

From mapping to scaling fields: A narrative about a theory and methodology development process

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This paper is basically about the ongoing interactions of two persons, situated in the same office, regarding the question of how to map the actual dynamics of what in a neo-institutional perspective is designated as organisational fields. In their efforts, both persons also interacted directly or indirectly with a whole range of other persons as, for instance, the authors of various journal articles and seminar students of the bachelor degree in social and educational sciences at the University of Luxembourg. The paper is written in a narrative style, as it retraces the train of thought and action leading to a first formulation of what they have, to put it in the terms of Wagner (1981), invented and covenanted as being an hermeneutics of scaling¹. This process might, retrospectively, be best described as a process of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction. In this sense, the present paper has to be seen as a temporary materialisation of ideas being exchanged in an ongoing interaction process taking on a certain pattern which, on the long run, eventually materialises in a more or less formalised network.

1. Construction: Visualising entities, mapping organisational fields

The first moment of “construction” was deeply rooted in neo-institutional thinking, not least because of our initial motivation residing in the development of an interview-based, comprehensive field mapping methodology aiming at informing various stakeholders of the so-called social service sector about ongoing dynamics related, amongst others, to conflicting rationalities or logics of thinking and action.

¹ The authors are perfectly conscious about the irritations they might provoke for the reader with their writing style. In the further development of their argument, it will become more and more obvious that proceeding in such a manner is a consequence of their theoretical perspective or scale. Indeed, they consider that collective scientific papers are narratives of variable scale about what is going on inside and between themselves.

Drawing, amongst others, on the ideas developed by Hoffman (1999) and Wooten and Hoffman (2008), and our own research experience regarding organisational fields², we conceived right from the start of organisational fields as open and relational spaces, populated by individual and collective actors as, for instance, nation-states, professions, associations, other elites, marginal players, social movements or rank-and-file participants (Scott 2014). As such, organisational fields are continually undergoing changes regarding actor membership, interactional patterning, border formation and, last but not least, institutional logics. With respect to the social service sector, we also agreed that organisational fields shape and re-shape themselves through processes of social problem work (Groenemeyer 2010).

In the further course of interaction, and with our ideas about actors and interactional patterns in the social service sector fields (e.g. early childhood education, youth care, work integration, elderly care) in mind, we began to reflect about organisational fields as institutions. Our reading of “A Theory of Fields” by Fligstein and McAdam (2012), and our re-reading of a series of classic social science texts, such as that of Hasenfeld and English (1974), Crozier and Friedberg (1977) as well as Strauss (1993) played an important role in the drafting of a first version of a typology of field actors. In analogy to the typology of organisational actors developed by Mintzberg (1982 & 1986), we distinguished between four major collective or organisational actor types^{3 4}:

- governance units, that are “charged with overseeing compliance with field rules and, in general, facilitating the overall smooth functioning and reproduction of the system” (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012: 13-14);
- governance arenas (Papadopoulos 2004), which form at nodal points of interaction and constitute more or less institutionalised spaces of social regulation between actors of the same or different kind;

² In the context of a historical analysis of the emergence and institutionalisation of the field of work integration, Haas (2014) had already operated with a field notion next to that of Hoffman (1999).

³ One and the same organisation can occupy more than one or cumulate positions. This type of hybridity is rather frequent in the social sector.

⁴ We considered that within each of these organisational actor types social workers and other types of professionals as, for instance, pedagogues or psychologists interact on the basis of their professional logics.

- front-line services, which either process, sustain or change people (Hasenfeld and English 1974);
- border-line services or “marginal-sécant” (Crozier and Friedberg 1977), that do not directly provide services to field clients, but have an important influence either on issue-making processes (e.g. trade unions, employers’ associations, consulting firms, universities) or on field pathways of clients, thus impacting the organisation-relational equilibrium.

As we were developing our typology of field actors, we started to reflect on the problem of institutional change in terms of transversality⁵ or intersection of professions, organisations and fields taken as open, relational spaces. Alike Fligstein & McAdam, we considered that fields do not exist in a vacuum, but have “relations with other fields and these relations powerfully shape the developmental history of the field” (2012: 59). So we adopted their typology of relations, differentiating between unconnected, hierarchical or dependent and reciprocal or interdependent. Our reflections about transversality materialised in a conference paper regarding the interrelation between the fields of social/solidarity economy and work integration (Haas and Marthaler 2014).

