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# Gradation of Actors, Interplay of Roles, Range of Cooperation, and Composition in Embeddedness: Complementary Ideas for Strategic Action Field Theory\*

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## Abstract

Classical debates in sociology or social science tend to gravitate around what determines the formation of social phenomena: actors or structures and ideas or matter. These debates have spawned various theories that emphasize on actors or structures, ideas or material forces, as well as various combinations of all four. One such combination is reflected in Fligstein and McAdam's theory of the Strategic Action Field (SAF). According to them, social phenomena are formed through SAFs (at the meso-level), which becomes an arena for collaboration and conflict between actors (at the micro-level) with their respective social skills, including instrumental and existential factors. These strategic action fields, on the other hand, are also embedded to and influenced by other SAF (forming the macro-level structure). While I agree with this theory, I also found several gaps within it: the dichotomy between incumbent versus challenger actors; ignorance of the possibility of a "tug-of-war" between existential and instrumental factors; the nature of collaboration between actors; as well as the particular composition of aspects and sub-aspects in embeddedness. To overcome these theoretical shortcomings, I offer four ideas: actors within a SAF occupy positions in a gradational sense; an outline of the interplay between existential and instrumental factors; the effect of three modes of social capital, namely bonding, bridging, and linking, to SAF dynamics; and two types of composition in SAF embeddedness.

**Keywords:** Strategic Action Field, Gradation of Actors, Interplay between Roles, Scope of Cooperation, Composition in Embeddedness

## INTRODUCTION

The Strategic Action Field (SAF) Theory is proposed by Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam to illuminate how a social order is formed, perpetuated, or transformed. They argue that a social order (or society) is composed of "Strategic Actions Fields" operating on the meso- level (Kluttz

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and Fligstein 2016:186; Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:9; 2011:3; see also the description of SAF in Fligstein and Vandebroek 2014:118-119). These SAFs are manifested in various sets of social actors and organizations, including companies and states, that make up society—whether they are yet to be established (in the formative period), or currently experiencing a process of change, of a formal or informal status, and in scales both small and large (Kluttz and Fligstein 2016:186; Fligstein 2013:41; Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:9, 59).

While SAFs occupy on a meso-level, it is embedded with individual and collective actors who operate on the micro-level, in the form of relationships between actors (Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:16; 2011:6-7; Fligstein 2001:112). In addition, a strategic action field is also surrounded by other SAFs. Together, they are all embedded into a larger SAF, which forms the macro-level order (Kluttz and Fligstein 2016:192; Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:18, 57; 2012b:49; 2011:8). The dynamics of a SAF—are influenced by these various aspects and sub-aspects embedded within the SAF itself and their relationships with other SAFs.

The structure of a Strategic Action Field is composed of four aspects (Figure 1). The first aspect are *elements of meaning* that bind together a SAF: the issues at stake, the actor's position in the SAF, the interpretive frames at play, as well as rules which structure interactions between actors (Kluttz and Fligstein 2016:191; Fligstein 2013:41-43; Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:10-11; for issues of rules, control, and social skills, see 2011:4). The second is the *composition* of a SAF, which can be categorized into incumbents, challengers, and governance units (Kluttz and Fligstein 2016:191; Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:13-14; 2011:5-6). The third aspect pertains to *social skills* of each actor in a SAF, which pertains to the micro dimensions embedded within an action field (Fligstein 2013:43; Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:16-18, 46; 2012c:291-292; 2011:6-7; Fligstein 2001:112).

The fourth aspect, namely *embeddedness*, is the micro-structural dimension of SAFs (Kluttz and Fligstein 2016:192; Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:18; 2012b: 49; 2011:8). If the first three aspects pertain to the “internal structure” of the SAF, embeddedness is the field’s “external structure”. It comprises the characteristics of other SAFs surrounding a SAF, including their degrees of proximity and distance, a vertical or horizontal position,<sup>1</sup> and if they are state or non-state action fields

1 In *A Theory of Fields*, Fligstein and McAdam (2012a:18-19) revises these categories into “dependent” and “interdependent”, but more-or-less refers to the same relations

(Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:18-19; 2011:8). In another iteration, Fligstein and McAdam also defines relationships between SAFs in terms of dependence, interdependence, or being unconnected (2012a:59-62), as well as the *number* of connections a SAF has with others, ranging from a unit of one to many (2012a:62-64).

While each SAFs comprise the same aspects and sub-aspects (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012a: 59; 2012b: 48), their conditions can vary greatly from one another depending on the role of its actors and connection with other SAFs. This is the reason why Fligstein and McAdam conceptualize a strategic action field as “Local Orders” or “Endemic Structures” (Fligstein and McAdam 2011:2, 11; Fligstein 2001:107). These differences also determine the degree of influence within the four aspects of a SAF to its overall dynamics. Nonetheless, Fligstein and McAdam are of the view that aspects which reflect the macro-structural dimension have greater influence to the dynamics of a SAF—defined as an “Exogenous Shock” —compared to others (Fligstein and McAdam 2012a: 19-21; 2011:8-9).

In concocting their theory, Fligstein and McAdam builds upon a variety of concepts developed in the traditions of Bourdieu, Giddens, institutional approaches in organizational sociology, network analysis, social movement studies, organizational theory, economic sociology, and institutionalism in political science (Kluttz and Fligstein 2016:192-200; Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:23-31; 2011:19-22; 2001:108-112). At the same time, they also criticized several aspects of these approaches. One recurring argument is Fligstein and McAdam’s disagreements with nuances surrounding the view of structural determinism and the agency of social actors—some of which they found to be excessively abstract—in determining the formation, survival, or transformation of social orders. In contrast, by focusing on empirical, meso-level social orders, Fligstein and McAdam offer Strategic Action Fields as an embedded social level which integrates actors (micro-dimension) and structure (macro-dimension). In doing this, they also reject both the determinisms of idea-over-matter or matter-over-idea, and emphasize the importance of integrating both aspects within a coherent social field.

