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**Special Section: “Special Issue guest-edited by Prof. Peeter Selg around the work of François Dépelteau”**

## Relational Sociology of the Scientific Field: Communication, Identities, and Field Relations<sup>1</sup>

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**Date of submission:** February 2020

**Accepted in:** October 2020

**Published in:** December 2020

### Recommended citation:

FUHSE, Jan (2020). “Relational Sociology of the Scientific Field: Communication, Identities, and Field Relations”. In: SELG, Peeter. “Special Issue guest-edited by Prof. Peeter Selg around the work of François Dépelteau”. [online article]. *Digithum*, no. 26, pp. 1-14. Universitat Oberta de Catalunya and Universidad de Antioquia. [Accessed: dd/mm/yy]. <http://doi.org/10.7238/d.v0i26.374144>



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### Abstract

A relational sociological conceptualisation of social fields is developed and applied to the world of academia and science. Generally, social fields are arenas of communication governed by specific institutions and by the sense (illusio) of involvement in the same game. They consist of communicative events like publications in science, claims and demands in politics etc. Scientific fields are organised around representational claims about the phenomena under study. Such communicative events offer particular definitions of the situation that subsequent communication builds on and / or renegotiates. In this process, ideas develop that structure the field, and identities of actors associated with these ideas. In this perspective, actors do not drive the processes of the field, but they serve as projection points that organise discourse in the field. Actors are connected to ideas, and thus indirectly to each other, in position-takings. Field relations then involve constellations of actors and ideas. Unlike social relationships like friendship or patronage, field relations can be one-sided, and they affect follow-up communication in the larger field rather than only between two involved actors. In contrast to previous theories of social fields, these are seen as socio-cultural constellations developing in the course of communication, rather than the competition of actors for resources, or constellations of subjective orientations.

### Keywords

academic field, authors, field theory, relational sociology, social relations, scientific field

1. You can read the article “The Field of Relational Sociology”, by Jan Fuhse included in this Special Section here: <http://doi.org/10.7238/d.v0i26.374145>

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## Sociología relacional del campo científico: comunicación, identidades y relaciones de campo

### Resumen

Se forma una conceptualización sociológica relacional de los campos sociales y se aplica al mundo académico y científico. Generalmente, los campos sociales son espacios de comunicación controlados por determinadas instituciones y por la sensación (*illutio*) de participar en el mismo grupo. Consisten en actividades comunicativas como publicaciones en ciencia, afirmaciones y peticiones en política, etc. Los campos científicos se estructuran en torno a afirmaciones representativas de los fenómenos objeto de estudio. Tales actividades comunicativas ofrecen definiciones determinadas de la situación en la que se basa o se renegocia la comunicación posterior. En este proceso, se desarrollan ideas que estructuran el campo y las identidades de los actores asociados a estas ideas. En este sentido, los actores no dirigen los procesos en el campo, sino que son puntos de proyección que estructuran el discurso en el campo. Los actores están conectados a las ideas y, por ende, indirectamente entre ellos, en la toma de posiciones. Entonces, las relaciones de campo involucran constelaciones de actores e ideas. A diferencia de las relaciones sociales como la amistad o el apoyo, las relaciones de campo pueden ser unilaterales, y afectan a la continuación de la comunicación en un campo mucho más amplio, y no solo a los dos actores implicados. A diferencia de las teorías anteriores de los campos sociales, estas se consideran como constelaciones socioculturales que se desarrollan en el curso de la comunicación, y no como la competición de los actores por los recursos o las constelaciones de orientaciones subjetivas.

### Palabras clave

Campo académico, autores, teoría de campo, sociología relacional, relaciones sociales, campo científico

### Personal Remarks<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, François Dépelteau was the chief organiser of discussions about relational sociology (RS). He co-edited two volumes on RS with Chris Powell from 2013 and the impressive *Palgrave Handbook* from 2018, while also organising workshops, sessions, online discussions, the research cluster on relational sociology in the Canadian Sociological Association, the book series *Palgrave Studies in Relational Sociology*, and so on. It is to be hoped that the discussions he sparked, and the interest he rallied around RS will continue, after his untimely passing in 2018.

My own version of RS is, like François's, quite idiosyncratic and somewhat iconoclastic. We have some overlap in our emphasis on processes in the social world, and in both of us dismissing human actors from their privileged positions as starting points and unshakable cornerstones of sociological thinking. While human actors are undoubtedly important, we should not feel too special about ourselves. From this perspective, the transactions or communication between us make(s) for the impressive achievements and colossal mistakes of human history. States, universities, journals, and scientific discourse do not consist of human beings but of what happens between us. If anything,

François was more radical than myself. He was ready to include non-human entities in transactions (including transactions between non-human entities), and determined to dismiss any idea of lasting structures in the social world. He would argue that states, universities, journals, and scientific discourse are really just processes of transaction. In contrast, I see them as governed by expectations that develop in the process and that guide the process in the future.