But this was not everything. While reflecting about the three pillars distinguished by Scott (2014) – we were somehow irritated by the criterion used to build the categorisation, as regulations and norms in the form of laws or standards can also be seen as materialisations of collectively shared understandings - and through further readings going beyond neo-institutional theory building, we found an interesting parallel in the way both groups and organisations are being described on the basis of the metaphor of the iceberg (Edding and Schattenhofer 2009; Moullet 1992). Discussing the relationships between the materiality of buildings, technologies or laws, interactional processes taking on different patterns, and the cognitive-cultural, we agreed with regard to the iceberg metaphor that organisations and fields are made of three dimensions: an infrastructural (all types of materialisations like buildings or machines, written procedures, norms and regulations), a relational (interactional patterns such as “stars”, “chains”, “stairs” or “switch yards”) including an emotional aspect, and an institutional

⁵ We borrowed the notion of transversality from Mèlèse (1979), a French organisational theorist heavily drawing on system theory.

(institutional logics, understood as collectively shared understandings closely linked, at their origin, to specific types of professions, organisations and fields, and which have more or less diffused over time due, amongst others, to the inherent transversality of fields). We conceived about these three dimensions as heuristical categories for analysis.

What we have described above as parallel strains of reflection⁶ through interaction was furthered by a mandatory seminar intitled “Social, political and judicial systems” within the Bachelor degree in Social and Educational Sciences at the University of Luxembourg. A total of around 45 students participated in the seminar and our basic idea was to give them an insight into the contextual embeddedness of professional social work intervention in organisations and fields. For this purpose, and in order to develop what we had termed as a context-reflexive professionalism grounded in a neo-institutional approach, we opted to start a teaching/research project intending to map two organisational fields within the social service sector, namely youth care/protection and work integration, on the basis of qualitative interviews, grounded in our theoretical propositions. For each field, we chose to interview 7-8 persons belonging to different organisational actors (governance units, etc.). The sampling was done on the basis of our previous knowledge regarding regulative and normative materialisations of the field structuration. The students only intervened from the transcription of the interviews on. In groups of two or three, they analysed the interviews on the basis of an open theoretical category system which core categories concerned the infrastructural, the interactional and the institutional embeddedness of the respective organisation from the perspective of the interviewee. While the students were beginning to work on the data, we began to think about visualising what we were calling an actor-centred field mapping. At the end of the seminar, we organised a half-day colloquium where the students presented their individual actor-mappings, in order to draw conclusions regarding dominant field structuration processes and conflicting institutional logics.

⁶ There were still other theoretical strains of thought going on, but for reasons of clarity and place, we will not go into them. They concerned, for instance, the idea that the social service sector is a set of organisational fields, thus introducing a heuristical distinction between the notions of field and sector. We had also reflected about the state as a specific type of organisation, characterised, amongst others, by an institutional logic of loose coupling.

2. De-construction: Maps as reproductions of Western orders of perception

The momentum of “deconstruction” has first of all been triggered by the analyses of the collected data and, amongst others, the ongoing interactional work about how to draw organisation- and field-centred maps, i.e. to visualise organisations in their environmental embeddedness in organisational fields, to symbolise their relations to other organisations in their material, interactional and institutional dimensions. Indeed, looking at how eight different persons were talking about the same entities, we found that these same entities appeared in eight different shapes, that is, with different borders, actors, relationships and logics. This insight sparked the question about how to uphold the idea of organisations and fields as entities or wholes? From there, the question of transversality became suddenly very fuzzy. If there were no entities to be imagined as forms partially covering each other, how could we then conceive of varying, conflicting logics? Who would be the “carrier” for such logics? On the one hand, a high ranked person at the National Employment Administration (ADEM) would include only certain types of organisations in his conception of the “field” of work integration, namely those who are preparing and changing “job-ready” people to return immediately into work by re-working their CV, teaching them how to present themselves, etc. But he would not include or only put at the very border of his picture of the “field” those people sustaining organisations which have been labelled by law as social initiatives. Talking to a responsible person of one of these, she would tell us, that most evidently her organisation was part of the “field” of work integration... On her map would appear a certain number of “new” organisations, with the local authority or municipality playing a very important role. In the end: What does this mean? How can we draw a map of such fields, when the different perspectives obtained by triangulation do not coincide?

