

# Power and culture in supply chains: contributions of the strategic action fields approach

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## Abstract

Important research efforts have been developed to account for power in the analysis of supply chains. This paper argues that further gains may arise by considering organizations as social constructions mediated not only by power relations, but also by cultural representations intrinsically intertwined to it. Its purpose is to discuss the dynamics of stability and change in supply chains based on the Strategic Action Fields (SAFs) approach. A theoretical essay was elaborated discussing some of the main implications of this perspective to the study of supply chains and presenting propositions to enable the construction of research objects and guide empirical studies in the area. Propositions emphasize how ongoing cultural-political relations circumscribed to different fields, including the organization, with its internal disputes.

## Keywords

Culture. Power. Strategic action fields. Supply chains.

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## 1. Introduction

Important research efforts have been developed to account for power in the analysis of supply chains (Cox, 1999, 2001; Benton & Maloni, 2005; Hingley, 2005; Crook & Combs, 2007; Ireland & Webb, 2007; Zhao et al., 2008; Bandeira et al., 2009; Byrne & Power, 2014; Huo et al., 2017). These initiatives were commonly grounded in empirical verifications of the influence of power relations in supply chain management (SCM), enabling these authors to assess the reality faced by practitioners more closely and to overcome their own social embeddedness (Faria & Wensley, 2002). In doing so, they implicitly or explicitly challenged both the pure normative models that deal with power relations as externalities and basic assumptions of the SCM.

Scholars often rely on broader conceptions of power and approaches stemming from organizational studies and strategy literature to conceptualize and assess the influence of political processes in supply chain practices. Notions of power as the one developed by French & Raven (1959) and approaches as Resource Dependence Theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) and Network Analysis (Smith-Doerr & Powell, 2005), related to a power-dependence view (Emerson, 1962), have commonly underlain these efforts.

While these approaches are appropriated to the task at hand and generated rich contributions, further gains may arise from the adoption of theoretical tools that 'take seriously' the idea that organizations and supply chains are social constructions mediated not only by power relations, but also by cultural representations operating in circumscribed arenas of action that have been called 'fields' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Martin, 2003; Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). In this view, power and culture are considered to be intrinsically intertwined, challenging segmented views that dominated post-war social sciences (Dobbin & Jung, 2015). They are also seen not only as variables for analysis, but as the bedrock of SCM practices and other managerial and economic phenomena.

These assumptions about the social dynamic, developed in contemporary organizational analysis, oppose both rationalistic/atomistic and structural accounts of action, dominant respectively in economics and management

and conventional sociological theory (Martin, 2003; Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). Their application to supply chain assessment responds to calls questioning rationalistic assumptions commonly used in this literature (Alves Filho et al., 2004; Borgatti & Li, 2009). It is also compatible with a subfield of management that has long conceived its object in interactional terms (Borgatti & Li, 2009).

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the influence of culture and power relations on the dynamics of stability and change in supply chains based on the Strategic Action Fields approach (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). The potential contribution of the perspective was explored following the claims of authors who consider that approaches of organizational analysis may offer consistent foundations for supply chain analysis (e.g.: Alves Filho et al., 2004). It also contributes to improving the understanding of how culture and power operate in several circumscribed arenas of supply chains.

The following sections compose this essay. First, some epistemological and methodological consideration about the essay are detailed. Then, the strategic action fields approach is presented and situated in relation to other perspectives of organization studies often used in supply chain literature. Three basic circumscribed spheres of meaning and dispute that are considered by practitioners in SCM are identified and assessed. The first is the industry or the sector in which the firms participating in the chain compete. The second is the organization, in which different functional areas commonly compete around the definition of supply chain practices. Finally, it is argued that the constitution of supply chains involves the creation of a specific social order gathering organizations composing it. In the last section, the final remarks and conclusions are presented.

## 2. Epistemological and methodological considerations

To achieve the purposed goal, an essay was elaborated addressing how this sociological perspective may be specifically useful to build supply chains as a research object. One of the challenges in addressing organizations as social constructions is that the very object of research should not be taken for granted (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Its construction is one of the main challenges for researchers, who address them from their own social perspectives.

Theoretical concepts are an important way to drive and discipline research, directing the attention of the researchers to certain aspects of the situations to be assessed. Grounding cultural research on theory is an important form of avoiding empiricism and that non systematized and common sense views frame the analysis (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). Nevertheless, the use of substantial and rigid theoretical models also frame the way the researcher assess reality, making only very particular and biased points of view accessible (Vandenberghe, 1999; Cassirer, 2004).

