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Social Skill and the Theory of Fields*

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The problem of the relationship between actors and the social structures in which they are embedded is central to sociological theory. This paper suggests that the “new institutionalist” focus on fields, domains, or games provides an alternative view of how to think about this problem by focusing on the construction of local orders. This paper criticizes the conception of actors in both rational choice and sociological versions of these theories. A more sociological view of action, what is called “social skill,” is developed. The idea of social skill originates in symbolic interactionism and is defined as the ability to induce cooperation in others. This idea is elaborated to suggest how actors are important to the construction and reproduction of local orders. I show how its elements already inform existing work. Finally, I show how the idea can sensitize scholars to the role of actors in empirical work.

INTRODUCTION

In classical sociological theory, social reproduction and social change were typically explained by social structure. This view has the effect of making people into agents of structure who have little independent effect on the constitution of their social world. In the last 20 years, there has been a renewed theoretical attempt to establish an independent role for social actors in social change and reproduction. This debate has been framed around the issues of connecting structure to actors, or, as it was sometimes put, the problem of agents and structures (Giddens 1984; Sewell 1994; Alexander and Smelser 1987). The debate has sensitized scholars to the important role that real people play in the reproduction of social life. But, after researchers have generated a number of books and papers, many of which were pitched at a rather abstract level, there appears to be little general consensus on how to think about these issues, and there certainly is no positive program for social research.¹

This paper enters this discussion in two ways. First, I suggest that an important set of conceptual tools that are useful for rethinking structures and action can be found in the various “new institutional” theories in the social sciences. Second, I develop a sociological view of action that originates in both the empirical and theoretical literature that speaks directly to the problem of agency. The conception of agency proposed here, which has its roots in symbolic interaction, can be called social skill.² The idea of social skill is that actors have to motivate others to cooperate. The ability to engage others in collective

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¹The issue of agency is important in a number of subfields in sociology; social movements, organizational theory, political sociology, and the sociology of culture. I believe this reflects the fact that these fields deal with the question of social change where actors or sets of actors contest regularly established ways of doing things and are able, on occasion, to construct new courses of action.

²The theory of social skill also bears resemblance to ideas proposed by Anthony Giddens regarding the “skilled reproduction of social life” (1984) and Hans Joas’s notion of the “creativity of social action” (1996).

action is a social skill that proves pivotal to the construction and reproduction of local social orders.

This idea can be used to understand how to identify the distinct contribution of actors, whether they are defending an existing set of social arrangements or are imposing or negotiating a new order. The purpose of introducing the idea of social skill is to provide a sociological, as opposed to a methodological individualist, microfoundation for using new institutional theories. Social life revolves around getting collective action, and this requires that participants in that action be induced to cooperate. Sometimes coercion and sanctions are used to constrain others. But often, skilled strategic actors provide identities and cultural frames to motivate others. I want to develop these ideas in a way that has empirical implications for how we study the formation of fields across a wide variety of settings.

The main contribution of this paper is to synthesize conceptual insights that already exist in the literature to push forward a more coherent view of how sociological institutionalist approaches might make progress. I am not offering a full blown theory of agency or institutions nor am I presenting a set of testable hypotheses. Instead, I am providing an abstract conceptual framework that supplies empirical sociologists with a set of tools that may help them analyze the role of actors in the emergence, stability, and transformation of many kinds of local social orders. At the core of the paper is an attempt to develop a symbolic interactionist view of action that is both strategic and based on providing actors with collective identities as motives for action. This is the purpose of other efforts such as Emirbayer and Goodwin (1994), Emirbayer and Mische (1999), Hays (1994), Joas (1996), and Sewell (1992:16–19).³

This paper pushes this project forward on two fronts. First, I integrate the existing literature on strategic action in sociology to describe the tactics that social actors use to gain cooperation with others. So, for example, I consider how “framing” (Snow et al. 1992), agenda setting (Lukes 1974), brokering (Gould 1993), and “robust action” (Padgett and Ansell 1992) describe alternative strategic forms of action. I argue that what all of these tactics have in common is actors taking the perspective of other actors to persuade them to cooperate. Second, I explicitly link the “agency” project of symbolic interactionism to the “new” institutionalist project of understanding local orders or fields. Here, my concern is to show what skilled strategic actors will do under different conditions of power and uncertainty. Social actors always matter to the reproduction of fields. Generally, the reproduction of fields depends on the skilled performances of actors in dominant organizations (Giddens 1984). But, under conditions of crisis or formation, it is possible for institutional entrepreneurs to create entirely new systems of meaning. These entrepreneurs are skilled strategic actors who find ways to get disparate groups to cooperate precisely by putting themselves into the positions of others and creating meanings that appeal to a large number of actors. It is these moments that are the focus of many of our empirical studies of politics, social movements, and firms and markets.

There has been increased interest for almost 20 years across the social sciences in explaining how social institutions, defined as rules that produce social interaction, come into existence, remain stable, and are transformed.⁴ Despite their differences, all new institutional theories contain a set of agreements (Hall and Taylor 1996). They focus on the

³My purpose here is not to directly engage the debate over theories of action, which is done in Emirbayer and Mische (1999). Instead, my purpose is to push forward the conceptual project of linking a particular view of agency to “new” institutionalist theories.

⁴For some examples, see in political science March and Olsen 1989; Steinmo et al. 1992; Pierson 1995; Cox and McCubbins 1993; Krehbiel 1991; Shepsle 1989; in sociology Meyer and Rowan 1977; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Scott 1996; Scott and Meyer 1983; Powell and Dimaggio 1991; Dobbin 1994; Nee and Brinton 1998; and in economics Simon 1957; Williamson 1985; North 1990; Milgrom and Roberts 1982; Jensen and Meckling 1974.

construction of local social orders, what could be called “fields,” “arenas,” or “games.”⁵ New institutionalist theories are social constructionist in the sense that they view the creation of institutions as an outcome of social interaction between actors confronting one another in fields or arenas. Most important, preexisting rules of interaction and resource distributions operate as sources of power and, when combined with a model of actors, serve as the basis by which institutions are constructed and reproduced. Once in existence, institutions both enable and constrain social actors. Privileged actors can use institutions to reproduce their position. Actors can use existing institutions to found new arenas of action. Actors without resources are most often constrained by institutions but under certain circumstances can use existing rules in unintended ways to create new institutions. The agreements that have been forged by “new institutional theory” by asserting that the appropriate level of theorizing is meso, that is, focusing on the construction of local social orders, can be applied to a wide variety of research settings. Much empirical social science in the fields of political sociology, economic sociology, organizational sociology, and social movements is about the production of new fields or the transformation of old fields. Scholars working in these subfields have to define the particular field of interest to them and understand the “local” institutions, who the players are, and what their resources are.