François and I debated our theoretical differences fervently and in semi-public in the e-mail group of the *research cluster on relational sociology* in the *Canadian Sociological Association* in the spring of 2015.<sup>3</sup> François organised the research cluster as well as the e-mail group and the discussion. As much as we disagreed on pretty much everything (with frequent provocative comments on my side), François always remained amicable in these discussions and in our extensive non-public e-mail exchanges. More than once he called me a "virtual friend", and I happily agree. François was a partner in intellectual discourse because of his inclusive approach to relational sociology, more than a rival, with our very different understandings of RS. He was intellectually stimulating and challenging, and that is probably the best academic discourse has on offer. But above all, he was enthusiastic about our joint (and very different) project(s) of RS, determinedly working on its

2. I would like to thank Christian Papilloud, Peeter Selg, Oscar Stuhler, and the anonymous re-viewers for helpful criticisms and suggestions on this article.

3. Thanks to Daniel Silver, much of this discussion got published subsequently in the electronic newsletter of the *Research Committee on Sociological Theory* in the *International Sociological Association* (Dépelteau et al. 2015).

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discussion, promotion, and dissemination. His passing is a severe loss for all of us, and I much regret never meeting him in person – so I have to remember him as “virtual friend”.

## 1. Introduction

Recent years have brought a surge of field theory in sociology (e.g. Martin 2003; 2011; Powell et al. 2005; Beckert 2010; Fligstein / McAdam 2012; Green 2014; Dépelteau 2015; Emirbayer / Desmond 2015). Diverse social phenomena are modelled as fields of actors competing with each other. This line of work builds on German Gestalt psychology, on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, and on neo-institutionalism. It stresses the interrelation between actors on the one hand, and the emergence of relatively durable structures and institutionalised cultural forms on the other hand. This diverges from the field theoretical tradition in physics, where fields are used to model the effects of forces like gravitation or magnetism on objects in the field mathematically (Hesse [1961] 2005). In the social world, fields are not so much abstract constructions governing the behaviour of things, as very much concrete socio-cultural formations: the field itself has to exist as a symbolic construction and to guide actors and events in its realm.

What exactly social fields consist of, and how they structure the processes in them, remains contested. Much field theory focuses on individual actors with their subjective orientations and with “objective positions” in the field. As in Bourdieu’s theory of practices, the field is conceptualised as existing in the minds of the actors involved – in the belief in the system (*illusio*), in position-dependent scripts of action (*habitus*), in subjective orientations to the other positions in the field, or even in sexual desire (Bourdieu 1980; Martin 2011; Green 2014). Actors engage in the field based on these subjective dispositions, and they use their individual skills (Fligstein 2001) to acquire more or less favourable positions in the field. These are dubbed variously as endowed with field-specific capital or with power (Bourdieu / Wacquant 1992: 71ff; Fligstein / McAdam 2012: 11; Emirbayer / Desmond 2015: 87f, 127f). From this angle, a social field looks like a vertically structured conglomerate of individuals engaging in similar activities and competing with each other for ranks in a status ladder.

In this paper, I argue for a vision of social fields less centred on individuals:

First, I conceptualise the basic processes in the field as *communication* between actors, rather than as their unitary actions or practices. The focus lies on the “communicative construction of the field”, as an integrated arena organised around symbols and ideas circulating in communication. The processes making and shaping the field are communicative. The field is

“discursive” (Spillman 1995; Bail 2012: 857ff), and the actors acquire their identities and positions through the communication or “transactions” between them (Dépelteau 2015).

Secondly, apart from institutions shaping and integrating the field, the key structures in a field do not consist of vertical status hierarchies with positions determined by the endowment of actors with resources (of field-specific capitals). Rather, the field is structured by *social relations* between actors (Anheier et al. 1995; Powell et al. 2005; Beckert 2010). These certainly afford different opportunities to actors by their positions in the network of field relations, but they should not be reduced to a more-or-less, or better-or-worse. Rather, they involve the *identities* of actors in the field as constructed from the communicative events attributed to them. Political parties and politicians acquire their identities from the claims and demands voiced, artists from the works attributed to them, and scientists from ideas presented and published. These identities are then defined in relation to each other, as more or less competent, skilled, creative, or original, but also as pursuing particular political ideologies, artistic styles, and scientific approaches.

These two conceptual decisions give us an improved conceptual tool kit to observe the construction of fields and of relations in them in discourse (Foucault [1969] 1972; Fuhse 2015a) and to analyse fields with regard to network constellations of actors (DiMaggio 1986; Anheier et al. 1995; White et al. 2004; Powell et al. 2005; Bottero / Crossley 2011). Even a coherent and compelling theoretical system has to work in empirical research, to help bring about interesting and non-trivial empirical insights. To render the theoretical framework a little less abstract and aloof, I apply it to the *scientific field*.<sup>4</sup> I suspect that many of the processes and structures at play similarly work in other fields, but do not discuss this here.

First, I consider the notion of social fields – not as the starting point, but as the final aim of this endeavour (section 2). Putting fields up front gives the journey ahead a clear finishing line to reach. Then I apply the concept to the scientific field (3). Communication is then introduced and discussed as the basic constituent element of field (4). In the process of communication, structures develop that guide future communication: ideas, institutions, and the identities of actors (5). These are linked by relations that position actors and ideas in a field to each other (6). The conclusion locates this notion of fields in the broader project of relational sociology (7).