To overcome this dilemma, field approaches unify realistic and relational epistemologies to conform the hard core of a research program based on the work of classic authors of social science (Vandenberghe, 1999; Martin, 2003). They are formed by a set of loosely coupled and general theoretical concepts that are designed to address relations instead of substances of the social phenomena, capturing the dynamic underlying diverse domains of societies (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Fligstein, & McAdam, 2012).

When confronted to data in empirical research, the abstract concepts of field theory work as tools that guide data gathering and analysis through analogical thinking. In this essay, the concepts of the SAF approach were confronted not to a specific case, but *vis-à-vis* the abstract idea of a supply chain. Concepts were applied to illustrate how they may contribute to the assessment of multiple levels of supply chains, pre-constructing specific research objects regarding the dynamic of culture and power. The idea is to identify fields involved in these specific kinds of networks, what is far from obvious and indicates directions to get into the symbolic universe of managers and make sense of their practices and the contexts in which they unfold.

So, this essay should not be read as a 'pure' theoretical statement, but as an illustration of how this theory may be useful to supply chain scholars. To make this point clear and also to summarize the main arguments developed, propositions were formulated. These may be tested using quantitative or qualitative research, drawing attention to aspects that have been neglected by the existing SCM literature and operating as a powerful program to organize, integrate and accumulate knowledge (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012).

## 3. The strategic action fields approach

The Strategic Action Fields (SAF) approach was presented after being developed and used in several empirical studies by Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam, important authors of organizational studies and economic sociology, and social movements' research, respectively. It draws on other field theories, institutional theory, resource dependence theory and other important classical and contemporary approaches in social sciences, integrating

them. It departs from the insight that organizations and their environments are social constructions mediated by power and culture in which actors seek to build stable worlds that accommodate their different interests and views (Fligstein, 2001).

The idea of fields from institutional theory has been used by several authors to make sense of supply chain practices (Zsidisin et al., 2005; Rogers et al., 2007; Zhu et al., 2007; Wong & Boon-itt, 2008; Liu et al., 2010; Cai et al., 2010; Tate et al., 2011). In line with the ‘first wave’ of institutionalism in organizational analysis (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991), these studies address the conformity of supply chain practices to pressures arising from organizational fields, but neglect the way these fields emerge and change and the influence of organizations and other collective actors in this process. They also underestimate the role of power, interests, resources and positions in structuring fields (Hirsch & Lounsbury, 1997; Fligstein, 1997; Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008). Finally, in this version of institutionalism, fields tend to be seen as fixed and autonomous units of analysis, neglecting external influences and the interconnection of multiple fields (Thornton et al., 2012; Fligstein & McAdam, 2012).

The SAF approach offers ways to deal with these shortcomings and account for the dynamic of stability and change in organizations. SAF are defined by Fligstein & McAdam (2012, p. 10) as “[...] socially constructed arenas within which actors with varying resources endowments vie for advantage”. Fields are relatively autonomous social spheres and are socially constructed in three key specific aspects:

- a. the sense of belonging, more based on intersubjective aspects than on objective criteria;
- b. the boundaries of a field, which change according to the definition of the situation and the issues at stake;
- c. the understandings that underlie the operation of the field, including the shared understanding of what is at stake in the field, who are the most and least powerful actors, what are the rules of the field and how the actors at each position should act.

This approach is grounded in the concept of social skills, which account for the distinctive features of human sociability (Fligstein, 2001; Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). Drawing on historical and archeological literature about the emergence of humans, these authors assert that they are different from other social beings due to their capacity and propensity for collaborative symbolic activity, associated with the advent of language, culture and meaning creation. These properties enable humans to interpret nature, build shared identities and meanings and to develop the ability to act collectively. The capacities to induce cooperation are distributed unequally amongst actors in different contexts, with some actors being more skilled than 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 considering existing interests and identities. (Fligstein, 2001, p. 15).

In authors’ view, societies are formed by multiple fields, in which meanings and order to social and – especially important to our case – economic life are produced. Therefore, a specific field to be assessed is always embedded in a network of other fields, with which they may keep three ideal types of relation. Two fields may be unconnected if what happens in one has no influence over the other. They may also be hierarchically connected if one space has influence over the other. Fields may also be interdependent, tending to develop more reciprocal relations with one another. States are considered to be important types of fields of modern societies that are capable of establishing and enforcing rules influencing the dynamics of varied arenas.