These observations seemed to us as constituting quite serious challenges for some of the basic assumptions of neo-institutionalism. Talking about institutions as rationalised myths, could it be that neo-institutionalism itself was actually bound in the production of such myths in form of institutions such as environment, organisation, organisational field or collective actorship?

In our endeavour to answer these quite intriguing questions, we began to look further beyond neo-institutional writing. In fact, we had developed two basic assumptions leading our quest. One was the idea, that interaction was the key; the other referred to our three-dimensional perspective on “fields”, that had lead our empirical research. We began to see an ubiquity of them, they were everywhere. The notion of fractality entered our thinking, and it was not only by chance that we stumbled over an article written by Jensen (2007), a Danish organisational and industrial sociologist drawing on fractal theory. It took us quite a time, as we were at first quite sceptical about the article title “Infrastructural fractals: revisiting the micro-macro link in social theory” before we finally began to read it. He lead us to the social anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (1990, 1995, 2004, 2013 & 2014) whose inspiration for theorising was grounded in extensive ethnographical research on the Melanesians in Papua New Guinea. Three major insights struck us in our reading. First, for her, interaction is the basic element for personhood as well as for all other phenomena in the world. It is, so to speak, the ‘fractal factor’ replicated in quite similar shape in all scales which might be applied (personhood as well as village, society or whatsoever). Second, in interaction humans are ‘scaling’, categorizing the world, defining scales of perception. Third, for her, the Melanesians are able to ‘scale through’ the world perceiving the hidden similarity, whereas ‘Westeners’ are socialised to scale the world in two basic modalities: by juxtaposition (dividing the world in entities) and by magnification, i.e., by ordering entities into big and small, micro and macro, important and irrelevant.

The tools for deconstruction as well as for reconstruction were at our hands. There are no such “things” as organisations that interact. In research, the only thing we can do is to grasp the scalings of persons in interaction to get a notion of how they invent and covenante the world. To put it in Jensen’s wording as he describes his ambitions in research: “I follow how different places and different people are variably connected and how actors engage in a constant deployment of their own scales (...) In any given setting, multiple scales and perspectives are thus deployed in different practical and material circumstances and it is through their intertwinement, transformation and temporary stabilizations that infrastructure evolves (...) it is therefore crucial to refrain from relying on a specific prioritized scale with which to evaluate all other actors, for the point is precisely to learn from those others

about the intellectual, practical, and moral scales they work with in order to build social relations and spaces” (Jensen 2007: 833). From here, drawing maps showing entities such as organisations and fields can only be understood as reproductions of what Strathern qualifies as “Western orders of perception” (2004).

3. Re-construction: towards an hermeneutics of scaling

Our key argument to begin with is that organisations and organisational fields - we prefer the term of (social) fields as they are not only “composed” of organisations - as well as professions or other types of interactional patterns that have been objectivated through invention and covenanting making in the course of time, have to be seen as institutionalised archetypes of interaction. In other words, what in western scientific language and organisational theory, such as neo-institutionalism, is commonly designated as organisations or organisational fields are, from this point of view, collectively invented and shared archetypes of human interactional patterning that take on besides their interactional dimension, an infrastructural (legal regulations and procedures, buildings, etc.) as well as an institutional dimension (common beliefs about what an organisation is, how they should be organised, etc.). It is through the intertwinement, transformation and temporary stabilisation of these three dimensions that social spaces evolve. What we have covenanted to term as the infrastructural groundings of social space are enacted scalings of institutions in interaction. And, to change the scale from spaces to persons and back: In the same way that persons become individual actors in the singularity of interaction (Munro 2005), organisations come to existence as actors in the singularity of persons that scale themselves as being members or not members of an interactional setting termed as organisation.