On a fundamental level, I agree with the concept of Social Action Field offered by Fligstein and McAdam. Nonetheless, I also argue that

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described in the previous versions of Embeddedness. To avoid confusion, in this paper I will use the previous categories, namely “vertical” and “horizontal” (Fligstein and McAdam 2011).

there are a number of gaps in their theoretical construction—which, in some respects, may not be factually confirmed. For example, the dichotomy of actor composition in a SAF of “incumbents” versus “challengers” ignores various other positions that can be occupied by social actors. Furthermore, the decision to theoretically combine existential (ideational) and instrumental (material) factors does not take into account that both can be caught in a tug-of-war in determining the formation of cooperation between actors, which underlies a SAF. The designation of inter-actor cooperation as “internal” or “external” is also vaguely defined as it fails to explain their influence on the dynamics (production, reproduction, and transformation) of a SAF. Finally, the concept of “embeddedness” also does not consider that several of its aspects and sub-aspects (verticality and horizontality; number of connections to other SAFs) may form a distinct social composition that both may or may not influence the dynamics of a SAF itself.

In order to fill this theoretical gap, I offer these following arguments. First, the composition of actors in SAFs are not dichotomous, but rather gradual. Actors do not simply occupy a “proximate” or “distant” position, nor are they neatly categorized as “incumbents” or “challengers”, but sit somewhere within these two categories. Second, there is an *interplay* between existential factors and instrumental factors in determining the establishment of cooperation in SAFs. Third, the scope of cooperation between actors also includes *bonding*, which exerts more influence on the reproduction of SAF, as well as those of *bridging* and *linking* which determines the production and transformation of a SAF as well. Fourth, there is a possibility that aspects and sub-aspects of SAF embeddedness are merged together into a separate composition, which may or may not influence the dynamics within the field.

This article consists of five parts. The first part contains an introductory description, while the second part outlines the method of study. From this point, the third part will provide an explanation of the main concepts of the Strategic Action Field Theory: its elements, composition, the social skills of its actors, as well as its embeddedness. The fourth part contains a critical review of these concepts and attempts to fill the theoretical gaps left by Fligstein and McAdam with arguments pertaining to the gradation of actor composition; the interplay of existential and instrumental factors; the extent of actor cooperation; and composition in SAF embeddedness. Finally, the fifth part is a conclusion of these arguments.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The method for obtaining materials in this article is literature study. The first step was to survey ideas on Strategic Action Field written by Fligstein, as well as Fligstein with McAdam and Klutz. These literature were published in scientific journals, books, chapters in books, as well as handbooks. What is written in this article is the result of my interpretation of Strategic Action Field Theory derived from these various sources. In the second step, I put these materials under a critical review to find out if this theory could withstand being confronted with the real social world. In this way, I managed to identify several theoretical gaps in the SAF theory. Finally, I offer some complementary ideas through corroboration with relevant literature in an attempt to fill these theoretical gaps.

## THE STRATEGIC ACTION FIELD

In *A Theory of Social Fields*, Fligstein and McAdam (2012a) define a Strategic Action Field as:

...a constructed meso-level social order in which actors (who can be individual or collective) are attuned to and interact with one another on the basis of shared (which is not to say consensual) understandings about the purposes of the field, relationships to others in the field (including who has power and why), and the rules governing legitimate action in the field. (P. 9; a similar definition can also be found in 2011:3)

To make sense of this brief definition, I will elaborate the key concepts contained within it into three parts. The first is a recognition of SAF as a socially constructed arena, along with the four elements that underlie it, as well as the composition of a Strategic Action Field. Second, I will explain aspects that pertain to the micro-dimensions within a SAF, which is best exemplified within the aspect of social skills. Finally, the third is an examination of “embeddedness” as a reflection of the macro-dimensions of SAF.

### *I. Preliminary Aspects: The Four Elements of Meaning and Actor Composition*

As an arena, Strategic Action Fields are socially constructed through three aspects (Kluttz and Fligstein 2016:191; Fligstein and McAdam 2012a: 10; 2011:3-4). First, the criteria of membership of a given field is based on *subjective* criteria; this generates a diversity among SAFs and allows them to compete or cooperate with one another. Second, boundaries between specific action fields tend to be *fluid*. In any case, the demarcation between SAFs is largely defined based on the specific circumstances and the issue at stake among actors. Third, a Strategic Action Field comprises a set of formed and reinforced understanding. In other words, the actors within a SAF are bound together by a common understanding of their world. Both Fligstein and McAdam (2012a:10) assert that these three points are most influential to the social construction of strategic action fields.

The shared understanding that binds together members of a Strategic Action Field are “elements” that delineate a particular SAF, the particular meanings that marginally differentiate them from other adjacent action fields. To begin, each actor within a SAF understands the *issues* which are at stake (Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:10; 2011:4). These issues relate to the identity and/or interest of actors, and contain the potential to benefit or harm them, as well as increasing or decreasing their social positions. Actors in a SAF also occupy certain *positions* based on their power. Each actor understands their own position and that of other actors, which is differentiated by how great or small their powers are (Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:11; 2011:4). Through this shared understanding of the landscape of power, actors can identify “who their friends, their enemies, and their competitors [are]” (Fligstein and McAdam 2012a: 11; 2011: 4). Furthermore, actors within a Strategic Action Field also possess an *interpretive frame* which guides their actions, including how and if they will respond to the actions of other actors. These frames, emphasize Fligstein and McAdam, also reflect the actor’s specific position within the particular SAF (Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:11; 2011:4). Finally, there are also *rules* which enable every actor to arrive at a common understanding of what is “possible, legitimate, and interpretable” (Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:11; 2011:4) within the SAF.