There are three ideal field configurations, with different characteristics. First, in *emerging fields*, meanings and identities are fluid, remaining in dispute. Actors with different views mobilize to impose their interpretations of situations seeking to establish identities and meanings that benefit themselves and using their resources and social skills to act strategically. The greater the difference between the initial distribution of the resources among actors of the emergent field, the more hierarchically the field will tend to be structured.

Gradually, actors able to impose their resources as the valid ones and whose strategies are most successful dominate the social arena. Then, the field approximates to a second state highlighted by the authors, the one of *stability*. In this case, identities and meanings that ground action within the field are stabilized, with actors seen as incumbents imposing their views as rules for the field. Challengers may not agree with the established social order, but they tend to adopt a cautious posture, sticking, even if partially, to the dominant order to *remain in the game*. However, it does not mean that stable fields are static. A constant jockeying for positions happens within certain boundaries and according to a relatively predictable dynamic, with changes tending to occur in an incremental fashion.

This order gets disrupted in the state of *crisis*. Commonly, fields get to this state due to *exogenous shocks*, with other spaces from which a certain field depends contributing to a sudden deconstruction of identities and shared meanings. Change may also result from smaller internal disputes that end up generating intense mobilization of different groups seeking to reorganize the arena. In both cases, the actors' possibilities are defined by their resource endowments and strategic skills.

The comparison of SAF with other theoretical approaches commonly used to address power in supply chains is also relevant at this point. Resource dependence theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) is one of the main frequently invoked references by SCM scholars (Cool & Henderson, 1998; Crook & Combs, 2007; Ireland & Webb, 2007; Paulraj & Chen, 2007). In this view, resources derive from the environment and the firm is considered as a network of exchange relations from which its survival depends (Emerson, 1962). Managers have to act to enhance firms' autonomy, coopting the environment to amplify chances of survival. Firms are powerful as they concentrate the possession of a resource and to the degree the resources controlled are acknowledged as important in themselves.

SAF address resource dependences in network interactions as one but not the only source of power. Power refers to different properties of actors recognized as valuable by others in a specific field. These attributes are socially constructed and changes in fields may involve the upgrading and downgrading of properties considered as valued. The relative distribution of valued resources controlled by an actor of the field defines one's position in it, establishing incumbents and challengers. In industrial arenas, for example, incumbent firms may be identified based on relative profit, diversification, the number of markets they participate, market share, worldwide presence, technological resources dominated, capacity to influence governments, positions of power in industry associations, juridical resources and other specific objectified properties that indicate resource endowments (Bourdieu, 2005). In practice, the possession of these resources contributes to the construction of an image or a reputation of the firm, enhancing its capacity to reproduce its position. In SAF, power is strictly and coherently associated with meaning making.

SAF also address power in a distinct fashion than network approaches (Lazzarini et al., 2001; Borgatti & Li, 2009; Candido et al., 2016). While network scholars dominate powerful techniques for modeling different forms of interaction, they do not draw on a clear theoretical view about social dynamics, accounting for history, culture, agency and the way they influence power relations (Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994; Fourcade, 2007; Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). As a result, power in exchange networks, for example, is associated solely to the degree of dependence on others or on a focal actor (Cook, 1977). As mentioned above, SAF go beyond relations of dependence, accommodating several socially constructed forms of power, including the ones associated with networks, defined by Bourdieu (1986, 2005) as social capital.

Finally, it is relevant to situate SAF in relation to the model of structural analysis from industrial organization and business strategy developed by Porter (1979), referred by Cool & Henderson (1998), Cox (1999) and Crook & Combs (2007). While these approaches may be used in similar ways, SAF correspond to a broader theory of social action, which may be used in multiple levels of assessment and in a more flexible fashion. Fields also emphasize the socially constructed character of the structure of industries, addressing culture and power in a more systematic and integrated way and serving not only to the analysis of established industries, but also to deal with their emergence and change.

In the following sections, propositions about how the SAF approach may be applied to assess several spheres of meaning and action involved in SCM are presented.

#### 4. Industrial sectors as fields and SCM practices

The analysis of supply chain practices demands attention to a first context in which they are adopted: the industrial sectors wherein organizations are inserted and meet their competitors. In line with institutionalism in organizational analysis and with widely known models from business strategy literature (e.g.: BCG matrix; Porter's five forces), the SAF approach suggests managers involved in SCM take into account in their decision making what their main competitors are doing. Actors tend to adopt strategies consistent with their position in the field as a whole or in a specific segment of it (subfield) and, when it is possible, they imitate the practices of companies considered as superior or seen as well succeeded (Garcia-Pont & Nohria, 2002). Companies are also subject to coercive and normative pressures, coming from State, governance units, professionals, among others (Dimaggio & Powell, 1983; Tate et al., 2011), as illustrated by the study of Dias et al. (2012) on sustainability management in supply chains.