## 2. Defining and demarcating fields

John Levi Martin notes that the field concept is used in various ways in the social sciences. Purely topologically as (1) an “analytic

4. Out of convenience, I subsume the two worlds of academia and science under the notion of the scientific field.

area ... in which we position persons or institutions", as (2) an "organization of forces", or (3) as a "field of contestation, a battlefield" (2003: 28).<sup>5</sup> A field as a purely analytical area alone (1) is not very interesting. The actors in question ("persons or institutions") should not be a convenient sample of unrelated entities. Rather, a field becomes interesting if the behaviour of these actors is interrelated and oriented towards each other, in a "field of contestation" or "battlefield" (3). Now the notion of field only makes sense if the contestation of actors is governed by rules, by forces that organise the conflicts in the field (2). The notion of field becomes most fruitful for social inquiry where the three senses overlap.

The field concept in physics is an analytical construct to mathematically describe the uniformity of effects on objects in circumscribed space (Hesse [1961] 2005). The objects in a gravitational field do not really interact with each other, but they are subject to the same gravitational pull in one direction (magnetic fields are more complicated). Objects in a field behave similarly. This calls for the construction of forces (gravitation, magnetic attraction) that govern the field. Field and force define each other: The force is the mathematical construct to make sense of the behaviour of objects in the field, and the field is defined as the space where the force plays out.

If we transfer these ideas to the social sciences, a social field should be characterised by the *similarity of behaviour of actors*. We consider politics, the economy, science and academia, sports, the mass media, and the arts separate fields because people behave relatively similarly within one realm, but differently across realms. We would want to know where this similarity comes from, but the notion of fields in physics only requires its mathematical modelling. The social sciences are notoriously bad at precise mathematical modelling. For the time being, our main aim is to come up with verbal accounts of why particular behaviour occurs. What could make for the similarity and inter-relatedness of behaviour, thus defining the field?

In the social world, behaviour is frequently accounted for by cultural factors: different countries, different social groups, different companies, different neighbourhoods are all supposed to be characterised by distinct cultures, making for the recognisable patterns of behaviour in them (Geertz [1973] 1993). As a first aspect of *field culture*, Pierre Bourdieu suggests that actors in a field share "illusio", a general sense of being part of the game and of its rules (Bourdieu / Wacquant 1992: 115ff). Following neo-institutionalism, we might say that the field features institutions – cultural rules and models that guide actors in the field (Powell /

DiMaggio 1991). A social field would be defined and demarcated by the illusion of being part of and invested in a game, and by the reach of institutions characterising the field. These institutions then bound and constitute the field (Abbott 1995). The field ends where behaviour is no longer governed by them (and by the illusio). However, this remains quite abstract and needs to be elaborated regarding particular fields.

Importantly, illusio and institutions do not make for harmony in the field. They lead to a certain similarity of the behaviour in the fields, but the actors are united in divisions and struggle, as Bourdieu emphasises. The field is a battleground of actors competing with each other and relating to each other more in conflict than consensus. Nonetheless, the field needs a common orientation to aims that actors compete for, and to rules governing this competition.

Overall, then, I define a social field as a context of interrelated activities, characterised and recognisable by a similarity of behaviour in the field. These activities are governed by field-specific institutions: cultural rules making for the similarity of behaviour and for an understanding ("illusio") of taking part in the same game – even if the actors relate to each other in conflict and difference. These arguments will be qualified further in the following sections. Here we can already note: this concept of field applies to social phenomena at various levels (Emirbayer / Johnson 2008; Fligstein / McAdam 2012). Families, friendship groups, school classes, work groups, organisations, social movements all qualify. As do economic markets, political arenas, international politics, the arts, and science and academia.

### 3. The scientific field

Turning to science and academia, the general illusion of the field seems to be that of a *production of knowledge* (Bourdieu 1975; 1997; Luhmann 1990; Knorr Cetina 1999). Scientists are in the business of advancing truth claims about the world. Some sub-areas from computer science to psychotherapy are geared more at producing knowledge that can be put to use – to get machines running or to cure diseases or distress. But in general, truth claims are supposed to accurately *represent* a phenomenon under study (Hacking 1983; van Fraassen 2008).

Most social fields are characterised by different positions with divergent roles and activities for actors. The economic realm features sellers and buyers, producers and consumers. Politics has politicians and voters, with lobbies and interest groups intervening

5. François Dépelteau seems to mostly focus on a fourth, less demanding usage: as a field of study with the "transactions between the observer and the observed" (2015: 58). But he also refers to multiple social fields that individuals are embedded in over the life course: "their mother's womb", "games played with other kids", "conversations with co-workers", "fights in a battlefield", "work at the assembly line", "trafficking women in a transnational field", and "making love in the bedroom" (57). All of these Dépelteau views as "social spaces" with their borders inscribed in and governing transactions between human beings and non-human entities.



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and journalists evaluating the performance of politicians. Art worlds are populated by artists, galleries, museums, collectors, and foundations that all play their part in the production, construction, and evaluation of art (Becker 1982). Typically, actors in one role perform one set of activities and compete with each other in these fields, rather than with other kinds of positions. Science is different in that all actors in the field are advancing knowledge claims and evaluating each other's claims. Scientists orient primarily towards each other, following the same routines and rules, taking each other's observations as starting points or as counter-positions, and competing with each other for the prevalent forms of recognition in the field: publications, citations, academic positions and honours, and third-party funding.

The theoretical language introduced in the next section relegates the individual actions and subjective orientations of scientists to secondary importance. The activities in a field are better modelled as communicative events that build on each other, meticulously distinguishing between the scientific and the non-scientific by way of institutionalised standards (Luhmann 1990). The competition between scientists builds on this meaningful separation of the scientific field from everything else (including its objects of study) in communication. The field, then, is first of all constructed in communication.