As a totality, the various positions occupied by each actor within a Strategic Action Field (the second of its “elements of meaning”) forms the overall actor composition of a SAF. Fligstein and McAdam offer three categories of actors that make up the composition of a SAF: Incumbents, Challengers, and Governance Units (Kluttz and Fligstein 2016:191; Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:13-14; 2011:5-6). Incumbents are the most influential actors within a particular action field insofar that their interests, perspectives, goals, and regimes have dominated the SAF (Fligstein 2013:41-42; Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:13; 2011:5-6; 2012c:294). Conversely, Challengers posit themselves in opposition to the incumbents. Given their position, challengers tend to conform to the rules, ie. what is “possible, legitimate, and interpretable” within a SAF, but nonetheless offer something different than what incumbents propose, while waiting their opportunity to challenge and alter the SAF composition (Fligstein 2013:41-42; Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:13; 2011:5-6). As such, the relationship between incumbents and challengers is conflictual. Finally, the Governance Unit is an internal element of a Strategic Action Field whose function is to ensure that each actor complies with the rules to ensure the stability of the SAF (Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:13-14; Fligstein and McAdam 2011:6). Due to their position, governance units tend to be conservative (Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:14; 2011:6) and/or in support of the incumbent.

Referring to the descriptions above, it is possible to connect the *elements of meaning*, *actor composition*, as well as the *dynamics* (production, reproduction, and transformation) of a SAF. Actors within a Strategic Action Field will be inclined to *collaborate* in facilitating the formation, stabilization, and transformation of SAFs if the issues being contested concerns their shared identities and interests; the actors wield great positional power and/or are in the position of incumbents; there are reliable interpretive frames to guide actors, including to react appropriately to the actions of others; while the rules are generally considered to be legitimate and are actively being enforced by Governance Units.

On the other hand, cooperation between actors in a SAF will be difficult to materialize in the exact opposite conditions: if the identities and interests of the actor are not related to the issues being contested; the actor is in a weak challenger position; interpretive frames have failed to guide actions between actors; while the rules are widely regarded to be invalid and failed to be enforced by Governance Units of the field. Any of these circumstances will be uncondusive to SAF dynamics.



## II. *Micro-Aspects: Social Skills*

As an aspect of SAFs, social skills are “micro-aspects” as actors acquire them from a socialization process, ie. by interacting with other actors (Fligstein and McAdam 2012a: 47; Fligstein 2001:112). Through this concept, Fligstein and McAdam seek to show the capacity of actors—both individually or collectively—to encourage and structure cooperation amongst actors *within* and *between* SAFs (Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:17, 46; 2011:7; Fligstein 2001: 112; Fligstein and Vandebroek 2014:116-118). In addition, social skills are also embedded with both ideational and material elements. As such, the concept can be said as an antithesis to approaches that heavily focus on either actor or structure in explaining a social phenomena, or privilege either the immaterial or material aspects within it.

The concept of Social Skills itself is formulated from a similar idea, namely that of Strategic Action, or the “attempt by social actors to create and sustain social worlds by securing the cooperation of others” (Klutz and Fligstein 2016:194; Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:17; 2011:7). There are also at least three aspects that is able to influence the formation of cooperation among actors and the framework that binds them, namely the differences of skills between actors (skilled and unskilled), the reasons which propel the cooperation (existential and instrumental factors), as well as the various tactics that actors can use to generate cooperation and framing.

In relation to Strategic Action, Fligstein and McAdam (2012a:46) define social skills as “the ability to induce cooperation by appealing to and helping to create shared meanings and collective identities”. Another definition, which references the previous work of Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford (1986), is:

...how individuals or collective actors possess a highly developed cognitive capacity for reading people and environments, framing lines of action, and mobilizing people in the service of these action “frames”. (Fligstein 2013:43; Fligstein and McAdam 2012c:291; 2011:7)

Several keywords emerge within both definitions: actors, cooperation, as well as “frames of action” in the form of collective meaning and identity. When synthesized, both definitions refer to “social skills” as the ability of each actor to compose and offer a framework of action that can become a reason for others to collaborate. Fligstein and McAdam

outline these skills as cognition, empathy, and communication, which can also be referred to as *cognitive*, *affective*, and *linguistic* skills (Fligstein 2013:43; Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:46; 2012c:292; 2011:7). Cognition pertains to an actor's ability to understand other actors and their social environment. Meanwhile, empathy can be interpreted as the capacity of an actor to "get out" of their own selves and enter the vantage point of another actor. Finally, the communication or linguistic dimension is in how actors have the skills in interacting with other actors—both in order to facilitate the work of the previous two dimensions (cognition and empathy) as well as to disseminate frames that provide identities to various actors.

