Field theory

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Abstract

...
Position in the field indicates the potential for a force exerted on the person, but a force that impinges "from the inside" as opposed to external compulsion. Motivation is accordingly considered to be the paramount example of social structure in action, as opposed to a residue of chance or freedom. ... Field theory offers social scientists a combination of analytical insight and attention to the concrete; further, the implicit definition of "explanation" that it brings is one that, unlike conventional sociological definitions, is internally consistent and in accord with everyday usage.

Field Characteristics

1. It purports to explain changes in the states of some elements (e.g., a static field induces motion in a charged particle) but need not appeal to changes in states of other elements (i.e., "causes").
2. These changes in state involve an interaction between the field and the existing states of the elements.
3. The elements have particular attributes that make them susceptible to the field affect (particles differ in the degree and direction of charge).
4. The field without the elements is only a potential for the creation of force, without any existent force.
5. The field itself is organized and differential. In other words, at any position the field is a vector of potential force and these vectors are neither identical nor randomly distributed.

Three Senses of Field

1. The field is conceived as an analytic area of simplified dimensions in which we position persons or institutions (topological sense, psychology of perception): not all spatial models imply a field. The positions of persons in a field must be based on their interpersonal relations, or on their orientations to each other or to shared goals: whether a set of persons actually forms a field must be an empirical question, and cannot be true by definition or methodology.
2. The field as an organization of forces (analogy to physics): We must bear in mind that something useful in one science may be worthless for another. ... "the notion of field presupposes a break with the realist representation which leads us to reduce the effect of the environment to the effect of direct action as actualized during an interaction." (Bourdieu)
3. The field as a field of contestation, a battlefield: But while Bourdieu more than others has stressed this meaning of the word *field*, he is not unique in this regard. In particular, Lewin, who rarely discussed social conflict as such, may still have had the same martial images in the back of his head that one sees in Bourdieu. But this sense of the field, as goal-oriented striving cannot replace the other conceptions of the field, since to do so begs the question of what it is the actors are striving for. Field theory argues that this must be understood as endogenous to the field, as opposed to wholly exogenous.

Misc

Field theory is well equipped to deal with one of the fundamental weaknesses of mainstream ssociological theory, namely its inability to do much with cases in which persons stand somewhat apart from the patterns of regularity upon which sociology focuses. Mainstream sociological theory, which consider the "sociolized" person to have preferences, needs, and desired that are "socially formed", generally has a difficult time explaining why people have such distantiation from "their" own values.

Not all human action or behavior takes place "in the field" in that it is judged susceptible to a field affect.

It is not necessarily clear that field can only induce such vertical differentiation, and it may be a problem that Bourdieu's analysis has tended to neglect horizontal differentiation that remains within the field. Horizontal differentiation may be said to exist when persons are not *comparable*, in that it makes no sense to say that one is better than the other according to some filed standard nor are the the same, yet for a number of reasons, we need to see them as being in the same field. Thus the game metaphor may introduce an artificial simplification that cuts against the second commanality among field theorists, namely their emphasis on concrete analysis.

Field theory implies a confident pursuit of what Lewin called "the full concreteness of the particular situation" while conventional approaches fear getting lost in "accidents". Concreteness, or attention to the particularities of this case, far from being assumed to lead to a "small picture" is inseparable from the field theorists emphasis on totality and synthesis.

In particular, field theory elegantly handles as fundamentally the same two social phenomena usually considered to be antithetical, namely the feeling that htere is some social force which constrains individuals externally and the feeling that we act on the basis of our motivations.