My main concern here is with the model of action in these theories. The sociological view of action proposed here focuses on the attempt by one set of actors to attain cooperation with other actors. There are two relevant groups with whom actors work to attain cooperation: those within a given group or organization (insiders) and those who exist in other organizations (the field). The people who act as leaders in groups must stabilize their relations to their own group members to get them to act collectively and must frame their more general strategic moves toward other organizations in their field or domain. The ability on the part of actors to analyze and attain such cooperation can be viewed generically as social skill. All humans have some social skill by virtue of their membership in groups. But we know that some actors are more socially skillful in getting others to cooperate, maneuvering around more powerful actors, and generally knowing how to build political coalitions in life.

New institutional theories emphasize that existing rules and resources are the constitutive building blocks of social life. I want to add that the ability of actors to skillfully use rules and resources is part of the picture as well. In some situations where rules and resources are heavily weighted toward the most powerful groups, social skill might matter little. Where there is more social turbulence or uncertainty, social skill can play a pivotal role in holding local orders together. Moreover, in the founding of orders, social skill usually comes to the fore. It is no accident that we talk about entrepreneurs in economic, social, and political life. Such actors are people with vision who create new things. These actors not only have an idea, but they must use that idea to induce cooperation among others (DiMaggio 1988). Using Giddens’s (1984) language, the “skilled performances” of social actors are at the core of the production and reproduction of social life. But under some social conditions, the skilled performances of certain actors can be more pivotal than under other conditions.

The mesoview of social life that comes from the new institutionalisms and the idea of social skill offer one approach to thinking about the agent-structure problem. I begin by considering how new institutional theories offer us a mesoview of the construction of local orders. I criticize the model of action in both sociological and rational choice versions of the new institutionalisms. Then, the model of social skill is elaborated. I offer propositions

⁵There is, of course, substantial disagreement among the various new institutional theories as well. Hall and Taylor (1996) argue that there are at least three varieties of new institutional theories, what they call sociological, historical institutionalist, and rational choice.

about how strategic actors behave differently depending on their positions in fields. I take up how these propositions directly affect the way we design research. Finally, I consider the empirical scope of this type of conceptualization by considering some examples from the existing literature that illustrate both the propositions and the research issues.

AGREEMENTS IN THE “NEW INSTITUTIONALISM”

Institutions are rules and shared meanings (implying that people are aware of them or that they can be consciously known) that define social relationships, help define who occupies what position in those relationships, and guide interaction by giving actors cognitive frames or sets of meanings to interpret the behavior of others. They are intersubjective (i.e., can be recognized by others); cognitive (i.e., depend on actors’ cognitive abilities); and, to some degree, require self-reflection by actors (for a good review of the various bases of institutions, see Scott 1996, chap. 3). Institutions can, of course, affect the situations of actors with or without their consent or understanding.

The central agreement across new institutional theories focuses on the concept of local social orders, which can be labeled “fields” (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), “organizational fields” (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), “sectors” (Meyer and Scott 1983), or “games” (Axelrod 1984). Fields refer to situations where organized groups of actors gather and frame their actions vis-à-vis one another. New institutional theories concern how fields of action come into existence, remain stable, and can be transformed. The production of rules in a social arena is about creating institutions.⁶ Institutionalization is the process by which rules move from abstractions to being constitutive of repeated patterns of interaction in fields (Jepperson 1991).⁷

Why do actors want to produce stable patterns of interaction? My position is that the process of institution building takes place in the context of powerful actors attempting to produce rules of interaction to stabilize their situation vis-à-vis other powerful and less powerful actors. Fields operate to help reproduce the power and privilege of incumbent groups and define the positions of challengers.⁸ While incumbent groups benefit the most from fields, challenger groups gain some stability by surviving, albeit at a lower level of resources.⁹ Institution building moments occur when groups of social actors confront one another in some set of social interactions that is contentious. These moments are inherently political and concern struggles over scarce resources by groups with differing amounts of power. Institution building moments proceed from crises of existing groups (or in the language of game theory, suboptimal arrangements) either in their attempts to produce stable interactions or when their current rules no longer serve their purposes.

There are a number of ways stable institutions can be built. Some groups come to dominate and impose a set of rules and relations on other groups. An outside force, such as a government (which itself is made up of fields), can enforce order and privilege itself or its most favored groups. Sometimes groups can produce a political coalition to bargain an

⁶States contain the fields in modern societies where general rules are hammered out and enforced. Fields outside of states become organized according to general rules in society and local rules that come from the interaction of groups in those fields.

⁷This is an important distinction. Laws can intentionally or unintentionally create new fields. Practices can be borrowed from other fields. Either of these preexisting institutions can be used by actors to frame interactions. This process of institutionalization is separate from and even somewhat orthogonal to the original production of the laws or practices. As actors interact, they may end up structuring a field that was unintended by the original institution builders.

⁸*Incumbents* refers to the dominant groups in a field while *challengers* refers to outsider groups. This language was used by Gamson (1975) to describe social movement organizations.

⁹My focus on power is not the only way to understand fields. Many versions of institutional theory focus on norms or interest as the determining factor in the structuring of fields. I choose to see power and meaning as the basis for fields.

outcome that provides rules for those groups, as game theory suggests. If a situation is sufficiently fluid and large numbers of groups begin to appear, it is possible for skilled social actors to help groups overcome their differences by proposing a new identity for the field. It is important to recognize that institution building may fail: Disparate interests and identities of groups can prevent stable institutions from emerging.

One of the great insights of the “new institutionalisms” is that the uneasy relationships between challenger and incumbent groups, the struggle between incumbent groups within and across fields to set up and maintain fields, and the intended and unintended spillovers caused by these struggles into adjacent fields are the source of much of the dynamics of modern society (Silber 1995). These struggles can be thought of as “games,” that is, social interactions oriented toward producing outcomes for each group. The possibility for new fields turns on actors using existing understandings to create new fields. Their impetus to do so is frequently based on their current situation either as challengers or incumbents. The possibility of changing a group’s collective situation can cause an invasion of a nearby field or the attempt to create a new one.

Constructing fields turns on using “culture” in three ways. First, preexisting societal practices, which include laws, definitions of relevant resources and rules, and the ability of actors to draw on organizing technologies (e.g., technologies that create various kinds of formal organizations) influence field construction. Second, the rules of each field are unique and are embedded in the power relations between groups; they function as “local knowledge” (Geertz 1983). Finally, actors have cognitive structures that utilize cultural frames, akin to what Bourdieu (1977) calls “habitus,” to analyze the meanings of the actions of others. These frames help actors decide “what is going on” and what courses of action are available to them as interactions proceed (Hays 1994). Once in place, fields and the social positions they define constrain actions and choice sets of actors. But this does not mean that the meanings and pecking orders of fields are uncontested. Indeed, action in stable fields is a game where actors are constituted with resources and the rules are set. In the interactions of more and less powerful, the game for the more powerful is to reproduce the order.

The theory of fields can be easily related to the agent-structure problem. By focusing on the construction of local social orders, the theory of fields causes analysts to focus their attention on how particular groups come to define a social terrain. Once in place, those definitions can be used by the dominant groups to reproduce their advantages on a period-to-period basis. In this way, the problem of the reproduction of existing social structures is easier to understand. Dominant groups, who can be identified in a particular arena of action, work to reproduce their position. Challenger groups try to take advantage of opportunities presented to them in interaction and by crises generated either within the internal logic of the field or by the actions of others in nearby fields. Stability, or in Giddens’s terms, reproduction, results when as the game is played, dominant groups reproduce their power.