Referencing Mead and Giddens, Fligstein and McAdam (2012a:48; 2011:7; see also Fligstein and Vandebroeck 2014:117) assert that every actor possesses social skills, at least to ensure their immediate survival. Nonetheless, the levels and contexts in which these social skills operate can greatly vary (Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:47-48; 2011:7; Fligstein 2001:112-113; Fligstein and Vandebroeck 2014:117), in which there are skilled social actors, as well as less-skilled or unskilled social actors. Skilled social actors can be interpreted as actors who can encourage other parties to work together for collective goals, while less-skilled and unskilled social actors do not possess the same level of capacity. While Fligstein and McAdam did not clearly explain the factors that lead to such differences, they might be caused by the intensity of socialization experienced by each actor.

The influence of social skills over a SAF, however, is also dependent on the condition of the action field itself (stable or institutionalized, or unstable or not-yet-institutionalized), as well as the position of actors in the specific SAF (Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:47-48; 2011:7, 11-14; Fligstein 2001:115-118). In a stable SAF, incumbent, skilled social actors find it easier to produce and reproduce their action field given that its actors tend to have accepted things as they are, while skilled challengers seek to maintain solidarity and collective identity, as well as looking for opportunities to transform power relations within the SAF. On the other hand, a Strategic Action Field that is not yet stable or still in its emergence will require both incumbents and challengers to require sophisticated social skills and become "Institutional Entrepreneurs" (Fligstein 2013:43; Fligstein and McAdam 2012c:291; 2011:7) for the sake of creating and maintaining a collective identity.

Underlying factors that encourage actors to cooperate and form interpretive frames for action is a combination of material and existential factors (Kluttz and Fligstein 2016:195). In other literature, these factors have also been referred to as “existential and instrumental” (Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:46-49) as well as “rational and emotional” (Fligstein and McAdam 2011:7). It is possible, however, to point out the underlying commonalities between these different terminologies. While instrumental factors are material, existential factors are ideational. For Fligstein and McAdam, existential factors are manifested in the need of actors for meaning and identity, in which they explicitly describe social skills as “part of a meaning making project” (2012a: 47).

As the basis of the existence of social actors, meaning can be achieved through cooperation with others. By creating meaning, actors feel valued as human beings and find purpose in their lives (Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:46). In the following quote, Fligstein and McAdam provide a concrete example of how actors are dependant upon meaning in their lives, and seek to obtain it through collaboration:

Being part of a group and reveling in the lived experience of “w-ness” is one of the most important ways that individuals come to have a positive view of themselves and hold their existential fears at bay. Having a successful marriage or relationship, raising children, cooperating with others at work, all provide us with the sense that life is meaningful and we play an important part in it. (Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:47)

While the existential yearning for meaning can be achieved *through* cooperation with other actors, such cooperation cannot ignore instrumental or material factors such as power, interests, and status:

...the act of creating material objects requires collective action. And collective action requires identity and meaning in order to convince individuals that they are part of something real, important, and tied to their interests. (Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:49)

Thus, the effort of an actor to achieve instrumental/material gain is inseparable from their quest for meaning (Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:46). On the other hand, the formation of meaning is always inextricably related with instrumental efforts and material processes.

There are at least ten tactics actors can use—especially *skilled* actors—to create a binding frame of action for cooperation with other actors, as well as to deal with competitors (Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:50-53; Fligstein 2008:244; Fligstein 2001:113-115). *First*, actors who possess authority can exert it to ask or demand cooperation from other actors. *Second*, actors can conduct agenda setting in two stages, namely a “closed” agenda setting or “behind the scenes” to accommodate the identity and interests of each actor, then following this up with an open agreement on the agenda. *Third*, appealing to the pragmatic side of each actor in the face of available opportunities, especially when there is potential for actors to generate profit. *Fourth*, offering something that can be accepted by other actors, or convincing them that the agenda is in accordance with their respective interests. *Fifth*, actors can post themselves as neutral intermediaries between various interests, or actively offer collective identities to various actors, which in turn can encourage them to cooperate.

*Sixth*, actors can conceal or present their personal interests in such a way that what stands out about them is their openness to accept the interests of other actors. *Seventh*, actors might appeal to other various actors by creating the “bandwagon effect”, emphasizing the positive outcomes of cooperation. *Eighth*, actors can employ a “netting” tactic—something which might actually produce only little success, but is presented as an especially concrete measure that inspires confidence for other actors to work together. *Ninth*, by convincing other actors of their quintessential role in the collaboration. *Tenth*, actors can also build alliances with other parties who have few alternatives on who to cooperate with, while at the same time blocking other actors that might disrupt collaboration to emerge.

Based on these literature, the relation of social skills to the dynamics of a Strategic Action Field can be summarized as follows. When skilled social actors cater to both existential and instrumental factors, as well as employ the right choice of tactics and frames that are compatible with the interests and identities of other actors, they are likely to be able to encourage cooperation to form, maintain, or transform a Strategic Action Field. In the opposite scenario, cooperation between actors is unlikely to occur, which will hinder or frustrate an actor’s efforts to produce, reproduce, or change their SAF.

### *III. Macro-Aspects: Embeddedness*

Fligstein and McAdam made the explicit point that a Strategic Action Field is not an isolated or autonomous entity. According to them, a SAF is “embedded” to other SAFs, thus forming a macro-level social unit, or a “field of fields” (Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:18; 2011:8; see also Kluttz and Fligstein 2016:192). Such embeddedness is an important part of their theory, as it can affect the dynamics (production, reproduction, and transformation) of a SAF, either stabilizing or destabilizing them (Fligstein and McAdam 2012a: 18-19; 2011:8).