Scientific communication shows a clear compartmentalisation into various fields and subfields, sometimes even into national or language-based discourses and different theoretical and methodological approaches within one discipline. Physicists do not compete for university positions with psychologists, nor do they cite each other or publish in the same journals. This partly rests on the organisation of institutions of higher education in different departments and disciplines. But it also reflects different "styles of thought" (Fleck [1935] 1979; Abend 2006), "styles of reasoning" (Hacking 2002: 161f, 180ff) or "epistemic cultures" (Knorr Cetina 1999). These result from lengthy processes of institutionalisation, making for fundamental differences in concepts, perspective, methods, and subjects of study by discipline, field of study, nation- or language-based discourse, and even different approaches.

The precise boundaries of a scientific field are hard to establish. We can start by pointing to the strong connection between fields and institutions (Powell / DiMaggio 1991): fields of mutual observation and orientation make for the emergence of institutions. These govern the communication in the field, rendering it relatively similar by positions in the field. The field ends wherever the institutions characterising it hold no more. In a sense, institutions define and demarcate fields, just as forces and fields define each other in physics (see above). Fields themselves have to be institutionalised. Science only slowly and gradually acquired its autonomy from politics, economy, and religion. Similarly, disciplines develop over time as their particular perspectives and methods institutionalise, as departments, study programs, and journals organise around them (Abbott 1999). This holds for

philosophy over the last 2,500 years, for economics in the 19th century and sociology in the early 20th century, for communication science in the second half of the 20th century, and currently for computational social science and digital humanities.

We can envision the disciplines as enmeshed in a network, with links of varying strengths between each other, rather than hermetically sealed entities. This network-character becomes even more apparent when adding academic specialties and approaches to the picture. Relational sociology, for example, connects to other branches in sociology, to philosophy, to interdisciplinary network research, but also to history, economics, political science, education sciences, social psychology, sociolinguistics and many other fields of application and sources of inspiration. Denoting academic and scientific disciplines, specialties, and approaches as fields only points to their nature as relatively cohesive contexts with a fair degree of internal communication and orientation. In principle, we have to check empirically whether this or that purported field actually displays internal cohesion, and separation from the outside, for example by examining the links within and across fields (White et al. 2004).

#### 4. Communication

The following sections dig deeper into the concept of social fields. Before turning to their structures in the next section, I consider the question of their basic elements: what do social fields consist of? The basic choice is: either fields are made of the *actors* in the field with their subjective orientations, or they have the *social processes* in them as their basic elements. I argue in this section for a focus on social processes, on the communicative events that follow the institutionalised rules of the field. Fields are contexts of interrelated activities, rather than of actors engaging in them.

According to Bourdieu, social fields are characterised by the mutual orientation of actors and the competition between them (1997; Bourdieu / Wacquant 1992: 115ff). The behaviour of actors (their "practices") are driven by subjective orientations that follow from their involvement in the field: they share the "illuso" as the general orientation of "being part of the field". The specific positions in the field, then, make for the particular "habitus" of actors: the sedimented and mostly unconscious sense of one's place in the field and of behaviour appropriate to this position. The notion of actor here spans the level of subjective orientations (illuso and habitus) and that of observed behaviour (practices), with behaviour following from subjective orientations, as in theories of action by Max Weber and others.

If actors and their activities are this inseparable, why should we ask whether one or the other constitute the field? Here we run into theoretical and methodological issues. Defining fields in terms of actors is not impossible, but it comes with two implications that I wish to avoid:

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(1) The first implication is that actors themselves would be part of the field, and that is: as *full actors*. Consider individuals: in modern society, people are always involved in a number of “social circles” like family, friends and neighbours, formal organisations (companies, universities), or social fields like the economy, politics, law, and science (Simmel [1908] 1964; Luhmann [1997] 2013: 87ff). If we hold fields to be composed of actors, these *multiple entanglements* would themselves become part of the field. Media and real estate tycoons turned politicians Silvio Berlusconi and Donald Trump are obvious cases in point. While their business interests might matter in the realm of politics, their positions in the fields of economy and the mass media do not directly translate into electoral success and public office. Many billionaires have failed to convert their wealth and economic status into political careers.

There is a certain virtue in taking the positions of individual actors in other fields into account when examining a field. However, the general stance of field theory is to examine one realm in isolation. The very construct of a field – in physics as in the social sciences – presupposes that we can focus on what happens in a field (Martin 2003). Imagine Silvio Berlusconi or Donald Trump venturing into the social sciences. Would their academic arguments convince us because of their fame and fortune in politics, the economy, and the mass media? Probably not. The academic and scientific world is relatively cut off from outside influences. Our family, our political convictions (or offices held), our wealth do not influence our positions in academia much. I therefore find it preferable to consider only parts of actors as in a field – actors not in full but in their positions and positionings in the field.

(2) The second problem concerns the organisation of meaning in a field. As argued in section 2, a social field is a symbolic construction. It consists of patterns of meaning that guide the processes in the field. If we conceptualise social fields as resting on individual actors, this places the main emphasis on their *subjective meaning*. The meaning of an event – say, a publication or a conference talk – in the field would be determined by the subjective orientations that bring this event about.