The transformation of fields is possible when current arrangements start to break down, which is usually precipitated by some form of crisis. Crises can originate in the relations between groups in a particular field. More frequently, crises spill over from other fields or by the invasion of groups into a particular field. Fields form in the first place when more powerful groups are able to build a local social order. This can be imposed on other groups or negotiated with other powerful groups within or outside of the field.

The theory of fields has a huge analytic advantage over conventional sociological views that have done little theorizing about fields of social action. It offers a view as to how local orders are created, sustained, and transformed. It aids scholars in looking at particular orders to see what forces external to a particular field are at work. It also allows scholars

to consider the conditions of how and if groups within the field can in fact create new orders. By substituting a focus on the mesolevel of action, “new institutional” theories suggest a radical theory of society. Here, society consists of a potentially limitless number of fields that are constantly being created and destroyed. It opens up the possibility of theorizing more clearly about the links between fields. The idea of fields can be seen to inform scholarship in many empirical studies. In economics, fields are consistent with current views of producer markets in industrial organization (Gibbons 1992). In political sociology, policy domains are arenas of political action (Laumann and Knoke 1987). In the sociology of markets, producers define markets as fields (White 1981; Fligstein 1996). Finally, social movement theory with its focus on incumbents and challengers in political arenas often implies a field metaphor (Gamson 1975).

CRITIQUE

“New institutionalisms” disagree on the roles of actors, culture, and power. On one end, rational choice suggests that institutions are the outcome of individual rational actors interacting in gamelike situations where rules and resources are fixed (e.g., Axelrod 1984). At the other, sociological institutionalists focus instead on how social worlds are murky and require interpretation and on how actions may or may not have consequences (Meyer and Rowan 1977). To deal with this, actors use readily available scripts, often provided by governments or professionals, to structure their interactions (Jepperson 1991; DiMaggio and Powell 1983).

The critique of both the sociological and rational choice perspectives that I want to make suggests that neither opens up the problem of action and gives real people much leeway in creating their social worlds. A sociological theory of action needs to take rational actor views seriously in the sense that actors do pursue interests and aggressively engage in strategic interaction. But it must “sociologize” them by making actors collective and motivate their actions by having them orient their strategic behavior to groups.¹⁰

Sociological conceptions of action in the new institutionalism suggest that institutions provide collective meanings by which the structuring of the field occurs. Once in place, these meanings provide actors with scripts to interpret the actions of others and actions to reproduce their social groups. Most new institutional analyses in sociology have started with institutionalized environments. Once a set of beliefs or meanings is shared, this argument suggests that actors both consciously and unconsciously spread or reproduce it. Since it is often the case that actors can conceptualize no alternatives, they use the existing rationalized myths about their situations to structure and justify their actions (DiMaggio 1988).

Unfortunately, the theory of action in this model makes actors cultural “dopes” (Giddens 1984) by making them the passive recipients of institutions. Shared meanings become the causal force in the argument, and actors are the transmitters that diffuse those meanings to groups. Meyer and some of his students (Meyer et al. 1987) have taken this argument to its logical extreme by arguing that the social life in the West can be accounted for by the myth of individualism, which produces both social stability and change in fields.¹¹

¹⁰Here is where this paper decisively breaks with Nee and Brinton (1998).

¹¹I agree with Meyer that modernity is about the construction of the myth of individualism and the reconstitution of actors as I argued earlier in the paper. But I believe that this abstract idea is only part of the story, which can be used to justify a large number of actions and social arrangements. The larger and more important part of the story is the development of defining actors and organizing technologies and their subsequent use in state and economy building. Moreover, the purpose of institution building is for sets of actors to produce arenas of power where their positions are reproduced.

Most versions of new institutional theory in organizational sociology lack a theory of power as well, which is related to the problem of the theory of action. The question of why fields should exist and in whose interest they exist never is a focus of institutional theories. Field analysis and dynamics are rarely about power (Bourdieu's version of the theory [Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992] is an exception), about who is benefiting and who is not. The theory of action fosters this turn away from issues of power by making actors propagators of shared meanings and followers of scripts. If actors are agents of rationalized myths, often led by professionals, they are left without "interests," and one is left wondering, why do they act? By virtue of their lacking a real theory of interaction and power, most versions of the new institutionalism in sociology have no way to make sense of how institutions emerge in the first place (Powell and DiMaggio 1991; DiMaggio 1988; Scott 1996; Colignon 1997). Where do the opportunities for these new forms of action come from? Which actors can organize? Which meanings are available and which are unavailable and why? Why and how do actors who are supposed to only be able to follow scripts recognize these situations and create new institutions?

This also creates problems that run against current social theorizing, both in rational choice theory and in recent sociology. The new institutionalist model of action in sociology just does not engage the rational choice assertion that people have reasons for acting, that is, that they pursue some conception of their interests and interact vis-à-vis others to attain them. Theoretical discussions in sociology in the past 15 years imply that the production and reproduction of current sets of rules and distributions of resources depend on the skilled performances of actors who use their social power and knowledgeability to act for themselves and against others (Giddens 1984; Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Sewell 1992). Actors, under both stable and unstable institutional conditions, are not just captured by shared meanings in their fields, understood either as scripts as they might be interpreted by professionals or government bureaucrats. Instead, they operate with a certain amount of social skill to reproduce or contest systems of power and privilege. They do so as active members of a field whose lives are wrapped up in and dependent on fields.

Rational choice theories in economics and political science are strong at pointing out how actors come together, what their motives are, and how and why they produce institutions. But rational choice and game theory models have problematic theories of power and action as well. Because actors are conceptualized as individuals, even when they represent collectivities, the nature of social arenas and the role of actors in producing, maintaining, and having positions in those arenas, are undertheorized. States, political processes in general, and power are considered rules and resources. These form background under which rational actors play out their games.

The basic problem is that these theories miss the point that actors (decision makers, managers, leaders, or elites) have many constituencies to balance off and they must continuously be aware that they have to produce arrangements to induce cooperation with both their allies and opponents.¹² So, for example, actors in challenger groups have to keep their groups together and continue to motivate them to cooperate. Rational actor models, by treating rules and resources as exogenous and actors as individuals with fixed preferences, miss the creativity and skill required for individuals, as representatives of collectivities, to operate politically vis-à-vis other actors to produce, reproduce, and transform institutional arrangements.

