-market ties. In this regard, Uzzi discussed trust between parties, in-depth information transfer, and joint problem-solving. We should not omit works

dealing with the polyvalent nature of networks, which draw attention to potential limits of beneficial effects – for instance, when connections turn into a liability; or the work of Portes and Sensenbrenner (1993), who studied network complementarity in immigrant economies, in particular the impact of network closure on credit circulation and on individual mobility. Moreover, Fuhse and Mützel (2010) introduced the idea of *cognitive structures*, i.e. agents' interpretative frames by which they assign meaning to their connections depending on the wider structural and cultural context of their networks.

For Bourdieu, networks represent the analytical aspect of fields which are made of temporary or durable relations, formal and also informal relations. In his field concept, he ascribes power and meaning to the 'objective structures' of fields so that he calls networks parts of a field. According to his perspective, fields are not only comprised of relations within them, but also of relations between and across fields. In modern societies, the social space is made up of a number of relatively autonomous but often hierarchically ordered social microcosms, or spaces of objective relations in which specific logics prevail that are a necessity and irreducible to those that regulate other fields e.g. the economic field, or the artistic field. While fields are also governed by the general laws (e.g. reproduction, hierarchisation), which are stable laws of functioning, each field defines itself partly by specific interests which do not necessarily correspond to the interests of other fields (Bourdieu 1993b trans. Wacquant and Farage 1994). We find in *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (1992) a definition of fields as networks in which Bourdieu points on the one hand to the objective relations of positions constitutive of fields, and on the other hand, introduces the dimension of power, or the regulative role of power derived from the distribution of capitals.

> In analytic terms, a field may be defined as a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents, or institutions, by the present and potential situation (situs) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.).
>
> (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992 trans. Wacquant 1992: 97)

Implicit to this definition is the assumption of an underlying symbolic process as part of the conversion of capital to power. For Bourdieu and Wacquant fields are spaces of objective relations between 'positions defined by their rank in the distribution of competing powers or species of capital' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992 trans. Wacquant 1992: 114). Therefore, fields are different from networks since the latter is understood as the mere manifestation of these objective relations. Similarly, Martin (2003) describes fields as a topological *space of positions*, a field of *relational* forces, and a *battlefield of contestation*. With the latter,

Martin refers to the political dimension of battlefields, which is manifested by a struggle for power to improve one's position. Bourdieu defends the idea that human action is adaptive to and embedded in fields, but to be sure, it is not entirely determined by it. While network approaches, and particularly comparative and historical approaches in economic sociology, argue that institutions generate meaning for people and to this extent determine action, Bourdieu sets against such explanation a notion of field that opens possibilities to action. More precisely, economics and social science scholars adopting a Bourdieusian field perspective would need to consider actors as not being forced by their social surrounding into their choices neither as conforming to rules externally imposed on them. Rather, these actors engage in a 'game' whose rules orient action. Implicit in this 'game' metaphor Bourdieu often used is the political dimension of fields in which *agency* is assumed to be subject to a struggle for power.

The Bourdieusian agents enter a field of relational forces well aware that they will have to struggle, negotiate, bargain to advance their positions within the existing field-specific power structures (Swartz and Zolberg 2005). As they struggle for power, their behaviour gets structured by the field but at the same time their conduct becomes constitutive of the future field structure. In order to describe this process, Bourdieu used the language 'structured structures' and 'structuring structures' representing his view of the relationship between the individual and society. While society shapes the individual habitus through socialisation, the very continuity and evolution of society depends on the permanent actions of individuals. Bourdieu describes this in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* as follows:

> The structures constitutive of a particular type of environment (e.g. the material conditions of existence characteristic of a class condition) produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends […].
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> (Bourdieu 1972b trans. Nice 1977: 72)