Building on Bourdieu, events in a field have a double meaning: First, they derive from the *subjective* considerations of actors (illusio and habitus). John Levi Martin stresses this aspect of fields (2003; 2011): they make for phenomenological orientations of actors in line with their relations to others, rendering their actions appropriate to their positions in the field. Secondly, the event constitutes a *position-taking* (“prise de position”) in the field (Bourdieu / Wacquant 1992: 105). In a publication or a conference talk, particular academic arguments and references to other authors are advanced and acquire meaning in the field – not in the sense of subjective orientations driving them, but in the sense of patterns of meaning structuring the field. Concepts are connected in arguments, claims are advanced, authors are related to each other, approaches are proclaimed or called into question.

In extreme cases, such patterns crystallise and institutionalise into durable structures of the field, for example if relational sociology becomes an approach that academic discourse organises around.

This second meaning of an event is less about the subjective orientations of actors, than about the meaning inscribed in the event and reacted upon in follow-up events. It consists of the “definition of the situation” advanced in communication, and picked up on by others. I would stress this second sense of meaning out of theoretical and methodological reasons: methodologically, it is next to impossible to know the subjective meaning behind communicative events. Theoretically, communicative events like publications make a difference in the field not through the subjective meaning behind them, but through the claims formulated in them and through their reception, interpretation, and reactions by others. In this sense, communicative events carry their own meaning, not the actors in their minds.

These considerations lead away from the actors to their activities as the basic elements of fields. In a sense, they are not even “their” activities anymore, they are activities of the field – just as the movement of a stone in a gravitational field is governed by forces in the field (rather than by intrinsic qualities or dispositions of the stone). Publications and conference talks in scientific discourse are placed in the stream of other publications and conference talks, relating back and forth. Academic and scientific statements are negotiated in this sequence of communicative events, as are the identities of the actors themselves (see 5.).

Communicative events, then, constitute the basic elements of a field. Social fields are “discursive” constructions rather than mere structures or assemblages of actors (Spillman 1995; Bail 2012: 857ff). Actors certainly play their parts in them, but not as prefixed entities driving the field, and not in full with their bodies, minds, and multiple social entanglements. In principle, sociology has a number of concepts for social / communicative events on offer – from individual behaviour, action, or practice to exchange, interaction, transactions, or communication (Fuhse 2021, chapter 7). Without elaborating in detail, I argue for conceptualising them as distinctly social events that take place *between* people (or: in a field). This rules out the concepts of behaviour, action, or practices that view social events as governed by individual attributes or dispositions. Also, the events have to be seen as *processing meaning*, as formulating “definitions of the situation” that subsequent events build on, reject, or otherwise have to deal with.

Michel Foucault terms the communicative events in discourses “*énoncés*” (literally “utterances”, but frequently translated as “statements”; 1969: 41ff; [1969] 1972: 28ff). Niklas Luhmann’s term of “*communication*” comes with similar implications: communication is a sequence of events taking place between at least two individuals, with both involved in the joint negotiation of the meaning the events (2002: 155ff; Fuhse 2015a). In this process, events acquire a meaning of their own that subsequent

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events build on. Luhmann's concept of communication stresses the supra-personal nature of social events, the processing of meaning in these events, and their temporal unfolding in sequences of communication. All of this has important consequences for social fields, if these are conceptualised as made of communication:

First, social fields acquire *emergent features*. They are no longer governed by the qualities and dispositions of actors taking part in them. Rather, any event in the field reacts to previous events, making the inner workings of a field relatively independent of subjective orientations.

Secondly, fields are *constructions of meaning*, like all social and cultural patterns. Therefore, we have to study the definitions of the situation offered in the field and the struggles around them. This focus is very different from the prevalent surveys of the distribution of resources across actors ("economic", "cultural", and "social capital" following Bourdieu).

Thirdly, fields *unfold and change over time*, rather than constituting stable structures that mainly lead to their own reproduction. Changes in the field do not only come from the changing fortunes of actors in the field, from challengers successfully replacing incumbents as power-holders (Fligstein / McAdam 2012: 13ff, 96ff). For example, we may want to observe the changing configurations of ideas in the scientific or academic field, with actors propagating them tying their fortunes to those of the ideas.

These three points do not make for a radical revamping of the field concept in the social sciences. They already form part of the most important field theories, in different versions and weights (Bourdieu / Wacquant 1992; Martin 2003; 2011; Fligstein / McAdam 2012). But they constitute a slight shift in perspective, with events, their temporal unfolding, and the processing of ideas in them gaining prominence at the expense of actors, resources, and structures. Consequently, a social field can now be defined as the *complex of interrelated communication structured by a set of institutions regulating conflict and competition* in the field.

Unlike Foucault's discourses or Luhmann's systems, the fields generated through communication are not by and large harmonious (see 2.). Communication marks differences and conflict as well as commonality and consensus. Definitions of the situation are not necessarily agreed upon, but frequently subject to contention. As a result, fields feature not only common cultural institutions, but also different ideas, and identities to which these ideas are attributed, as well as relations between identities. These form part of the structures in the field.