In general, companies may be in newer or in more mature and structured sectors. In emerging fields, the performance parameters and professional practices seen as more efficient and effective are usually less defined,

tending to embrace a greater variety of interpretations. It is still not clear which are the leading companies - those to be imitated or that provide basic references for defining the strategy of others - what makes companies often seek for references in other sectors. Overall, there are no well-structured business associations acting as what Fligstein & McAdam (2012) call internal governance units. Many of the specific State regulations are also not clearly defined or the way they are interpreted is not stabilized.

Professionals conducting the adoption of SCM practices will take as a reference the ones developed in other sectors with which the emerging sector maintains relations of material or symbolic dependence, with action tending to diffuse from important economic sectors (e.g.: Automotive industry) to others. In this state, socially skilled action is favored, with managers and other professionals from specific organizations being able to influence the understandings about the contributions of SCM to the business.

*Proposition 1a: In emerging industries, the adoption of supply management practices is influenced by experiences developed in other influential sectors, which may increase its legitimacy.*

*Proposition 1b: Managers and professionals of companies of novel sectors use the resources and social skills available to develop their supply chain practices in a relatively independent fashion from their competitors, framing their own understandings about the contributions of SCM to the business.*

In mature fields, the meanings associated to SCM practices are stabilized, with the interpretations of dominant actors about the efficiency and effectiveness of some SCM practices and how they may be achieved becoming recognized by others. In cases in which the contribution of SCM to performance is acknowledged by incumbents, these management practices tend to diffuse as they align with the power structures of the field (Guler et al., 2002; Rao, 2006). The relative distribution of power in the field will influence the extent to which this diffusion will occur.

*Proposition 1c: SCM practices tend to diffuse throughout stable economic sectors when they are seen by incumbents as efficient and effective tools for improving performance. The extent of this diffusion process will be proportional to the concentration of power in the field.*

In situations of crises, in which incumbents face trouble to stabilize the meanings and identities that organize a certain sector, the shared understandings about the contribution of SCM to the performance of organizations of the field may change or even collapse. This will depend from the jockeying for position and from the possibilities of conciliation of the rising conceptions about the field promoted by challengers with supply chain practices.

*Proposition 1d: In periods of crisis in industries, the contributions of SCM practices to improve the performance may be called into question, depending on the new dominant conceptions of the field arising.*

Beside the 'organizational field' level, which is privileged by institutional accounts of organizational analysis, two other relevant units are considered useful to understand the logics of practice in SCM based on SAF approach. In the following section, implications of framing organizations as fields for analyzing supply chains are developed.

## 5. Organizations as fields: SCM practices in the organizations

Fligstein & McAdam (2012) suggest organizations may be conceptualized as fields, often composed by subfields. In this fashion, firms and other bureaucratic organizations are ones in which the structure is particularly prescribed, with the roles of subunits, relations between them and other rules that shape actors' behaviors better defined than in other social spaces. Each bureaucratic level may also be seen as a strategic action field itself, with hierarchical positions being relatively well defined.

According to the authors, there are two basic kinds of struggle in this type of organization. The first is the vertical one, among the actors who occupy higher and lower positions in the hierarchy. Upper hierarchical levels may not have sufficient resources or social skills to maintain their authority over the lower ones, what may induce actors to corrupt a particular organizational order. The second type, which is especially relevant for the assessment of SCM developed here, involves conflicts between the subfields that constitute the organization. In this case, functional areas, as production, marketing, sales, finance, and human resource management dispute the different ways of seeing the organization as a whole, its strategies and practices. This is exemplified by Salerno et al. (2010) regarding the selection of suppliers in organizations of the automotive industry.

Power relations within the units composing the organization are decisively influenced by the dynamic of the organizational field, highlighted in the previous section. In his analysis of the evolution of the largest corporations in the United States during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Fligstein (1990) showed that struggles over the control



of organizational fields paralleled internal disputes. So, while these companies started to adopt strategies and structures aligned with a 'financial conception of control' by the end of the period, professionals with a background in finance also got to the top of organizational hierarchies (Fligstein, 1987; Zorn, 2004; Davis, 2009).