The distinction of Strategic Action Field theory lies in that it posits macro-level structure (SAF embeddedness) and micro-level actors (social skills) as part of a unified whole.<sup>2</sup> This is certainly different from approaches which place structure as something that is external and autonomous from actors, and has its own logic (Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:18; 2011:8). Furthermore, various embedded SAFs also share the same structure, which includes the same ideational and material elements (Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:59; 2012b:48). In contrast to a deterministic approach which solely privileges ideational or material factors, the structural aspect of SAF theory necessitates both ideational and material elements working within it.<sup>3</sup>

There are at least three ways in which embeddedness is able to influence SAF dynamics (Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:18-19, 58-64; 2011:8). The first pertains to the status of other SAFs around a particular SAF, including proximate or distant, vertical or horizontal, or if the adjacent SAF pertains to state or non-state aspects. Another aspect is the relationship or pattern of embeddedness between the SAFs: either dependent or hierarchical, interdependent or reciprocal, or simply unconnected. Finally, there is also the quantity of connections of a strategic

2 In my opinion, the root of Goldstone and Useem’s misplaced criticism lies in how they fundamentally misunderstood the concept of Structure in SAFs. According to them, Strategic Action Field Theory tends to ignore the dimensions of structure and institutions, which is not the case. See Fligstein and McAdam’s (2012b:49) response to criticisms from Goldstone and Useem.

3 Another criticism by Goldstone and Useem (2012:41-42) is that the idea of SAF does not take into account the dimensions of values and culture. However, in my opinion (see also Fligstein and McAdam 2012b:50), the underlying elements of SAF (the issues at stake, action frames, and rules) as well as the role social skills within it contain an inherent dimension of value. This is explained more explicitly in subsequent works of Fligstein and McAdam (2012a), as well as Kluttz and McAdam (2016).

action field. Some SAFs have many, or “more dense” connections, while others could be much less connected.

In the context of their embeddedness, the status or characteristics of other SAFs can be described as follows (Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:18-19; 2011:8; Kluttz and Fligstein 2016:192). If a group of strategic action fields are tied together, but the dynamic of one SAF does not have an effect on another, then they can be said to be *proximate* to one another. Conversely, if various SAFs do not form connections or influence one another, then they are *distant*. Relations between proximate SAFs that are bound to each other due to formal authority is *vertical*; however, if different action fields are connected through mutual need, then their relations are *horizontal*.

There is also the distinction to be made if an adjacent Strategic Action Field pertains to the state. A SAF with “state characteristics” entails: 1. An actor who has formal authority over most non-state domains, as well as having the ability to influence the stability of these domains, and; 2. A dense collection of domains that can either be proximate or distant, or vertical or horizontal. As I understand it, action fields that do not fulfill these two criterias simply fall into the category of non-state SAFs. Unfortunately, Fligstein and McAdam themselves did not explain the basis of such categorization.

The second dimension, namely the *pattern* of embeddedness between SAFs (Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:58-59), relates to the verticality/horizontality mentioned before. A *dependent* pattern can be interpreted as a linkage between SAFs which is hierarchical: simply put, a SAF with more power can influence other, less-powerful action fields. Meanwhile, an *interdependent* pattern means that both SAFs are able to reciprocally influence one another because they wield relatively equal power. Finally, there is also the possibility that two SAFs are *unconnected* and have no influence over one another.

There are several factors that can partly shape the pattern of relationships between SAFs, namely “resource dependence, mutual beneficial interactions, sharing of power, information flows, and legitimacy” (Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:59). Relationships between SAFs can also occur *directly*—characterized by regular interaction between actors of various strategic action fields—or *indirectly*, involving intermediary SAFs.

The third and final dimension of embeddedness is the quantity of connections of a Strategic Action Field, which can range from none to an

abundance of ties (Fligstein and McAdam 2012a:62-64). Any SAF with a large number of connections tends to be more susceptible to instability (experiencing changes, encouraging the formation of new action fields) as the result of the dynamics of other SAFs connected to it, whereas SAFs that have little to no number connections tend to be more stable due to the lack of external influence. This also means that apart from the quantity of its connections, the stability of a SAF can also be influenced by how dependent or interdependent its relations with other SAFs are (Fligstein and McAdam 2012a: 62-63). Dependent relations tend to make a SAF unstable, notwithstanding the number of connections it has. On the contrary, interdependent relations tend to foster stability. For SAFs with a large number of connections, such stability is possible if there are some SAFs associated with them that might provide alternative resources in times of need.

We can summarize the literature as follows. When it comes to their embeddedness, dynamics within a SAF are more likely to happen if they are closely, vertically, and dependently connected with another SAF, as well as having many connections and related to the state. Conversely, if relations are distant, horizontal, interdependent or absent, as well as not pertaining to the state, a SAF is less likely to experience the social dynamics of production, reproduction, and transformation.