From here, we would like to draw the following momentary conclusions regarding empirical field work, not least the question of visualising in social fields:

- We can observe – because it is being - interaction of different persons in different places (offices, workshops, etc.) at different moments in time. In reference to Jensen (2007), persons constantly interact in order to make sense of what they are doing, what is going on around them and who they are.

- These persons permanently relate in their narratives about what they are doing and try to achieve to terms like organisation, professional group, professional, governance unit, governance arena, etc. - they most often don't refer directly these terms, but use similar expressions that relate to these more or less scientific notions. This also applies to scientific interviews. They are moments of interaction made up of scalings – in narratives that might be reflexively provoked by the interviewers⁷.
- A multitude of different scales are deployed for the same place. For example, an office is at a certain moment the working place of a professional, an office amongst others where a certain category of professionals work, a part of a department or the organisation itself. Depending on the deployed scale, what is going on in the office is termed in quite different ways.
- Which scales are enacted by persons in interaction at a specific moment in time and in a given place is, on the one hand, linked to the interactional stock/horizon of experience that has piled up in the course of biographical time. On the other hand, what scales are enacted is also contingent to the infrastructural, interactional and institutional dimensions of the given place. What Fligstein and McAdam (2012), in reference to Bourdieu, designate as social skills relates in our perspective to the enactable universe of scalings in a given setting. Transversality as a source of change and dynamics in "fields" then refers to the enactments of scalings scaled as belonging to a different "field" than the "field" to which the place of interaction seems to "belong". The possible irritation caused by unexpected scaling in this manner might be the same as provoked by the finding in the interviews we lead with so-called "clients" of social service organisations. What professionals enacted quite naturally as scales to make sense of what is going on – departments, organisations, professional groups, clients and client groups, fields or sectors – in most cases was not part of the scaling repertoire of the "clients". It also appeared from the interviews that these "clients" did not necessarily term themselves as clients in the first place, but as

⁷ In the same way we can only conceive of this paper as a narrative of our scaling presented for an interactive scaling work with the reader and maybe the audience in case we get the chance to relate this narrative in direct interaction at the foreseen place in Vienna.

members of a family that has to earn money to survive or as employees under the regime of limited working contracts.

- Even more fundamentally, persons are not reducible in what they enact to the position or the role which is ascribed to them by other persons. Persons always enter interaction, whatever the setting or the ascriptions may be in their dividuality or rootedness in the multiplicity of interactions piled up in the course of biographical time. This is also the reason why clients of social service organisations are oftenly considered as “problematic” or “stubborn”. In our theoretical perspective, it is precisely in this that embedded agency or transversality is rooted.

What does all this mean for the development of a methodological approach aiming at understanding what is going on in fields? At this stage of our own methodological reflexion on an hermeneutics of scaling, we would like to advance the following five points. Firstly, the necessary point of departure for all empirical analysis are our own scalings. We have to be aware of our pre-assumptions, to put it in hermeneutical terms; and we use them to identify persons as actors in fields who might help us understand what is going on by discovering their scalings.

Secondly, we have got to talk to them, “controlling” our own scalings we forcibly apply, making them reveal their scalings. This means, on the one hand, that we should in a first approach try to ask “scaling-free” questions as we have done in our interviews of social service clients. For example, we asked them to narrate “How has it come that you are now in this place?” or “How do you explain to others persons what you are doing here?”. On the other hand, this also means that we, as researchers, by enacting consciously certain scales, can explore the scaling repertoire of the interviewee.

Thirdly, we may use our theoretically developed grid of categories, especially what we have termed as institutionalised archetypes of interaction on which we did not elaborate in detail in this paper, as a means to better understand these scalings. Fourthly, this exercise can lead us to draw a picture of the scaled entities (organisations/fields), as they exist, or, better, as they are invented in the perception of the person. Here, transversality does take place; in the same way as places and interactional structuration enable or disable agency, they also facilitate or not homogenous, unidimensional scalings or rich, diverse,

multidimensional scalings. Finally, scalings and inventions of different people at different places in an entity lead to thick descriptions of the respective archetype of interaction, helping to understand shared scalings of logics, change and conflict. But it is impossible to draw 'correct' and complete maps, what we perceive is always just partially connected to 'reality' (Strathern 2004).

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