## 5. Ideas, and identities

Generally, structures arise in the social world as the result of the process of communication. Communicative events lead to *expectations* that govern the production of future events in the

field. These expectations concern what kinds of communication will take place, in terms of content (ideas, institutions), from whom (identities), and between whom (social relations). Expectations are relatively inert because of the tendency of events to conform to them. At the same time, they gradually change with every event, making for an open-ended "evolution". I discuss ideas and identities here, and social relations in the next section.

The ideational structure of a field includes its boundary, with the *illuio* of what the field is about, and the institutions governing the communication in the field (see 2.). These ideational patterns are quite different from field to field. In the academic field, they include prevalent theories and methods, but also prominent findings that any scientific statement has to take into account. These have been coined "styles of thought" (Fleck [1935] 1979) and "epistemic cultures" (Knorr Cetina 1999) in section 3. Each academic and scientific discipline develops its own epistemic culture, even differing by sub-specialties. Such structures of expectations are always provisional. They can be challenged and changed. Even prominent findings can be discarded in the light of follow-up research, culminating in the fundamental upheavals that Thomas Kuhn calls "scientific revolutions" ([1962] 2012). Journal articles and books have to come up with new ideas to be published, and authors cannot make their careers by reiterating what is already known. Scientific and academic fields thus harbour in them the impulse for change and a certain heterogeneity of ideas. Even authors pursuing the same approach have to distinguish themselves from each other.

Now the social sciences are home to a number of competing approaches at odds with each other – the oft-lamented "balkanisation". Relational sociology is one such approach, but within it we find incommensurable positions: Nick Crossley's interactionist theory of social relationships and networks (2011), François Dépelteau's "deep relational sociology" (2008; 2015) with its similarities to Actor-Network Theory, Pierpaolo Donati's critical realism of social relations (2011), the pragmatism-inspired reflections on social network analysis by Mustafa Emirbayer (1997) and Emily Erikson (2013), my own account of the construction of relational patterns in communication (Fuhse 2009; 2015; 2018; 2021), and many more (Dépelteau 2018; Fuhse 2020). A field thus harbours the competition between different ideas and different authors associated with them. Fields are not supposed to be harmonious, like groups and collective identities. Rather, they constitute battlefields where actors compete with each other for resources and influence, but generally following the same rules governing their behaviour.

*Actors*, together with their ideas, then constitute important features of the field: politicians, parties, and social movements in politics; companies in economic markets; artists, galleries, and museums in art. In the perspective advanced above, an "actor" is less the point of origin from which communicative events spring, be they political claims, products, artworks, or publications. Rather,



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his or her identity serves as a projection point to which these events (and the ideas in them) are attributed. Actors do not come into discourse with pre-given qualities like skills, ideological leanings, creativity, and excellence. Rather, these skills are attached to actors as a result of attribution, and of the reception of claims, artworks, or publications in follow-up communication. A politician may call for a particular tax cut out of legitimate concern for an industry. But then others accuse her or him of favouring political donors, and she or he comes to be seen as trading favours. Original intentions do not organise discourse, but attributed intentions do.

If attribution is key, everything can become an actor in a field to which communication is attributed. This holds for individuals as well as for collectives and formal organisations (Fuhse 2015a: 53f). As far as I can see, most material and spiritual objects do not meet this requirement, since they are not seen as the sources of communication in a field. Bots in online environments constitute an important exception (Howard et al. 2018). For now, they can probably be dismissed from the field of science. But that is not an essential distinction: bots and non-human actors can be actors in a field if communication treats them as such, and develops expectations concerning their future behaviour towards others in the field.<sup>6</sup>

In science and academia, universities and departments are one type of actors competing with each other (Münch 2014). But mostly, ideas are attributed to individuals as the authors or co-authors of publications. Michel Foucault views authors as projection points for ideas and texts, that help organise discourse (Foucault [1969] 1998). Great authors, like the classics in sociology (Marx, Durkheim, Simmel, Weber), lend credit to arguments when invoked. And the construction of their greatness frequently contributes to all sorts of ideas being attributed to them and not to minor figures (Merton 1968). Intellectual achievements, however, rarely come from individuals but from networks of academics working on similar questions, toying with words, inspiring and challenging each other (Collins 1998: 3, 14f).

In this sense, the “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology” sprang from the discussions between network scholars and friends in New York City in the early 1990s, but it is credited to Emirbayer alone (1997; Mische 2011: 82f). His attempt at reconstructing a common position of relational sociologists including Harrison White, Charles Tilly, Margaret Somers, Ann Mische, himself, and many others has come to denote his own position in discourse. In a similar vein, the Gestalt of Jacques Derrida changed with transfer from the French to the American intellectual field (Lamont 1987). Mainly read and discussed among French philosophers, the translated Derrida became a hero of the nascent field of literary criticism in the US. Naturally, the ideas attributed to him changed

through the shift. An author is not somebody who injects ideas into academic debates, but a source to visit, an authority to appeal to or to rebel against, a construction whose shape is continuously revamped and whose merits are repeatedly reassessed.

Authors by themselves are of little importance for the field. They only acquire their identity and their position in the field through links with ideas, arguments, and achievements. However, the construction of identities in the field is also linked to their relations with others (White 2008).

