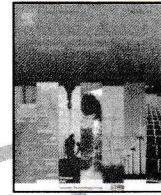


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Survey

Sustainability transitions and strategic action fields: A literature review and discussion

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ABSTRACT

With the growing attention to political dimensions of sustainability transitions (STs), researchers have shown interest in theoretical frameworks from policy studies and sociology. A framework that has growing popularity is the theory of strategic action fields (SAF) as developed by Fligstein and McAdam (2011; 2012). This review shows 1) how the integrated and holistic approach of SAF theory can contribute to growing interest in ST research in institutions, power, and agency; and 2) how ST researchers have modified and extended SAF theory. Based on a systematic sample of publications, the study identifies five theoretical clusters of SAF theory in ST research: actor relations and resources; change, emergence, and destabilization of fields; field rules; agency, framing, and coalitions; and strategic action in an interfield matrix. The potential of field theory as an analytical framework for ST research is discussed and critically assessed.

1. Introduction

Leading theoretical frameworks in sustainability transition (ST) studies originally drew heavily on pre-existing frameworks from science and technology studies and innovation studies (e.g., Geels, 2007; Markard and Truffer, 2008). These fields tended to conceptualize the research problem of substantial technological change in terms of systems, functions, and evolutionary processes. As the ST field developed, researchers paid increasing attention to developing a better understanding of agency, power, and strategy in the context of institutional change (e.g., Avelino and Wittmayer, 2016; Fuenfschilling and Truffer, 2014; Geels, 2014; Geels et al., 2016). As this change occurred, meso-level institutional and policy-process theories gained more attention. With this turn to theories in sociology and policy studies, there has been growing interest in the theory of strategic action fields, or “SAFs” (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011, 2012; see Köhler et al., 2017).

This study contributes to the literature on sustainability transitions (STs) by exploring both how ST researchers are using SAF theory and how they are developing it. Regarding the first contribution, we show how ST researchers have used SAF theory to provide a holistic and comprehensive framework that is especially relevant for research on the role of agency, strategy, rules, framing, institutional context, and power in ST transitions (e.g., Candido et al., 2018; Canzler et al., 2017; Fuchs and Hinderer, 2016a; Köhrsen, 2018; Mey and Diesendorf, 2018). For example, with respect to the multilevel perspective (Geels, 2007), SAF theory draws attention to the unequal positions of actors in an industrial field and the effects of innovations on their power in a field, and it populates the landscape as a set of structural conditions with an interfield matrix that provides strategic opportunities for actors. With respect to institutional approaches that have gained ground in ST research (e.g., Fuenfschilling and Truffer, 2014, 2016), SAF the-

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Thus, this review contributes to ST research by demonstrating the growing appreciation of SAF theory, and by implication field theory in general, to problems encountered by ST researchers. SAF theory can help to advance the ST research field by providing a comprehensive and integrated way of thinking about the relations among actors, power, strategy, processes of field change, rules and norms, cultural meanings and framing, alliances and coalitions, and the institutional context or interfield matrix. Whereas some other, related theoretical approaches focus more on structural conditions (e.g., opportunity structures and political economy), cultural meanings and logics, discourse or advocacy coalitions, innovation dynamics (niche and regime), and so on, field theory provides a comprehensive way of thinking about conceptual connections among the different areas of emphasis in meso-level theory. The comprehensive and synthetic perspective of SAF theory and field theory in general is of particular relevance for researchers who are interested in the political and strategic dimensions of sustainability transitions.

However, the additional contribution that we make is to highlight the changes and adjustments to SAF theory that ST researchers have made while drawing on SAF theory in their empirical projects. In this section, we summarize this process of theory application and innovation with respect to the five theoretical clusters that the review identified.

First, ST researchers draw on and modify the concepts of power and actors in SAF theory. The use of SAF theory in ST studies provides a method for the assessment of the relative power of actors, including the differences in their power as the same actors move in different social fields. Especially when Bourdieu's concept of the different forms of capital is used judiciously and in combination with the concept of general resources used by Fligstein and McAdam, ST researchers provide a concrete way to think about power that is linked to strategic action. But ST researchers move beyond the binary relationship of challenger and incumbent and explore the complex divisions within these two categories. They also draw attention to the different ways in which the relationship can be defined, such as a relationship of different levels of power and one of different postures toward the future direction of the field.

Second, ST researchers who have used SAF theory have drawn attention to research on the emergence of fields and how new fields are constructed and old ones destabilized. Researchers have also shown how actors can strategically seek to develop new fields and the conditions under which emerging fields can achieve a settlement or become mired in ongoing conflict. Actors find opportunities in the creation of new fields, where rules are not yet stabilized and power relations among actors are not yet well defined. In addition, ST researchers have charted out some of the conditions for field destabilization that go beyond the emphasis on exogenous shocks.

Third, ST researchers use SAF theory to study and theorize the role of field rules, which is not well developed in the original statements of Fligstein and McAdam. ST researchers show how rules are contested, modified, enforced, and developed. Because the rules of action serve as both a guide to action in the field and a target of action, the stability of a set of rules that orient action in a field requires ongoing work. ST researchers have developed the theorization of field rules to include the mechanisms for achieving rule stability that go beyond the formal enforcement of external regulations or internal governance units. These mechanisms include the embedding of rules in cultural practices and identities.

Fourth, ST researchers have developed the understanding of agency in their analyses. Although Fligstein and McAdam focused heavily on the concept of social skill, ST researchers focused much more on the basis of strategic action in the intertwined work of framing actors' goals and building coalitions. For example, ST researchers have focused more on the strategic use of cultural meanings as they show how framing strategy is connected with resonating cultural values. ST researchers also draw attention to framing, storylines, visions, and related symbolic and cultural dimensions of transitions, and they draw out the relations between frames, coalition composition, and counterframing by opposing actors in the field. This approach to culture and strategy has some similarities to Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus, which has some advantages over Fligstein and McAdam's understanding of social skill because it connects with a semiotic concept of culture. This development in ST research also embeds the analysis of frames and related concepts (imaginaries, visions, or storylines) in a specifiable field of relations of cooperation and conflict.

Finally, ST researchers use SAF theory to show how transitions occur in a structured space of interfield relations that is not limited to industry-industry and industry-state relations. Rather, the interfield matrix includes different fields within the state and relations with the scientific, media, civil society, and other social fields. Attention to the interfield matrix is itself valuable in ST research because it provides a structured and more precise way of populating concepts such as "context" or "landscape." In addition, ST researchers have also begun to show how actors use this matrix as a strategic resource. By going outside the primary field of orientation and simultaneously operating in neighboring fields, actors can leverage new coalition partners and bring pressure on more powerful actors in the original field.

In summary, we show that the relationship between SAF theory and ST research is a dynamic process that goes beyond the application of stabilized concepts. SAF theory has proven valuable in ST research both because of its integrative approach to strategy, power, and institutional dimensions of transitions and because of the value of specific conceptual clusters. However, as ST researchers have taken up SAF theory, they have also provided significant and innovative theoretical modifications across all five conceptual clusters.

6. Conclusion

In recent years, ST researchers have begun to explore the potential of SAF theory for ST research, and in the process they have made modifications to SAF theory. This review advances the development in ST research by showing how the emerging relationship between SAF theory and ST research is a two-way conversation. On the one side, we show that ST researchers have already demonstrated how SAF theory can help to solve problems and inform research frameworks in ST research, particularly when problems of