Non-rational choice oriented political scientists and sociologists are frequently frustrated by the fact that rational choice theorists are uninterested in the details of the histor-

¹²There is a rational choice literature about two-level games where individual actors play off different constituencies. But this literature still starts with individual actors pursuing individual self-interest.

ical social processes by which arrangements are made. If social life is fundamentally socially constructed, then identities, interests, and actions are likely to be constructed as process emerges (Steinmo et al. 1992: chap. 1). This means that social process is inherently important in the constitution of institutions. But this lack of interest in social process in rational choice theory stems precisely from its model of action. Once the existing rules and resources are known and actors' interests are fixed, the ability to construct institutions can be deduced from the rules of the game. Indeed, the game theory model collapses if this is not the case (Tsebelis 1990). The real negotiation within groups and across them and its effects on the constitution of interests are ruled out a priori as possibly being consequential for the outcome.

My critiques imply the need for an alternative conception of action. Here, actors matter because some have to help groups decide what their interests and identities are and engage in negotiations across groups. This more sociological view suggests that to induce cooperation to build institutions, social actors must have the requisite ability, what I call social skill. It is the social skill of critical actors that allows groups to work; it is their ability to induce cooperation among actors by defining collective interests and identities that allows for the emergence and reproduction of institutions.

SOCIAL SKILL AS MICROFOUNDATION

My goal in this section is to characterize a more sociological view of what people in organizations and groups do. I do not consider this a theory. Instead, it is a set of conceptual understandings that helps clarify from a sociological point of view how to make sense of what actors are doing in groups and organizations. Social skill can be defined as the ability to induce cooperation among others. Skilled social actors empathetically relate to the situations of other people and, in doing so, are able to provide those people with reasons to cooperate (Mead 1934; Goffman 1959, 1974). Skilled social actors must understand how the sets of actors in their group view their multiple conceptions of interest and identity and how those in external groups do as well. They use this understanding in particular situations to provide an interpretation of the situation and frame courses of action that appeal to existing interests and identities.¹³

This concept of social skill originates in symbolic interaction (Mead 1934; Goffman 1959, 1974; Joas 1996). Actors' conceptions of themselves are highly shaped by their interactions with others. When interacting, actors try to create a positive sense of self by engaging in producing meaning for themselves and others. Identities refer to sets of meanings that actors have that define who they are and what they want in a particular situation. Actors in dominating positions who are efficacious and successful may have high self-esteem.¹⁴ Actors in dominated positions may be stigmatized and are forced to engage in coping strategies to contest their stigmatization (Goffman 1963). As Giddens has noted, all members of society are capable of skilled social performances (1984). People learn how to interact with others, cooperate, and gain a sense of identity in the process of socialization.

Mead (1934) argues that some social actors are better than others at inducing cooperation. This is because they are able to create a positive sense of self that resonates with

¹³This point of view does not just turn the "other's" perspective into whatever one thinks it is (a "spin") but is a serious attempt to empathetically make sense of what another thinks.

¹⁴Low self-esteem might be associated with effective actors as well. People could be driven to action to feel better about themselves and feel meaningful attachments to groups. But, if they have sufficiently low self-esteem, they will interpret "success" as not providing evidence that they are worthy. This could bring them to continue to engage in aggressive "meaning" making projects, where they would always fail to find meaning and produce a positive identity for themselves.

others. I call these actors more socially skilled. Skilled social actors produce meaning for others, because by doing so, they produce meaning for themselves. Their sense of efficacy comes not from some narrow conception of self-interest (although skilled actors tend to benefit materially from their skill) but from the act of inducing cooperation and helping others attain ends. They will do whatever it takes to induce cooperation, and if one path is closed off, they will choose another. This means that skilled social actors are neither narrowly self-interested nor do they have fixed goals. They do not have individual fixed interests but instead focus on the evolving collective ends. They keep their goals somewhat open ended, and they are prepared to take what the system will give. This makes skilled strategic actors behave more or less with the opposite motivations of rational actors who are narrowly pursuing their interests and goals in some contest with others.

Having more social skill implies that some actors are better at attaining cooperation than others because some people will be better at making sense of a particular situation and will produce shared meaning for others and bring about cooperation (Mead 1934). All human beings have to be somewhat socially skilled to survive. We all know people who are more socially skilled than others; that is, they have the ability to get others to cooperate. They appear in universities, politics, and the world of business. Sometimes they are leaders or managers in that they hold formal positions of power, but this does not mean that all “managers” are highly socially skilled. The assertion here is only that some people are more capable at inducing cooperation than others.¹⁵

Now the idea that some people are more effective than other people at inducing cooperation in others is abstract. There are two problems that one must solve to make the idea empirically useful. First, one needs to specify what sort of tactics real socially skilled actors use to induce cooperation. This will allow empirically oriented scholars to recognize who socially skilled actors are and to look for various tactics they might use to get cooperation. Then, one needs to connect the use of these tactics more closely to where actors stand in fields.¹⁶ The theory of social skill informs the way that we study the formation, stability, and transformation of new fields.

The literature has identified a number of important tactics that socially skilled actors use (Padgett and Ansell 1992; Bourdieu 1977; White 1994; Coleman 1988; Leifer 1988; Nee and Ingram 1997; DiMaggio 1988; Fligstein 1997; Goffman 1959, 1974). The basic problem for skilled social actors is to frame “stories” that help induce cooperation from people in their group that appeal to their identity and interests, while at the same time using those same stories to frame actions against various opponents. This is the general problem of framing that Goffman identifies (1974).

One of the most important sources for framing is the direct authority to tell someone what to do. Weber (1978) long ago noted that authority was the probability that a direct command was obeyed based on the position of legitimacy of the person giving the command. By holding a position in a particular social group, actors will find it easier to attain cooperation with others. But even if one has a formal position in a group, one must still

¹⁵In the recent literature on the origins and purposes of the human mind, it has been noted that much of brain evolution in primates and humans appears to be related to their high degree of sociability (Leakey 1994, chap. 8; Byrne and Whitman 1988; Humphrey 1993; Jerison 1991). Mind and self-awareness function, in this point of view, to help primates keep track of and participate in social life. There is evidence that a “self” exists in nonhuman primates (Byrne and Whitman 1988). Field evidence suggests that a conception of self can be deduced from the ability of primates to form alliances and networks, cooperate, and engage in acts of deceit. In humans, both language and self are more highly developed. Social skill is one quality all people must have for social life to proceed. Our ability to get the things we need, indeed, to conceptualize them in the first place, and to engage others in our collective pursuit of them are at the core of social life.

¹⁶Not all skilled social actors are either leaders or in dominant organizations. Since all social actors have social skill, it follows that people who are in less powerful positions will use their social skill to resist their subjugation, engage in acts of subterfuge, and try to work against the most difficult aspects of their situations.

induce cooperation in subordinates (Barnard 1938). This means that there has to be a repertoire of other tactics skilled actors use to structure interactions with those within and across groups.

Agenda setting is the ability to set the parameters of the discussion for others (Kingdon 1984; Lukes 1974). If a skilled actor can get others to accept what the terms of discussion are, the negotiation is half won. Agenda setting is usually attained by behind the scene action to convince multiple actors and groups that a particular agenda is in their interests. When the groups meet, the agenda is set, the terms of discussion are set, and the identity and interests of actors are framed. This requires actors to come to understand their interests within certain bounds and closes off some courses of action.