## COMPLEMENTARY IDEAS FOR SAF THEORY

### *I. Gradation of Actor Composition*

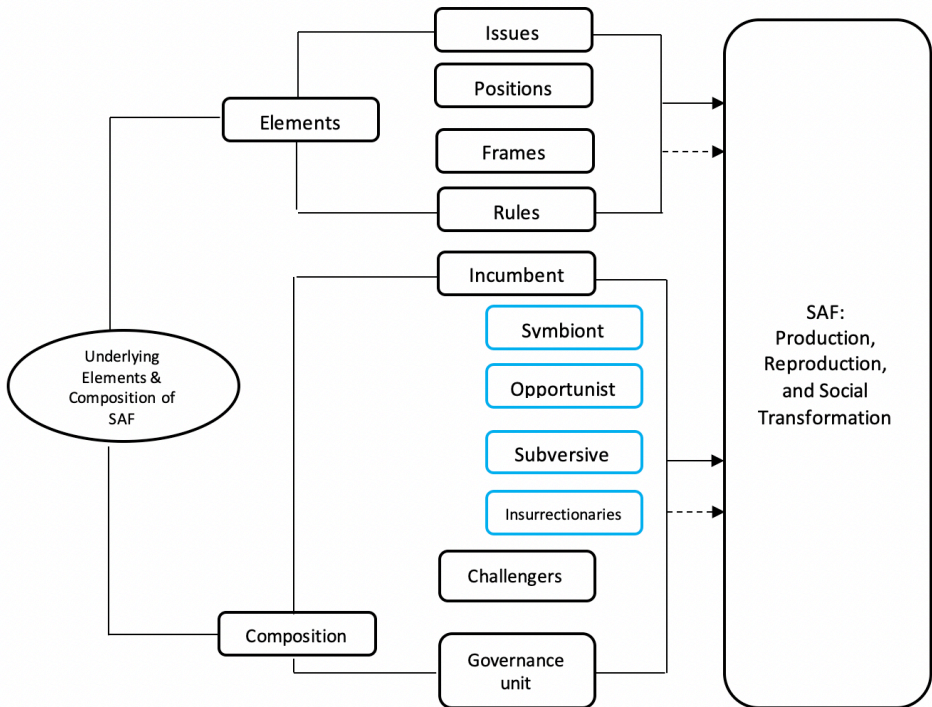
As previously described, Fligstein and McAdam are of the view that the composition of actors in a SAF is made up of three categories: incumbents, challengers, and governance units. In principle, I agree that these three categories of actors *factually exist* in a Strategic Action Field. However, I would also point out that the binary categorization of actors into only incumbents and challengers—with governance units functioning more as an extraneous force—reflects a dichotomous way of thinking that has yet to be fully justified. It ignores the possibility of actors falling somewhere between the two extreme positions of incumbents and challengers, possessing only several characteristics that fit with the descriptions of both categories.

By contextualizing the ideas of historical institutionalism thinkers such as James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen (Van der Heijden 2010:236) into the discussion of Strategic Action Fields, I offer the



possibility of four new actor categories: Symbionts, Opportunists, Subversives, and Insurrectionaries. Each of these categories can be placed in a spectrum, ranging from a position that strongly fits that of an incumbent, to a position that strongly reflects the challengers.

Figure 2. Elements of Meaning, Actor Composition, and SAF Dynamics



*Symbiont* actors can be broken down into two sub-categories: mutualistic or parasitic. While all symbionts represent the incumbent position, mutualistic symbionts tend to strengthen existing institutions or SAFs, whereas parasitic symbionts tend to undermine them. *Opportunists*, on the other hand, can assume either the role of incumbents or challengers, depending on which position actually provides them with more opportunities for gain. Due to the wide range of the actions they could take, these actors tend to be influential in producing, reproducing, or transforming a SAF. The next two categories, namely *subversives* and *insurrectionaries* (Van der Heijden 2010:236), can be considered to be that of a challenger profile. While both seek to transform a SAF and



alter its relations and composition, the difference between the two lies in how they achieve this goal. The subversive actor does not openly oppose the SAF they seek to transform, but opts to become a part of it. At the same time, subversives slowly work on incorporating aspects of themselves as a part of the SAF, gradually chiseling away old frames or rules that bind an action field. Meanwhile, insurrectionary actors openly express their rejection of a SAF, including refusing to comply with rules and other aspects which are embedded in it.

To complement Fligstein and McAdam's concept of SAF composition, I included the four new sub-aspects (shaded in blue in Figure 2). Thus, actor composition within a Strategic Action Field is divided into five sub-aspects. The binary extremes between the incumbent and challenger positions can be broken down into symbiotic, opportunist, subversive, and insurrectionary actors, while internal governance units stand on their own. As a general rule, symbionts tend to have more influence on the dynamics of a SAF compared to subversives and insurrectionaries. Finally, opportunist actors can either play a role or have no effect on the SAF—depending on which course of action gives them the advantage.

## *II. Interplay of Roles and Range of Cooperation*

In general, I also agree with how Fligstein and McAdam conceptualize the aspect of social skills. Nonetheless, I managed to identify at least two gaps within their thinking. Apart from the criticisms of ideational bias levied against Strategic Action Field Theory, its progenitors have admitted that material or instrumental factors play a role in encouraging actors to collaborate as much as immaterial or ideational ones (which they refer to as “existential functions”). Both factors are intertwined in forming an interpretive frame that binds together all actors within the field.

What is less clear, however, is whether these two factors always carry relatively equal weight in their influence. In my opinion, this is not the case. Rather, there is an *interplay* of factors at work. Factually, a combination of instrumental and existential factors might be the force which propels cooperation and generates a common framework in certain SAFs. In other cases, the role of existential factors may be more prominent than instrumental ones, and vice versa. This all depends on the interests and identities of actors who are being invited to collaborate.

The next gap pertains to the scope of cooperation that can be forged by actors (either broad or narrow) and its influence on the dynamic processes within a SAF. According to Fligstein and McAdam (2001:112, 117), actors that are subject to potential collaboration include “internals”, i.e. anyone included in a SAF, and “externals”, i.e. actors who are found in other SAFs. In my opinion, these categories are too loose and might lead to a problematic identification. They do not provide a solid understanding of who these actors are; the nature, objective and level of cooperation between them; the factors that incentivize cooperation; and if there is a category of actors that can be both “internal” and “external” to a SAF at the same time. It is necessary to clarify these points because they can provide an indication of how the scope of cooperation affects the dynamics (production, reproduction and transformation) of a SAF and other SAFs.