Games, likewise, order play through rules and players invest in the game and agree by their belief that the game is worth playing. These analogies serve to explain two behavioural mechanisms: on the one hand, the resorting to common practices which have their grounding in the past following the behavioural principles individuals derive from incorporated knowledge and beliefs; and on the other hand, strategic improvisation (Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Meyer and Rowan 1977). The strengths each individual can put into the game depend on the value and meaning of the types of capital.[3]

Structural, relational, and cognitive explanations of action in field theory

There is more to social contexts than its converging effects with past field structures. Economists and social scientists adopting a Bourdieusian perspective have to employ two main concepts to understand action and how it is moulded by field structures: capital and habitus (the element of agency). Bourdieu identifies what Widick calls two moments: first, there is an *objective moment* referring to the power-laden structure and patterned systems of objective forms, objects (*capitals*), positions, and action that constitute groups and institutions; second, there is a *subjective moment* (which is organised under the term *habitus*) used by Bourdieu to locate individuals into the social context by interlinking them in a kind of dialectic of cognitive and social structures. This dialectic consists in the encounter of individuals and their opportunities as the objective conditions of possibility of action. Widick (2005) argues in psychological terms, that the 'self is mediated by the social that shapes expressions of the subjective commitment to the external dimension of lived institutions that order, structure, and constitute the world of collective necessity' (Widick 2005: 199). Whereas the view that action takes place within social order is also shared by most embeddedness scholars, their conceptions on the underlying forces are different (Granovetter 1985). We may say that Bourdieu sees 'social power' as the main element of the structure and logic of any given field and thus attributes high importance to the role of conflicts over resources that shape the functioning of the field, and in the end decide upon who gets what.

Capital and power in field theory

The dimension of power is central to Bourdieu's relational analysis of behavioural outcomes and transformation processes of fields. People's power depends on the amount and configuration of resources and the extent to which these resources are valued in a field. Ultimately these resources affect their dispositions to act, their strategies, and the way they impact on common practices. Bourdieu has identified different kinds of capital – educational capital, social capital (such as useful contacts and networks), technological capital (such as innovative technical equipment), commercial capital (such as brands), and organisational capital (such as a firm's reputation) (Bourdieu 1979 trans. Nice 1986). He distinguished cultural, technical, and commercial capital as the objectivised capital (equipment, instruments), from those embodied kinds, such as personal competencies and skills.

Since people do not act in a social vacuum, fields are competitive arenas. The idea of competition is much less prominent in network approaches, where network connectors in similar positions would rather be considered redundant. The strength an individual can compete with, or more generally the possibilities of action an individual has, depend to some part on the stock of capital. Fields are characterised by heterogeneity of its agents differently equipped with capital

(Bourdieu 2005a). Not only is the stock of total capital important (i.e. its volume, or total amount), but also its structure (i.e. the relative proportions of the different types of capital). For instance, firms with similar total stocks of capital can occupy dissimilar positions if the share of the diverse forms of capital (e.g. economic, cultural capitals) is different between firms – see, for instance, in this volume, Chapter 11, written by Fabien Eloire. The basic idea of how fields are structured can well be illustrated by one quote from a book chapter published in *Principles of an Economic Anthropology*, where Bourdieu describes the structure and capital distribution of the specific field of the market as follows:

> The structure of the distribution of capital and the structure of the distribution of costs, itself linked mainly to the scale and degree of vertical integration, determine the structure of the field, that is to say, the relations of force among firms: the mastery of a very large proportion of capital (of the overall energy) in effect confers a power over the field, and hence over the firms less well endowed (relatively) in terms of capital; it also governs the price of entry into the field and the distribution of opportunities for profit.
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> (Bourdieu 2000b trans. Turner 2005: 76)

The concept of field posits that the distinctive value attributed to capitals remains marked by its earliest conditions of acquisition. Capitals whose transmission is 'best hidden', receive higher weight in the reproduction of the field than direct, tangible forms that are more strongly controlled.[4]

One type of capital that is also prominent in network approaches, and that has been mentioned earlier in this volume, is social capital, which comprises the totality of resources, including financial capital and information, that may be activated through a 'more or less mobilisable network of relations that procures advantage by providing higher returns on investment' (Bourdieu 2005a). In other words, we may consider the volume of an agent's social capital as dependent on the size of the network of connections that the individual can mobilise, and on the volume of capital possessed by the other members to whom the agent is connected.