## 6. Field relations

Relational sociology obviously has to stress the role of relations in fields. But what are social relations? Bourdieu repeatedly stresses relations as key in the social world and in his theory of practices: “The real is relational” ([1994] 1998: 3). As a number of critics clarify, Bourdieu is not really interested in social relationships of interaction between actors (Bottero 2009; Mohr 2013). Bourdieu’s relations run between positions in fields, and these have two sides: actors are positioned “objectively” in a field by the field-relevant resources (economic, cultural, social capital and others) they possess, and by their symbolic practices (“position-taking”). Generally, practices are supposed to follow the habitus of actors, and these are determined by the objective positions in terms of the relative distribution of resources (Bourdieu [1980] 1990).

In the perspective adopted here, actors and their resources do not drive the field, but they result from the processes of construction and allocation in the field. Therefore, I focus on the “position-taking” in the field: The relations between actors are constructed in the communication in the field, with actors relating to each other in the communicative events attributed to them. In science and academia, these events consist primarily of publications, to a lesser extent also of presentations and informal talk in departments and at conferences.

Emirbayer’s “Manifesto” does not detail what social relations are. Instead he focuses on “relational thinking” (following Cassirer) and on processes of “transaction” (following Dewey and Bentley) unfolding between actors (Emirbayer 1997: 282f, 286f). Relations here seem to be processes, rather than structures. Dépelteau goes further in dismissing any structures arising in transactions (2008; 2015). For him, relational sociology is about the mutual effects of (different kinds of) entities in transactions, rather than about lasting relational patterns. Charles Tilly, in contrast, argues that “interpersonal transactions compound into identities, create and transform social boundaries, and accumulate into durable social

6. This position does not entail that we should not reflect on, and study, subjective cognition like subjective orientations and cultural scripts in a field (Lizardo 2004; Leschziner / Green 2013). But it treats cognition as part of a field’s environment, given that it cannot be observed directly in the field.



ties" (2005: 6f). I agree with Tilly rather than with Dépelteau: social processes (termed communication here, rather than transactions) make for relatively durable patterns of expectations that guide future process (Abbott 2016). Social relations are one such form of expectations: how do actors stand towards each other? These "relational expectations" develop in past communication between actors, and they guide their subsequent communication.

Elsewhere, I insist that we should study social relationships rather than mere social relations (Fuhse 2013: 183f). The difference is that social relationships are characterised by two-way communication between the parties involved and by the build-up of expectations in the course of it (Figure 1). These expectations concern the question of how two actors stand towards each other, and how they will and should behave towards each other in the future.

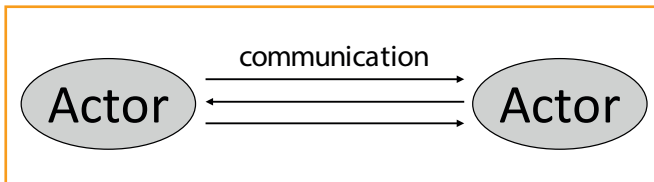


Figure 1: Communication in a social relationship

These kinds of social relationships can also matter in fields. But generally, the communication in a field is a little different. If a political party or a social movement organisation suggests controlling the ownership of handguns, this is first of all a political demand. But it will be seen as aligning with other groups supporting the same demand and as conflicting with gun rights-advocating groups and parties. Actors in a field thus relate indirectly towards each other through ideas and institutions (see 5.). Also, one political actor may attack or support another political actor without the second actor taking note or reacting. This still constitutes a relation in the field, as long as it is visible to others and affects subsequent communication – for example by further actors joining the support or attacks, or by rivalling actors closing ranks.

A relation in a field thus has a wider frame of reference than a social relationship. It not only connects actors directly with other actors in two-way relationships, but also actors with ideas and indirectly with other actors (through the joint support of ideas or the contention around them). Also, actors are sometimes unilaterally tied to other actors. Follow-up communication is the decisive factor in both instances: in social relationships, actors are connected to each other through the expectations that govern subsequent communicative events between them. Field relations, in contrast, consist of expectations that guide future communication in the field, whether or not the same actors are involved. Expectations are here not confined to the dyadic relationship, but concern the wider socio-cultural organisation of communication in the field. Within this socio-cultural organisation,

ideas, authors, and relations are mutually co-constitutive (Fuhse et al. 2020: 6f; Fuhse 2020): an idea means something by virtue of its connections to other ideas held by the same actors. And actors are related through ideas. By articulating an idea, then, one takes a stance towards other actors, thus establishing relations to them and marking one's position in the field (Figure 2).

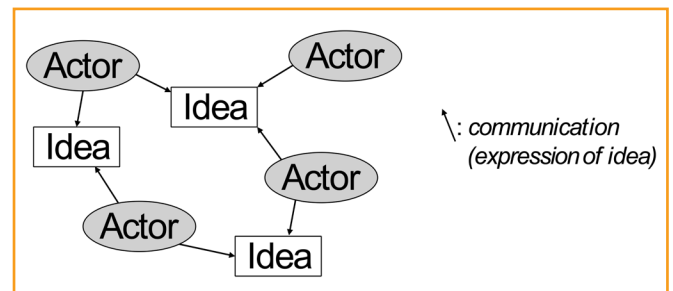


Figure 2: Relations in fields (between actors and ideas)

Scientific and academic fields are then structured by a pattern of expectation about how authors and ideas relate to each other, but also how authors (and ideas) are positioned among themselves. Scientific or academic communication takes place within these socio-cultural patterns, building on and reacting to the relations in the field. At the same time, it forges new connections, suggesting particular links between ideas (and authors), and establishing its authors as projection points to which ideas are attributed. I leave the question of what an "idea" is deliberately vague here. For example, it can consist of linking two concepts, as between "relationality" and "agency" (Burkitt 2016).