Skilled actors understand the ambiguities and certainties of the field and work off them. They have a sense of what is possible and impossible. If the situation provides opportunities that are unplanned but might result in some gain, the skilled actor will grab them, even if the actor is not certain as to the usefulness or the gain. This is a pragmatic approach to attaining cooperation that is akin to what Levi-Strauss calls bricolage (1966). It follows that the skilled actor will take what the system will give at any moment, even if it is not exactly what the actor or others might ideally want.

Indeed, skilled social actors end up often convincing others that what they can get is what they want. To do this, skilled actors have to convince others who do not necessarily share interests that what will occur is consistent with their identity and interest. This can be done by selling groups on some overriding values that all accept or by convincing them that what will happen will serve their narrow interest, at least in some way. Since interests and preferences can be formed as fields form, it is then necessary to link broader frames to groups' existing conceptions of interest.

The skilled social actor will engage in brokering more than blustering (Gould 1993). This works in two ways. First, strategic actors present themselves as neutral in a situation and as just trying to mediate between two groups. Second, strategic actors present themselves as more active in selling the group collective identity and appealing to others to find a way to get people to go along. Their solution is sold either to help keep the peace or to make sure that the whole field does not collapse. To be brokers, skilled actors have to convince others that they are not narrowly self-interested and that others will gain personally from finding a negotiated solution.

A common bargaining tactic for skilled actors is to press for more than they are willing to accept, either from recalcitrant group members or those on the outside. Since situations are frequently ambiguous, one can never tell how far others are willing to go. This tactic must be used judiciously: If one asks too much then one risks alienating the other party, and this is where strategic skill comes into play.

Since the goal of skilled action is to attain cooperation with others, socially skilled actors appear hard to read and without values oriented toward personal gain (this is what Padgett and Ansell [1992] and Leifer [1988] have called robust action). If others think that some actors want something and that it is narrowly for selfish purposes, they can easily frame actions to thwart those actors. On the other hand, if one appears open to another's needs and not wedded to any course of action, others will find the situation more attractive for negotiation and be more willing to allow brokering or helping to forge a collective identity.

One main problem for socially skilled actors is to find a way to join actors or groups with widely different preferences and help reorder those preferences. This aggregation process, once it gets going, can take on a life of its own. Once a number of actors come on board, then others will follow. The trick is to bring enough on board and keep a bandwagon going that will keep others coming. This is most frequently done by trying to create a

common collective identity (Ansell 1998). Such an identity allows groups to attach their divergent senses of their interest to a common project.

Skilled actors will often have lots of balls in the air. It is the case that while most things will fail, all one needs is a few victories to convince others to come along. After the fact, other actors or groups will only remember the successes, and one must try many options in the hope that some will work. Part of this illusion of action is to try to convince others that their vision contains more reality than they might think. If they can convince others that they have more power or control or ability to get others to go along, then once something gets set in motion, everyone will fall in line.

Another ploy of strategic actors is getting others to believe that others are in control. One of the best skilled action ploys is setting up situations where other actors take the lead and act on what they think was their idea. By getting actors who are relatively isolated to cooperate and convincing them that their cooperation was their idea, the strategic actors get others to cooperate without appearing Machiavellian.

Padgett and Ansell (1992) have argued that a good way to attain cooperation with disparate groups is to make alliances with people with few other choices or to isolate particularly difficult outliers. The preferable action is to include as many outliers as possible in the field and gain agreement on a collective identity. One good way to do this is to be the node at the network for these outliers. Then, the skilled actor is the source of information and coalition building. Occasionally, certain actors or groups are so disruptive that the best tactic is isolation. If they are upset and even if there are a number of upset but isolated actors, they generally remain disorganized. Since these types of actors are usually incapable of strategic action themselves, they remain isolates.

SOCIAL SKILL AND THE ANALYSIS OF FIELDS

Social skill functions as a microfoundation for understanding what actors are doing in fields. It is the combination of preexisting rules, resources, and the social skills of actors that works to produce fields in the first place, make them stable on a period-to-period basis, and produce transformation. Skilled social actors tailor their actions depending on the current organization of the field, their place in that field, and the current moves by skilled actors in other groups in the field. Social process matters, because even in stable fields, skilled social actors need to manipulate rules and resources to aid the reproduction of local orders. In the next section, I describe what we would expect skilled social actors to be doing under different structural conditions of stable rules and different places in the system of power in a field. I provide some propositions to describe the conceptual link between skilled social actors, their resources in the field, and the organization of the field. These are not meant to be causal propositions but rather are conceptual tools to aid empirical analysis.

THE EMERGENCE OF FIELDS AND SOCIAL SKILL

The emergence of new fields occurs when a significant number of members of different groups see new opportunities. The crisis of new fields reflects the fact that stable rules of interaction have not emerged and groups are threatened with extinction. Skilled social actors will orient their actions to stabilizing their group internally and stabilizing their group's relation to other groups. It is important to note that in these situations, skilled social actors may fail. Skilled actors may be unable to build political coalitions or may be members of groups that are strong enough to enforce a local social order. All of the social

skill in the world may fail to produce order where no one has enough claim on resources and there is no possibility to build common frames.

*PROPOSITION 1: Skilled social actors are pivotal for new fields to emerge. They must find a way to translate existing rules and resources into producing local orders by convincing their supporters to cooperate and finding means of accommodation with other groups.*¹⁷

Order can be produced in two ways. The largest and most powerful groups can come to impose an order in their own image. In this situation, preexisting rules and resources brought to the emerging field by groups may suffice to impose an order in the new field. This requires skilled strategic actors to use existing resources and rules, often based on power from other fields, to set up a new order. It is possible for a single group to do this if it is strong enough. But frequently, there is more than one strong group. Then, the most powerful groups must find a way to cooperate to impose such an order. Skilled strategic actors can negotiate or signal to their principal competitors their intentions and may collectively find a way to impose an order under their power. In this situation, the superior resources of a small number of groups win the day. This situation requires skilled social action because groups have to be convinced that no order is worse than one where they may be disadvantaged.

PROPOSITION 2: Skilled social actors can help produce entirely new cultural frames for fields. They do so by building compromise identities that bring many groups along. In this process, every group's identities and interests can be transformed.

The second way of producing order involves inspired skilled actors, what DiMaggio (1988) calls institutional entrepreneurs, who invent new cultural conceptions to help fabricate entirely "new" institutions. The trick is to come up with political coalitions under a new banner that unites disparate groups. The new cultural conceptions build on materials available to strategic actors that provide identities for collective actors that resonate with their collective conceptions of selves. These new cultural conceptions can reorganize actors' identities and interests. By deciding who and how to be, groups accept a position in the order that may redefine who they are and what they want. It is also the case that these situations frequently are political bandwagons where cultural conceptions bring together disparate groups.

This makes it possible for new, unimaginable coalitions to emerge under new cultural frames (for an example, see Ansell 1998).¹⁸ This process often appears in social movements in that organizations' interests, identities, and preferences emerge out of interaction. Here, institutional entrepreneurs are able to engage many groups in a meaning making project that can bring stability to the field.