In a field theoretic view, struggle is symbolic because agents attribute certain value to capital. The definition of social capital makes this abundantly clear. Social capital involves relationships of mutual recognition and knowledge. As a power in terms of brand loyalty, or commitment to a firm in the case of employees, symbolic capital functions as a form of credit that presupposes trust and belief of those upon which it bears because they are supposed to grant it credence. The extent to which capital can be converted in a field adheres to common laws of conversion and of securing field functioning (reproduction). For instance, in markets which are sub-fields of the economic field, manpower can be converted into financial capital, and its rate of conversion highly depends on whether it serves to secure the firm's and the overall market functioning.

Opportunities, interpretation, and imagination

The basic idea of field struggle is that individuals try to stabilise or improve their positions in the field by using their capital (Boyer 2008). They may influence the functioning of the field – holding back, maintaining expectation, or hustling and surprising – to exert power (Bourdieu 1981). For instance, if a group could use its social capital to exploit some of its properties that could serve as (symbolic) capital in the new state of the field, then they would be able to modify the rules of the game to their advantage. This vision is well expressed in *Principles of an Economic Anthropology*, in which Bourdieu argues that interactions depend on indirect conflict, on the socially constructed structure of the relationships of force that agents modify through those resources they control (Bourdieu 2005a).

Bourdieu holds the view that the conflict over structure by virtue of the volume and structure of the capitals at hand shapes the space of opportunities of action. However, the idea that this space constrains the choices of strategies (Fligstein 2001a; Bourdieu 1972b trans. Nice 1977) would not separate the agent from the field, rather it is said to inscribe the actor into the field logic who follows written scripts he can do little about. This would emphasise a 'taken for granted' reality, a routine social order and reproduction in which all actors share the same perceptions of their opportunities and constraints. Therefore, Bourdieu and even more so Fligstein and McAdam (2011) avoid this pitfall to reduce the field actor to a 'socialised cipher' (Widick 2005). In contrast, for them, field actors constantly adjust to the conditions in the field given their position and the action of others. Fligstein and McAdam (2011: 7) define 'strategic action as an attempt by social actors to create and maintain stable social worlds by securing cooperation of others'. He emphasises that strategic action is about control, which is achieved by the creation of identities, political coalitions, and interests. But the ability to reach such agreements requires that actors are capable of role-taking.

This idea is consistent with Bourdieu's *habitus* that links any given field to the *cognitive capacities* of the agents operating within it, without confusing them analytically. The conception of the habitus is that of a repository of classifications, schemata of perception, dispositions, and scripts (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992 trans. Wacquant 1992). It serves as a repertoire of meanings and orients action structured by and synchronised with the fields. An essential point of his view is that individuals as social agents operate in the fields and make them operate insofar as 'a field can function only if it finds individuals socially predisposed to behave as responsible agents, to risk their money, their time, sometimes their honor or their life, to pursue the games and to obtain the profits it proposes' (Bourdieu 1982b: 46; trans. Adamson 1990: 194). Individuals choose strategies on the basis of these repertoires, which operate out of the intersection of perceptions, appreciation, and action inclination moulded by their past experience (Crossley 2001). Figure 10.1 provides a simplified illustration of the relationship between Bourdieu's basic concepts of habitus, capital, field, and behavioural outcome. While the force of habitus is mediated by fields, the constraints and