These two theoretical gaps can be overcome by complementing Fligstein and McAdam’s categories of Internal and External Reach (whether the cooperation occurs *within* or *beyond* the SAF) with the three types of social capital—namely *bonding*, *bridging*, and *linking*—developed by, among others, Granovetter, Putnam, Coleman, Portes, Nan Lin, and Woolcock (Claridge 2018).<sup>4</sup>

The notion of an “Internal Reach” is more-or-less in line with the bonding-type social capital as described by Claridge (2018:1-3). This cooperation is established between various actors within a SAF, such as administrators, members, or sympathizers of a political party; as such, the scope of the collaboration is internal. What made this type of collaboration possible is the *similarities* between actors that have grown at least since the formation of the SAF. By being bound together by existential factors (such as a common identity and/or values), actors within the SAF will have a high level of trust with one another. The objective of their cooperation also tends to be inward-looking, focusing on the internal dynamics within the SAF.

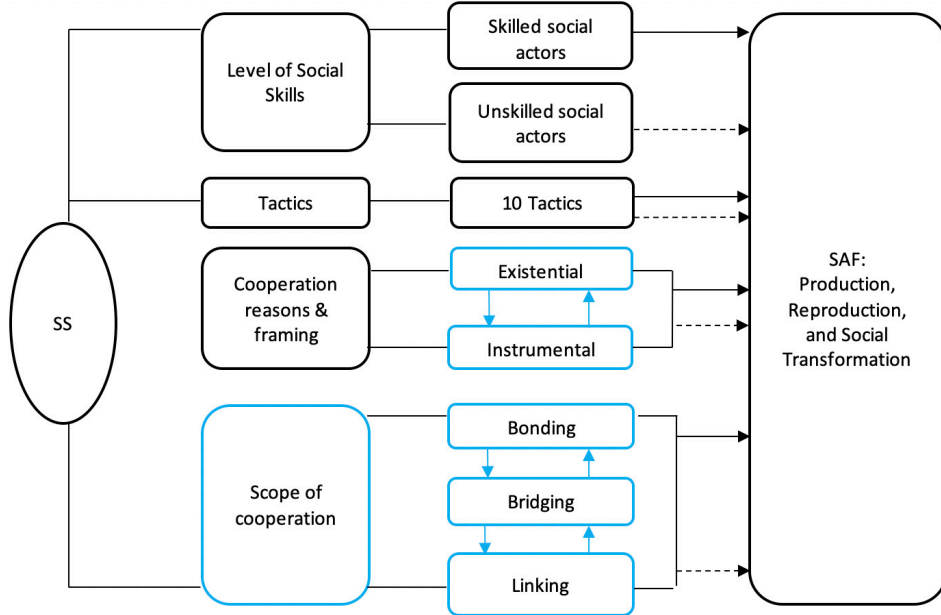
Conversely, “External Reach” roughly resembles the bridging and linking-types of social capital outlined by Claridge (2018:1, 3-5). In bridging, collaboration is formed between actors in a SAF and actors in other SAFs, which, using Fligstein and McAdam’s conception, are horizontal (more-or-less that of equal social standing), whereas linking pertains to relationships that are vertical (such as with a corporation or

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4 I integrate Claridge’s description of bonding, bridging, and linking social capital to explain the role of social skills to the scope of cooperation between actors.

state). Actors who are involved in bridging typically possess different interests and identities, but collaboration between them is made possible when skilled social actors manage to create some kind of “consensus” that everyone can agree upon. Meanwhile, linking occurs when actors with a higher social position utilize their power or authority to “force” cooperation with actors of a lower social position. What is important to point out is that both bridging and linking tend to be based on instrumental rather than existential factors, which leads to lower levels of mutual trust and weaker social bonds amongst the actors. Additionally, these types of collaboration are also more outward-looking, as actors are compelled to see beyond the immediate factors within their own SAFs.

Figure 3. Social Skills and SAF Dynamics



These three different scopes of cooperation have different effects on the dynamics of a Strategic Action Field. With strong bonding, skilled social actors have more to do with maintaining rather than forming or transforming their SAF. In contrast, with strong bridging and linking, skilled social actors tend to play a larger role in producing or transforming a SAF rather than in its reproduction. When we compare these roles with Woolcock’s (1998) notion of integration and linkage (extra

and intra-community relations) as well as organizational integrity and synergy (state and community relations) in social capital, the ideal social actor is one that is able to perform a balanced range of cooperation between bonding, bridging, and linking. Thus, skilled social actors do not only have influence in stabilizing a SAF, but can also utilize the internal conditions of their respective action fields to create new SAFs or even transform other SAFs.

Figure 3 contains a brief illustration of my ideas to fill in the gaps in Fligstein and McAdam's notion of social skills and their relationship to SAF dynamics. In this complementary version, I only add two things (shaded in blue in the picture), namely: 1. The interplay between existential and/or instrumental factors, and; 2. The three types of social capital within the scope of cooperation namely bonding, bridging, and linking. Existential and/or instrumental factors that match the interests and identities of other actors, along with a balance in the scope of cooperation (bonding, bridging, linking) can affect the dynamics of a SAF. In cases where such factors do not match and the scope of cooperation is out of balance, the opposite outcome is likely to happen.