SKILL AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

Social skill provides useful insight into the problem of social reproduction. Skilled social actors in stable fields either are trying to reproduce their dominance or are trying to find openings to contest the dominance of others. In dominant groups, skilled social actors

¹⁷These propositions are not causal statements about whether or not skilled social actors will make a difference in the organization of their field. Instead, they summarize expectations about the behavior of skilled social actors under different structural conditions.

¹⁸All rational choice theories in economic and political science have resisted this idea so far. I think this reflects two concerns. First, it is difficult to see how the emergence of an entrepreneur can be predicted, and if the point of theorizing is to make predictions, then entrepreneurs fall outside the context of theory. Second, game theory has relatively fixed parameters, and it is difficult to imagine how one could develop a "game" where the whole point was that the game was transformed.

must ensure cooperation with their members inside their groups and across dominant groups. As long as they continue to deliver valued rewards for group members, skilled social actors are likely to maintain their power.

PROPOSITION 3: Skilled social actors in incumbent groups in stable fields will use existing rules and resources to reproduce their power.

Existing fields give incumbent actors a better chance of reproducing their advantage precisely because they imply an unequal distribution of rules and resources. If skilled strategic actors are attracted to positions of power in incumbent groups, their energy will be put toward playing the “game.” Skilled social actors frame their moves vis-à-vis others with the end of enhancing or maintaining their group’s position in the field.

The relations between dominant groups are complex. On a period-to-period basis, one can expect that the skilled actors who run dominant groups will try to better their positions vis-à-vis their principal challengers. This will also play well with other members of the group, who will see their leaders as trying to get an edge in their relations with others. Thus, skilled actors in dominant groups will constantly be pushing the limits of current rules that produce order. Skilled strategic actors have to be careful not to undermine the existing order by too direct confrontation with the other principal dominant groups. This interaction can create a permanent tension within a field and the sense that the field is always in some form of crisis.

PROPOSITION 4: Skilled social actors in challenger groups will try to build niches and take what the system will give to avoid dominant groups in stable fields to keep their group together and their hopes of challenging alive.

Skilled strategic actors in dominated groups face difficult problems in stable times. They are likely to be the groups most disadvantaged by the skilled strategic actions of dominant groups and their strategic actors. After all, their position is weakest, and if dominant groups want to gain some advantage, they may choose to confront not other dominant groups but the dominated. Still, here skilled strategic actors must keep their group together. They must find an identity for their group that will keep people on board. Often, this is an identity of opposition and “niche.” Skilled strategic actors in dominated groups tend to take what the system gives.

PROPOSITION 5: In fields where there is little internal turbulence or external threat, it is possible that social skill matters less for the reproduction of groups.

It is possible in stable fields that actors may not matter as much for the reproduction of the field. After all, dominating groups have resources and rules on their side, and the dominated have fewer opportunities. This is particularly true where there are few dominant groups, where there are slack resources in the field, or where success and failure are difficult to evaluate (e.g., schools or police departments). Here, the legitimacy of organizations in the sense of their right to exist may rarely be challenged (Meyer et al. 1981), and even where there is crisis, the organizations do not go out of business. It is also the case that these kinds of fields attain a “taken for granted” status by participants and potential challengers.

SOCIAL SKILL AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF FIELDS

Existing fields can go into crisis as a result of changes that occur outside of fields, particularly in fields that a given field is dependent upon. Thus, a downturn in a field’s major market or supplier, or in the case of governments, war or economic crisis, will have con-

sequences for a particular local order. Crises can frequently be caused by the intentional or unintentional actions of governments or the invasion of a field by outsiders. One can identify a real crisis in an existing field as a situation where the major groups are having difficulty reproducing their privilege as the rules that have governed interaction are no longer working.

PROPOSITION 6: Skilled actors of dominant groups generally defend the status quo even in a crisis.

Skilled strategic actors in dominant groups will begin in a crisis situation by trying to defend the status quo. This is for two reasons. First, it is difficult to distinguish a crisis that threatens the legitimacy of the whole field from a “normal” playing out of the “game.” Skilled strategic actors respond to the actions of others in the field, either challengers or incumbents, by engaging in actions that have always worked to their advantage. Second, since these actions have always reinforced the position of the dominant groups, skilled actors will continue to use them. Therefore, skilled actors will manipulate the same symbols, identities, and tactics that have always proved successful in the past.

If these fail over time, and large dominant groups begin to fail to reproduce themselves, the possibilities for new forms of strategic action open up. Challengers may find an opening (what social movement theories [Tarrow 1998] call a “political opportunity”) to force changes on the existing order. They may ally themselves with other dominant groups, invaders from other fields, or the government to help reconstitute a given field. Occasionally, incumbents might defect to the side of challengers and help produce change in the field.

PROPOSITION 7: New frames will come from skilled actors in either invader or challenger groups. They will attempt to create new rules and a new order and therefore either will build a new political coalition based on interest or create a new cultural frame that reorganizes interests and identities.

The social fluidity of this situation suggests that new bargains are possible. This makes the situation akin to what occurs in the moment of emergence. It means that the largest groups might still be able to impose an order, albeit one that is based on different principles. But new institutions are most likely to be undertaken by challenger or invader groups because they are the ones who are not committed to the old order. Those defending the status quo can accept a new order and adopt some new position in that order. But this will require their leaders to change their identity and interests to justify their new position.

THE SCOPE OF INSTITUTIONAL THEORIES

The discussion of social skill and the construction of fields has so far remained abstract. The theory of social skill and fields is applicable to a range of sociological phenomena that share common characteristics. It is possible, therefore, to consider the empirical scope of the ideas proposed in this paper. The subfields in sociology that are best analyzed from this perspective contain organized groups who have a reason to set up rules for a particular social space. These groups and their leaders have some collective identity, some conception of interest, and a vision that will lead them toward organizing their fields. After considering which subfields seem most relevant to these kinds of analyses, I consider some empirical cases from these disparate subfields. The purpose of the cases is to illustrate how some of the ideas I have developed already inform scholarship in these subfields. This implies that there is more possibility of creating a more general institutional theory than most scholars who study these problems would probably anticipate.

The subfields in sociology where self-conscious actors strive to organize groups toward collective ends include organized politics; social movements, where the goals are to transform existing political and social fields; the economy, where firms and governments create markets; and the nonprofit sector of capitalist economies, where organized groups produce fields oriented toward organizing particular sectors of society. All of these arenas of action contain actors who want to construct institutions to guide their interactions so that they might forward their collective identities and interests. They want to create new social spaces where their groups can dominate or prosper. In all of these empirical terrains, we observe formal organizations, law, and informal practices to guide interaction. Now, of course, the goals of actors are very different across states, markets, the nonprofit sectors, and social movements. But in all of these arenas, my assertion is that actors are striving to attain cooperation within their groups and to stabilize interactions across groups.