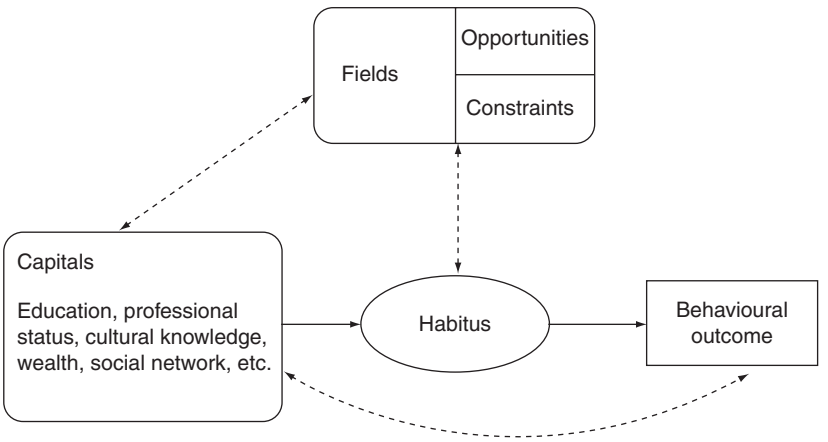

Figure 10.1 Simplified overview of the relationship between capitals, fields, habitus, and behavioural outcomes.

opportunities imposed by fields, such as its power structure and the possibilities they open to agents, are mediated by the dispositions of the habitus. Accounting for an interplay between field and habitus allows purveyors of this perspective to better understand how existing social structures came about, and thus go beyond situating or embedding action within a pre-given social context as proclaimed in the embeddedness tradition.

In Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), the internalisation of external structures, or the somatisation of social relations, helps agents to identify and interpret their social environment. Field actors regress to 'virtually prevalent situations' within the body (habitus) that can be reactivated and serve as an *interpretative device* as part of the pre-logical, spontaneous logic of practical action (Widick 2005). In other words, individuals chose strategies out of their pool of options and on the basis of prior experience, both of which are shaped by their social environment and incorporate shared understandings.

Emphasising the *interpretative capacity* is to suggest that people are always acting informed by the sense of the game, mostly in an unconscious way and with an inborn *interest* to practically master their lives. They construct their own relation to the field[5] – their own personality and identity. Out of prior experience, based on values and knowledge of game rules, they derive their strategies. However, the habitus is subject to permanent stimulation and conditioning by the social process, so that it is the product of history, 'an open system of dispositions' that is durable but not eternal; not a reflex but conditioned limited spontaneity (Bourdieu 2000b trans. Turner 2005). It is also consistent with this logic that actors with presumably an identical habitus will generate different outcomes because their biographical trajectory and attachment to other actors affects their cognitive capacity to make sense of people's actions and environments.

Key to the idea of interpretative capacity is that individuals must be able to use their interpretative repertoires at any given moment. This kind of competence however requires a second capacity, which links the subject to the network of social relations, which is the capacity of imagination and identification (Widick 2005), or as Fligstein puts it, the social skill of reading people and environments (Fligstein and McAdam 2011). This *imaginative capacity* is consistent with Bourdieu's notion of the generative nature of the habitus because it bears the idea that strategies are oriented by the constraints and possibilities built into their position (Bourdieu 2000b trans. Turner 2005: 78) and by the representation the individual is able to form of that position and the position of competitors. These strategies result from the information at their disposal and their cognitive structures (Bourdieu 2005a).

The imaginative capacity that Bourdieu did not explicitly mention, rather his works refer to improvisation (Bourdieu 2000b trans. Turner 2005), bears the core motivation of field actors to identify themselves with others. This desire, or investment, and the instantaneous influence it has on the mental structure inculcate social typifications, categorisations, and schemata. Here, one can observe similarities to John Dewey (1910), one of Bourdieu's major sources of inspiration, who thought of imagination as an activity to test alternatives to resolve conflicting situations in thought by envisioning them to be carried out. The imaginative process continues until a suggested solution meets all the conditions of the case and does not run counter to any feature of it. Dewey calls this imaginative process 'dramatic rehearsal', which is a taking-in of the full scope of the situation, including its socio-cultural meaning (Dewey 1930). It differs from imaginary flights of mind-wandering, which are totally separated from the concern of the current situation. Through imaginative activity, individuals' perception is amplified because people are able to form anticipations of the future in the present. This has repercussions on how a field evolves because individuals deliberately rehearse ways to settle difficulties or ambiguities and by doing so open up a situation so it is perceived in a new way. The attention Bourdieu drew on the individual field agent, including his capacities and potentialities in taking actions and by doing so contributing to the structuring of the field, goes far beyond socially embedded agents who build on trust and reciprocity as one of their core motivations of action (Granovetter and Swedberg 2011).