### *III. Composition in Embeddedness*

In short, the embeddedness of a Strategic Action Field includes three aspects: 1. The state of adjacent action fields surrounding a SAF (proximate/distant; vertical/horizontal; state/non-state); 2. The pattern of relationships between one SAF and another (dependent, interdependent, or unconnected), and; 3. The quantity of connections a SAF has (ranging from many to none). Each of these aspects and sub-aspects carries different degrees of influence to the dynamics of a SAF.

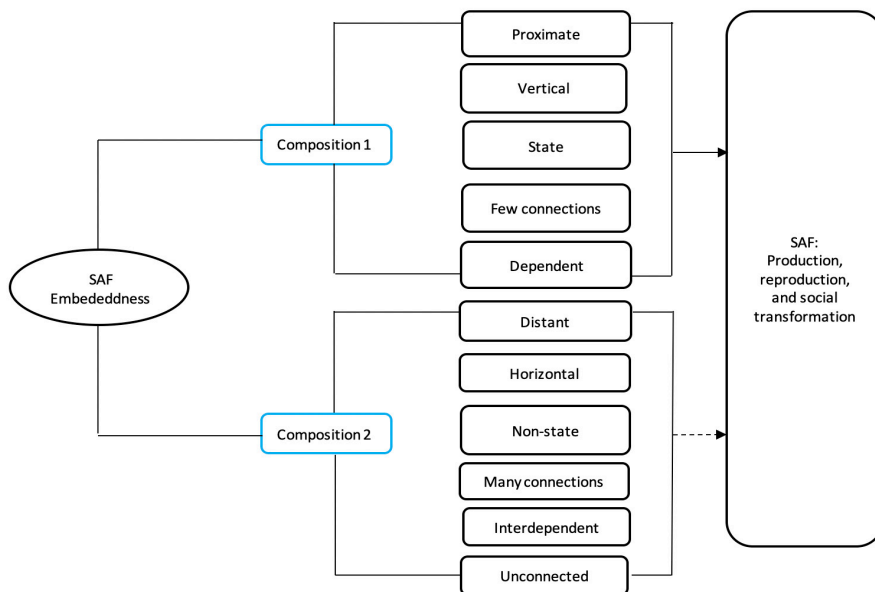
While I do not oppose this categorization, I also managed to identify one point that warrants further discussion within Fligstein and McAdam's conception of embeddedness. In particular, they did not outline the likeliness in which certain aspects and sub-aspects of the same characteristics form a distinct "External Environment" with its particular set of influences to the dynamics of a SAF. These specific collections of aspects can be termed the *composition* of SAF embeddedness.

I identify at least two compositions of SAF embeddedness. The first, which I simply refer to as "Composition I", comprises sub-aspects that suggest proximate, vertical, and dependent relations between SAFs, along with a relation to a State SAF and relatively few connections

with other SAFs. All these sub-aspects share a similar type of influence, namely increasing the possibility of SAFs to be formed, stabilized, and transformed. Conversely, “Composition 2” indicates an overall lack of dynamism in forming, stabilizing, or transforming SAFs. The sub-aspects within this composition shows relationships between SAFs that are distant, horizontal, and interdependent. The absence of relations with State SAFs—or to be precise, with *any* other SAFs—also falls within this composition.

The two compositions above are certainly not rigid. In some cases, a SAF might contain sub-aspects from both compositions, such as when it has few connections (Composition 1), and the relation with these small number of connections are distant (Composition 2).

Figure 4. Embeddedness and SAF Dynamics



A brief description of composition in SAF embeddedness can be seen in Figure 4. This complementary version simply simplifies the sub-aspects of embeddedness into two categories, namely Composition 1, which tends to have some influence on SAF dynamics and Composition 2 (blue in the image), which has less or no effect.

## CONCLUSION: SAF THEORY IN ACTION

My main criticism of Fligstein and McAdam's Strategic Action Field Theory is that the gaps in their theoretical construction might hinder their concepts from corresponding with everyday social life. To demonstrate how some of these gaps might be patched by my complementary proposals, I provide the following concrete examples taken from political life.

By introducing the idea of a gradation of actor composition within a SAF, I aimed to overcome the gap caused by the dichotomy of incumbent versus challenger in the thoughts of Fligstein and McAdam. In everyday life, social actors are hardly only found occupying these extreme roles, but fall to an array of other positions between these two poles. In electoral politics, for example, there are voters who remain neutral throughout and do not even exercise their right to vote, while others act in a more opportunistic mold by playing the role of political brokers. Meanwhile, introducing the idea of an interplay between existential and instrumental factors also helps to resolve the uncertainty of determining which of these two exerts a larger influence. The lower class, for example, may support a political party due to instrumental factors, such as its provision of free health services, while the middle class is more attracted to a party's ideational facets, such as their vision and mission.

My proposal of the three categories of scope of cooperation within a SAF and their influence on its dynamics (ie. bonding influences reproduction, while bridging and linking affects SAF production and transformation) is intended to fill the conceptual gap left by Fligstein and McAdam regarding the designation of "internal" and "external". The effects of strong bonding can be seen, among others, in political parties that are exclusive and are usually based on religious conservatism. Meanwhile, the strong nature of bridging and linking is reflected in parties that are more inclusive, whether they are based on a more moderate religious stream or other ideologies. Finally, my idea of composition in SAF embeddedness might also complement Fligstein and McAdam's own conception. For example, the increase in electoral support for religious-conservative political parties can be explained by a parallel development of religious conservatism in other social fields: the progress and growth made by party wing organizations, the pattern of top-down (vertical) relations between parties and their wing organizations, as well as as the corresponding weak influence of moderate religious organizations.

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Figure 1. Strategic Action Field (SAF) according to Fligstein and McAdam