My argument about the generality of the ideas of fields and social skill is intended to be quite provocative. While many scholars have suspected that there ought to be a more general view of institutions in sociology, few have tried to push forward the scope of phenomena to which such conceptual elements apply (for an attempt, see Powell 1991). Because of space limitations, I limit myself to cases where institutional entrepreneurs are pivotal to either the formation of a field or the transformation of an existing field. I discuss the crisis or opportunity that precipitated the field building or field transformation moment. Then I consider “who” the entrepreneurs were, how they built a political coalition around their new “identity” for the field, and how it became institutionalized. The examples illustrate the general propositions discussed earlier. I select examples from political sociology, social movements, economic sociology, and the study of nonprofits.

“Normal” politics is about entrenched groups using political systems to maintain their dominance of fields. Historical institutionalism is one approach to studying states that is consistent with both the theory of fields and skilled actors (Evans et al. 1985; Steinmo et al. 1992). In Evans et al., states are characterized as having different capacities. Capacities are defined as the ability to organize or intervene in a sector of society. For historical institutionalists, states develop traditions of forms of intervention or regulation (Steinmo et al. 1992; Dobbin 1994). The possibility for policy change requires historical institutionalists to consider the nature of the current crisis, what the possible ideas were to resolve the crisis, who were the challengers and incumbents, and how the ideas were to be used by policy entrepreneurs to bring challengers together and change policies (Hall 1992; Kingdon 1984).

Weir’s case study (1992) of Keynesian fiscal stimulation during the New Deal illustrates these points. The depression of the 1930s created an obvious political crisis for the federal government. In essence, the old ideas for governing the economy had failed and were discredited. There were two problems that stood in the way of transforming the field of making economic policy. First, there were entrenched and powerful groups represented by Republicans and conservative Democrats who were against change. Second, what was the alternative? Roosevelt was, of course, a political entrepreneur. One of the things he did to shake up government was to bring in people without formal positions or authority and ask them to study problems and propose fresh solutions (Weir 1992:195–96). He was prepared to try lots of solutions to the problems of the depression in his search to find a way out. One of the entrepreneurs he empowered was Marvin Eccles, named to head the Federal Reserve Board. Eccles recruited people who had new ideas about how to get the economy going. In particular, he brought in staff who were in favor of developing Keynesian deficit spending plans.

These ideas, however, needed a political base to become policy. The Republicans still controlled Congress, and as the incumbents, they favored balancing the government’s

budget and reining in the money supply. The ideas of Keynesian intervention in the economy required a challenger group to take up the banner. Over time, more and more actors in Roosevelt's administration, the labor movement, and the farmers' movement came to favor more government intervention to end the depression. Eccles spearheaded this effort by spreading the gospel of Keynesianism. Roosevelt remained skeptical about the value of deficit spending (Weir 1992:197). What finally changed his mind was that these ideas brought a strong political coalition into the Democratic Party. It provided a set of policies to unify voters with very different sets of interests. In the 1934 and 1936 elections, the Democratic Party, on the platform of using government intervention to bring the country out of the depression, took over Congress. At this point, Keynesianism moved from the outskirts of federal policy to its center, where it formed the central political project of the Democratic Party's electoral coalition.

The main question in social movements theories is the conditions under which groups are successful in forming, expressing grievances, working against powerful groups, and reorganizing society (Gamson 1975; Tarrow 1998:4). Extralegal, noninstitutional, or social movement politics is about trying to open new fields and creating new political capacity for challenger groups.¹⁹ Their ability to succeed is a function of a crisis or political opportunity, the preexistence of groups with resources who can take advantage of the opportunity, and the production of a collective identity by which disparate groups can coalesce (Tarrow 1998:6–7). This, of course, is a version of the general field dynamics presented here. Challengers are successful in a crisis (political opportunity) when they are able to mobilize resources and can produce a political identity to bring groups together.

The field of race relations in the United States was in flux by the 1950s. The decline of the cotton agricultural system and the move of Blacks to cities in the South presented Blacks with a political opportunity to change their situation. Aldon Morris's book (1984) mostly focuses on the role of various groups in the eventual mobilizations that took place. Morris emphasizes how the preexisting network of church groups provided both an organizational base for mobilization and also young people who could be recruited for civil rights organizations. But his study also focuses on who the leaders of this movement were and what identities they used to gain adherents to their perspective. One of the key questions for the Civil Rights movement was to figure out how to mobilize people. There were a number of possible framings for this, but the one that eventually won out was the philosophy of nonviolent protest. Morris's book shows how people in and around churches (including Clara Luper and Revs. James Lawson and Kelly Smith, among others, and of course, eventually, Rev. Martin Luther King) developed the philosophy of nonviolent protest. This framing was consistent with general Christian values and produced a positive identity for participants. It was specific leaders who developed this idea and disseminated it to others. These leaders and the framing of identities for mobilization were pivotal to the ultimate success of the movement.

Economic markets that exist have been characterized as fields and studied extensively in the organizational literature (Hamilton and Biggart 1988; White 1981; Fligstein 1996; Hannan and Freeman 1984; Biggart and Guillen 1999). The case of institutional change I wish to use comes from Alfred Chandler, the business historian. In his book *Strategy and Structure* (1962), Chandler is interested in the link between what managers want corporations to do (strategy) and how they manage to do it (structure). His account of the rise of the multidivisional form (MDF) is one of the classic works in organizational theory. The field here was the largest corporations in the U.S. economy circa 1920. The crisis that

¹⁹Of course, not all social movement politics is reformist in orientation. Social movement politics can be oriented toward destruction of the whole system.

motivated managers to shift the organization of corporate structure in the 1920s was the fact that they were unable to control their firms as their firms became more and more diversified in their products (1962:6–7).

The institutional entrepreneur who first analyzed this problem was Alfred Sloan, who became president of General Motors in 1922. Sloan realized that the five product divisions of General Motors were highly diversified and their leaders were suspicious of one another. As president, he found it difficult to get them to cooperate. The division presidents, who were incumbents, were fearful of coordinating their activities because they did not want to be blamed for performance failures that they did not control. In Sloan's own words (1957), this created a political problem whereby managers would not cooperate with each other by sharing information and technology or engaging in fair transfer pricing. Sloan's solution to the problem was the MDF. The MDF gave operational control over the divisions to the managers of each unit of the firm. They became responsible for the divisions' performance, which was something that they all sought. The MDF became the frame by which Sloan was able to forge a new political compromise among his division heads. They were then free to reorganize each division into a freestanding operation with production, financial, and marketing departments. However, the price they paid for this was a centralization of financial controls under Sloan that would be used to evaluate the performance of the divisions. The MDF allowed corporations to grow indefinitely in size. By dividing units into product divisions, control could be decentralized and yet divisions monitored simultaneously. Managers in other firms became aware of this solution to the problem of large size either because they came to share Sloan's analysis of the problem or saw their principal competitors adopt it. It came to be the standard organizational form that dominated the field of the largest corporations (Fligstein 1985).