Two sites of transformations are possible, the *intra-subjective* and *inter-subjective sites*, both of which shape the structure and logic of the field. In the *intra-subjective site*, individuals are able to imagine being the other, which transforms their mental structures by the image of the other. Consequently, it creates an image through which later the social environment will be imagined. An example would be observing the successful manager in a company; the observer lives through this other – being part of his or her career in an instance of identification that transforms the observer's mental structures, e.g. qualifying the perception of one's position and worldview relative to others. In the *inter-subjective site*, imaginative capacity aids individuals not only to transpose themselves into others, but to mobilise people by identifying their 'frames' and those of the environment, and to

make them act on behalf of these frames (Fligstein 2001b). By doing so, they need to take distance from their own and the group's interest, and consider multiple interests which are socially constructed to converge strategies for shared views with wider ranging structural effects (e.g. social movements).

Permissiveness of fields

Coming back to Bourdieu, he suggests that individuals who imagine futures form implicit understandings about how competition is dealt with, what roles and internal hierarchy and interests a field has. If these understandings are undermined, fields become permissive to change. Indeed, in turbulent times, strategically acting individuals, which in Bourdieu's conception can be powerfully generative and innovative, challenge and question the rules and positions governing the field (Bourdieu 1980g trans. Nice 1990). A major signal of this turbulent time is a high level of uncertainty. This uncertainty influences what someone deliberates as rational to do. It may cause non-foreseeable behaviour, which is not necessarily irrational. In other words, someone may show a behaviour which is not pre-given in its direction in the stimulus and that is not deducible from knowledge of the appropriate rules, even if individuals knew most of them; such behaviour is presumably shaped by the trace of one's past trajectory that does not necessarily match existing field structure and the collective conceptions that control its working (Bourdieu 1997e). A mismatch between habitus and field often leads a field into crisis and disrupts regularities, which increases the field's permissiveness to transformation, changes to the configuration of laws of functioning, and tempo of transformation. Additionally, it increases changes in the relation between fields, which in turn may affect the overall configuration of the vertically and horizontally organised field structure.

The disruption of regularities can be a *consequence* of a de-synchronisation between field and habitus, i.e. the lack of correspondence between the two (Florian and Hillebrandt 2006); or it can be considered as a *cause* for further field–habitus transformations (Hanappi 2011). In this sense, we recall, field structure inculcates the habitus, and these mental structures in turn reproduce or change social structures. This view is consistent with Crossley (2001), who explains that patterns and underlying principles of social contexts are incorporated in the habitus as both an inclination and a *modus operandi*. Disruption can often feed on itself. Individuals incorporate a generalised feeling of uncertainty (about threats, opportunities, and benefits of action), which leads them to question existing laws of functioning of the field and which hinders anticipations of field relations (McAdam and Scott 2005). This weakens the integrative power of the existing laws which hold together the field, and which define its boundaries towards the outside world. As a consequence, the field becomes permissive as a response to such disruptions, and new people (with their habits) can intrude to change the existing logic.

At the same time, dominant individuals attempt to safeguard or regain the former position and re-stabilise the former system by taking (innovative) action.