But relations also run between authors, for example with one author citing the work of another. These references point to, and make for, the relevance of the cited author in the field. At the same time, it entails that the citing author takes a position vis-à-vis the cited author. References do not always endorse the ideas of the cited authors. But even critical citations are better than no citations at all – being ignored makes for the disappearance of publications and authors from the field. Generally, authors cite mostly those works and authors they by and large agree with – to invoke support by trusted authors for their own arguments, and to place themselves in an "imagined community" of academics holding similar views. Of course, this includes authors who will not or cannot reciprocate our citations, such as the sociological classics: Émile Durkheim, Georg Simmel, Max Weber. As authors to which we attribute ideas, and as projection points, they can still feature in the field of sociology long after their biological death.

## 7. Conclusion

The notion of fields is not integral to relational sociology. Many relational sociologists (Andrew Abbott, Margaret Archer, Pierpaolo

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Donati, Ann Mische, Christopher Powell, Charles Tilly, and Harrison White) make do without it. However, in recent years, there seems to be a growing consensus among relationally-minded sociologists: the field concept allows us to model the relational aspects of large-scale social phenomena like arts, economic markets and collaborations, sexual scenes, the world of academia and science, even social inequality (DiMaggio 1986; Anheier et al. 1995; Bottero / Crossley 2011; Fligstein / McAdam 2012; Green 2014; Emirbayer / Desmond 2015). The question then is how to conceptualise social fields.

In this essay, I advance a particular version of social fields from a theoretical perspective that views social and cultural structures as patterns of expectations that arise in the process of communication and structure it in turn (Fuhse 2009; 2015; 2018; 2021). This conceptualisation has the following main features:

*Communicative events*, rather than actors, are the constituent elements of fields. The structures of fields and their boundaries are symbolic patterns (expectations) that crystallise and change over the course of communication. Every communicative event offers a definition of the situation that subsequent communication builds on, or has to deal with.

The *boundaries of fields* are part and parcel of these provisionally crystallised definitions of the situation. They include an “illusio” of common involvement, and of particular rules (institutions) governing behaviour in the field.

Fields thus feature a *socio-cultural organisation* over and above the level of social relationships and networks. Every actor, every idea, every relation between actors (and between actors and ideas) is embedded in the socio-symbolic constellation of other relations within the field, as well as in the illusio and institutions of the field. Therefore, we cannot simply reduce fields to networks, but have to consider their overall patterns.

*Relations in the field* differ from social relationships proper, in that two actors do not have to be involved in two-way communication. Communicative events here relate actors to ideas and to other actors within the broader socio-cultural organisation of the field.

*Actors and ideas* acquire their identities and meaning within this socio-cultural organisation, through the relations to other ideas and other actors.

Academic and scientific fields then consist of scholarly communication, in particular publication, with most fields composed of representational claims about empirical phenomena. Scholarly communication is attributed to authors, along with concepts and arguments advanced in them. Authors and ideas, and the relations between them, constitute the basic structures of expectations in a field. As in Foucault’s theory of discourse, authors are projection points in the field, rather than self-driven entities driving the processes in the field.

The notion of social fields advanced here combines elements from different theoretical approaches and perspectives. I diverge

from Bourdieu’s concept of fields by relegating individual orientations (*habitus*) and resources (economic, cultural, and social capital) to secondary importance. In contrast to Fligstein and McAdam’s theory of fields, I emphasise the socio-cultural organisation of fields (including the construction of their boundaries) more than struggles for power and individual skills. This resembles Martin’s conceptualisation of fields, apart from its individualist focus on subjective orientations. This theory of fields then uniquely stresses their phenomenological organisation and ongoing construction *in communication*, rather than in people’s minds. In this regard, my approach lies closer to Foucault’s discourse analysis and to Luhmann’s theory of social systems. Unlike these, the notion of fields allows me to stress the role of patterns of relations and of conflicts in fields.

I view this conceptualisation of fields as compatible to the theories of social networks as interwoven with meaning (White 2008; Crossley 2011; Fuhse 2009; 2021), but adding important elements to it. Fields have a socio-cultural organisation and unity over and above networks of social relationships. Actors are not only related to each other in “stories” (White) or “relational expectations” (Fuhse), but immersed in a constellation of other actors and ideas. Actors are here related in position-takings (Bourdieu), both directly (e.g. in citations or in attacks) and indirectly (in the contention around ideas). Social relationships constitute a separate layer to these field relations. The role of social relationships and networks has been well documented in the sociology of science (Breiger 1976; Collins 1998). Generally, we can expect social relationships to correspond to field relations – with friends and colleagues converging on similar arguments, and with adherents of one approach more likely to develop friendships and to co-author together. But this conjecture has to be explored in empirical studies.

Many of the differences outlined seem scholastic at first glance. But like all theory, they are linked to particular methodological sensibilities. The field concept advanced here focuses on the processing of meaning in fields, and on the construction of constellations of actors and ideas. This leads away from the behaviour of actors as the prime object of study, towards constellations of actors and towards contention around ideas, labels, categories, authors, and collective identities – in line with the general trend in relational sociology away from entities towards the relations and processes between them.

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