The nonprofit sector can be usefully analyzed from the perspective of fields (Powell 1991). Here, organizations have to find funding (i.e., resources) and figure out what they are going to do (i.e., framing) (DiMaggio 1982, 1988). These problems are particularly acute at the founding of new fields of endeavor. There is a whole literature that links the philanthropic activities of various groups in society to the ultimate shape of what those organizations do. The problem is that it is not always obvious what such organizations should do. This makes the problem of framing, particularly at the beginning of new fields, fundamental.

DiMaggio has analyzed the situation of how the symphony and art museum were founded in Boston in the late nineteenth century. In the case of art museums, the questions were, what was to be shown, and who was the audience? The problem of art raises the issue of high versus low culture. DiMaggio argued that the mainly upper class people who supported art institutions were interested in making a distinction between the two but that they needed some way to make and enforce such criteria. The idea of "high art" needed to be framed so that one could tell what did and did not count under this rubric. So, for instance, initially, museums saw themselves as serving an education function to the masses, and they often presented reproductions, not original art (DiMaggio 1982:304).

The view that won out was represented by people who DiMaggio calls the "aesthetes." Their perspective was that art was about beauty and the museum should be a temple for the appreciation of art, not a vehicle for the education of the masses. The policy prescription here was to collect and show only original art of the highest quality. The proponents of this perspective were often academics (professionals). The entrepreneur who led this movement in the museum was Edward Robinson, a Harvard art historian. DiMaggio ends up arguing that this elitism appealed to the people who were paying for the museum, that is, wealthy people in Boston. This identity conferred on them the status of being "high culture" and reinforced their view of themselves as special and privileged (DiMaggio 1982:

317–19). This view of art museums came to organize the field of art museums in the United States in the 1920s. It united the interests of professionals, who wanted to maintain their high cultural status, with those of donors, who came to see themselves as enlightened.

I have selected cases where scholars have provided enough available evidence to ascertain whether or not there were crises in a particular field, considered the social definition of the crisis and its possible solutions, and presented the role of institutional entrepreneurs in framing new actions for groups that came to organize or reorganize fields. That the authors themselves felt compelled to produce evidence on all these points suggests that in their studies, they saw all of these social processes at work. These underlying similarities are not generated by research design or common theoretical perspectives. On the contrary, these authors are only trying to understand their empirical cases. My assertion is that field dynamics are central to all of these empirical stories. Actors had to produce ideas and identities, and groups had to be mobilized to accept and embrace those identities. Once in place, these identities then informed subsequent interactions and defined the structure of the field.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE THEORY FOR EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The microfoundations of social skill cause empirical researchers to focus their attention on groups who form a field, the rules and resources available to skilled actors and their groups, the relations between fields, and the interpretation of relations within and across fields by skilled strategic actors within groups. Studying those actors becomes important to making sense of new institutional projects and their potential for success or failure. Resources and rules provide powerful actors with tools to control their group's destinies. But the skillful use of those resources and, where important, the ability to build broad political coalitions and new cultural frames that reorganize identities and interests means that actors are always important as well.

When one is looking at the emergence or transformation of an existing field, the theory of fields implies that one must identify who the main collective actors are, what their resources are, and what rules guide the possibility for action. Social skill implies that in fluid situations some actors will try to put together alternative institutional projects to organize the field. The goal of the analyst must be to identify the main possible projects and who their proponents are. Normally, there are only a small number of possible models for designing institutions in a particular field. In DiMaggio's case, for example, the two main models were one whereby museums existed to educate the public and the other whereby museums existed to show off beautiful objects. By tracing how the proponents of these possible institutional orders framed their projects, modified them to make them more attractive to others, and basically built political bandwagons around them, the analyst can attempt to see how groups of institutional entrepreneurs produce new orders.

The analyst can also become sensitive to why some frames win and others lose. It might be the simple case where the groups who align themselves around a particular frame are sufficiently powerful that they are able to push that frame on all of the other groups in the field. In other words, preexisting rules and resources might be enough to explain which frame conquers. On the other hand, frames can be blocked, and no frame may emerge as a way to organize a field. In this case, skilled actors were not able to overcome potential veto points in the process. Finally, skilled strategic actors may be able to produce a frame that actually reorganizes group interests by finding ways to create agreements by getting groups to change their conception of their interest.

There are a number of obvious methodological implications of the theory of fields and the idea of social skill. Analysts must spend time looking for entrepreneurs and examining

their tactics. How do they spread their ideas, build political coalitions, persuade others, and create new identities? Moreover, can we observe them reorienting their framing? And to whom are they appealing by taking what the system gives, figuring out how to get others to cooperate, and figuring out who to cooperate with? I note that there are frequently multiple entrepreneurs in any field. A project may have many proponents. The people who ultimately are successful in bringing the field together may not be the ones who start it.

Scholars often find themselves observing stable institutions as they are confronted by new challenges, either by crises from outside or within the field. How do we study the response of strategic actors in incumbent organizations? I argue that scholars must understand who the players are in a field, how it works, and what the tools available to skilled strategic actors are to reinforce the status quo. Actors will use the tools that hold the status quo in place in a crisis. They will first deny that there is a crisis. If this fails, they will undertake actions designed to reinforce their power in the field. Finally, they will undertake piecemeal reforms or small changes that will leave the underlying power distribution in the field intact while trying to co-opt the opposition or challenger groups.

CONCLUSION

The idea of social skill offers us a way to begin to study how actors sometimes can transform social structures but most of the time fail to do so. It allows us to make sense of how resources and rules, once in place, tend to favor the biggest and most organized groups. The theory of fields helps us see that once in place, generally, dominant organizational arrangements reproduce themselves on a period-to-period basis. They do so because of a distribution of rules and resources toward dominant groups and the ability of skilled actors to use these to reproduce their power.

The reproduction of the power of groups is not always certain. There are always challengers to any given group's social power. Moreover, the basis of a group's power, its claim over resources and rules, can be undermined by periodic social crises. These crises can have their origin from outside the field or within the field. As these crises intensify, the role of skilled social actors in the reproduction of a given set of social power increases. Similarly, in more fluid social conditions, either in a serious crisis or in the emergence of a field in the first place, skilled social actors play even more visible roles. They design alternative frames for the organization of the field, propagate those frames, and convince other actors to cooperate toward newly defined identities and interests. As the new frames spread and gain proponents from around the field, the structure of the field emerges and the frame becomes institutionalized to form the structure of the field.

I have argued that the sociological ideas of fields and social skill offer many attractive features. They reintroduce actors in a strong way into sociological discussions about politics, the state, and the economy. They offer roles for both actors and structures in making sense of any field building episode. They provide conceptual ideas about how to study such episodes and make sense of what skilled actors and the groups they lead are doing. It is my belief that much of our best scholarly work on social processes in these social arenas has explicitly or implicitly realized how actors and structures are implicated in institution building moments. Much theoretical work remains to be done. This paper provides an opening toward a more general sociological theory of actors and institutions. Such a theory will require the cooperation of both empirically oriented scholars who have studied the social world in various contexts and those who are more theoretically oriented. Indeed, without this cooperation we will be unable to bridge the gap between theory and research.

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