This brings in an almost perpetual spiral of adjustments in the objective (field) and mental (habitus) structures by virtue of cognitive acts. These acts include the recognition as reasonable of the agent's practices and rules of thumb, and pre-reflexive, unconscious style on the one hand, and the practical acts of mastering a situation, on the other hand. In a field perspective, continuity and change are thus not the mere result of an innovative activity. Rather, as a result of an adjustment to novel situations and the enactment of past experience, it is a highly interwoven dynamic between field and habitus which by nature has stabilising and destabilising social forces. Part of this dynamic is that individual mental adjustments do not just occur *to* the environment but *of* the environment and generate relatively independent field forces. This makes fields non-ergodic (North 1999) – the present means (averages) are no good proxy for future means – which continue to change in novel ways. Therefore, it does not put an end to the attempt to anticipate future possible outcomes among even the most sophisticated and experienced individuals.

Final remarks

The chapter has presented approaches which embed action to help better explain the relationship between human conduct and the structured social context by referring to relational, institutional, or cognitive forces. Applications to embed action in networks often consider the role of institutions and cognitions as secondary, or inscribe action into institutional settings and take social networks and cognitions for granted.

The field theory of Bourdieu has been offered as an alternative way to link human conduct and social structure, providing a framework to consider structural, relational, and cognitive elements together without analytically merging them. Bourdieu departs from the game metaphor that sees individuals in permanent competition over positions and power. Their goal is to safeguard or improve their position in the field, by either stabilising or de-stabilising the current state and resorting to more or less innovative strategies. Individuals may influence the very rules of the field – holding back, maintaining expectation, or hustling and surprising – to exert power. By considering the objective moment adherent to all fields as the power-laden structure and patterned systems of objective forms, objects, positions, and action that constitute groups and institutions, the subjective moment which refers to habitus in Bourdieu's work locates competent agents into their objective social structure. This interrelationship between field and habitus is fundamental, and embodiment is an irreversible process, i.e. all external stimuli and conditioning experience are perceived through already constructed past experience.

The idea that conflict over structure and past trajectories shapes the space of opportunities is however too narrow since strategic action is achieved by the creation of identities, political coalitions, and interests. In other words, cognitive forces are fundamental. To identify and interpret their social environment, individuals refer to internalised knowledge (not necessarily thought) that can be

reactivated and serve as interpretative device. Individuals build images as kind of representations of the other, which allows them to locate themselves in the social structure (out of the position they currently inhabit), and to take sufficient distance to identify others' interests. These images have been argued to be central to link individual cognitions to social and institutional structures. They either confirm the general field functioning or in times of social change they disrupt the existing field laws, which lowers compliance with existing rules and renders the field permissive to change.

Notes

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2 In some of his works, he contends at the metaphorical level that the screen the habitus introduces between stimulus and response is a screen of 'time' and that this is most effective in as much as no conscious reflection is involved (Bourdieu 2005a). In *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, he described his understanding of this stimulus–response relationship as follows: 'We must think of it [the habitus] as a sort of spring that needs a trigger and, depending upon the stimuli and structure of the field, the very same habitus will generate different, even opposite, outcomes' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992 trans. Wacquant 1992: 135).

3 A prominent scholar in American sociology who took up this field concept was Neil Fligstein, who used it to analyse several empirical topics, e.g. differences between national employment systems, or governance in the field of international relations (see Fligstein 2005: 183–204). In his view, field actors are confronted with different rights, laws, and conceptions of control, which result in the strategic practices, similar to those strategies resulting out of a 'feel for the game' as suggested by Bourdieu (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992 trans. Wacquant 1992).

4 Bourdieu's view may be conceived as being rooted in an anticipation of the distinction between the two states of capital, the objectivised and the embodied, as spelled out in Thorsten Veblen's work on the instinct of workmanship (1898).

5 At least complementary to the principle of rationality are the principles of *adaptation* and *practical* mastery that guide the reasonable agent in any of his or her actions. Bourdieu argued that an economic habitus generates behaviours that are particularly well-suited to those conditions from which they arise and that they tend to reproduce (Bourdieu 2000b trans. Turner 2005).