As a result, the analysis of SCM depends on understanding the overall distribution of power among the different areas of companies. Business units involved in these practices interpret them according to their own views and interests, which are commonly contradictory. As suggested by Kanda & Deshmukh (2008), these conflicts may be associated with incompatible performance indicators, targets and goals. Production, logistics, marketing, sales and purchasing departments are subfields often involved in the disputes regarding SCM. These subfields in which SCM practices are conceived are usually dependent on companies' higher levels, which intervene directly in their disputes, and also on higher order interorganizational fields.

*Proposition 2a: Supply chain practices will be shaped by different meanings attributed to them in subfields of companies. In stable companies, units with more resource endowments and skills will impose their views about the SCM over others, being influenced by the dominant conceptions stemming from higher order fields.*

New firms tend to lack a stable conception of control, what have implications for the attribution of meaning to supply chain practices. The results of the disputes occurring at this state influence directly the way SCM will be conceptualized when the field gets better structured. The greater the inequality of initial resource distribution, more likely the control over these practices will be hierarchical.

*Proposition 2b: In emergent companies, the meanings associated with SCM practices will be more sorely disputed between business units. The actors to be involved in it and the scope of these practices will be at stake.*

*Proposition 2c: Actors will use their resource endowments to try to impose their conceptions and act strategically based on their social skills. The result of these disputes will be influenced by contests over the control of the whole organization and by the structure of higher order fields.*

The dominant meanings about SCM established in companies tend to be reproduced, but they may change. In stable organizations, change tends to occur in a piecemeal fashion. But in certain contexts, the very structures that organize the field may be put into question, leading to more radical shifts. Under the influence of other fields, which provoke 'exogenous shocks', incumbent areas of the organization may have their position called into question, what may provoke changes in SCM practices.

*Proposition 2d: Under favorable external conditions, the field of SCM in organizations may get disrupted. In this case, a situation of crisis will arise, with challengers promoting the escalation of perceived uncertainty and using their resources and social skills to impose their conceptions about SCM.*

In the following section, the relationships among the organizations participating of the same chain are addressed.

## 6. Supply chains as fields: establishing a new management sphere

Over the last decades, the notion of SCM arose, implying in an interfirm sphere of management, in which processes permeating the boundaries of different companies should be coordinated. To do so, it is necessary to establish a SAF, in which such actions will gain meaning and make sense to involved organizations and practitioners.

Supply chains involve companies, which may be conceptualized as fields, inserted in different organizational fields. They have access to different resource endowments that define their position in the supply chain. Positions tend to be influenced by the positions occupied by their sectors *vis-a-vis* one another, with companies from greater businesses (e.g.: automotive industry) tending to get advantage over the ones from smaller sectors (e.g.: auto upholstery business), as noted by Jabbour et al. (2011). In case of a supply chain involving sectors with similar sizes, the specific positions of companies in their sectors will tend to exert greater influence to the positions they occupy in the supply field. In this sense, a leading company from a medium sized sector may be in a better position in the supply field than a challenger from a greater sector.

Companies of the supply field have to build a common conception of interest and other understandings that justify their cooperation, what is usually done based on the idea that competition should occur not between individual companies, but between chains. It is assumed that the involvement in supply chains may generate a generalized elevation of gains. As scholars studying power relations in supply chains noted, this conception

tends to concur with the interest of individual companies, which also dispute the appropriation of value (Cox, 1999; Alves Filho et al., 2004; Crook & Combs, 2007; Munson et al., 1999). Therefore, the establishment of a supply chain field is subject to the reconciliation of these two competing conceptions of interest, with the formation of a coalition (March, 1994).

As in other SAF, the construction of these shared understandings about SCM practices is mediated by power relations and the social skills of actors. The organization of supply chains is a key period to the definition of the culture of this arena. Social skilled actors from different companies are able to shape notions about who is and who is not part of the chain, what is at stake in this space, who are the most powerful companies, how the chain should be managed and how companies in different positions should act. The role of these actors is particularly important when the distribution of resources among chain members is not so uneven. In this case, they are able to influence the sense of trust and the perception of power (Gulati et al., 2000; Ireland & Webb, 2007), mobilizing companies and fashioning ways to integrate and coordinate businesses (Lambert & Cooper, 2000; Mentzer et al., 2001). When the asymmetries of power are stark, social skilled actors of challenger organizations have limited space to act and stronger companies can impose their views regarding the management of the chain. In the study presented by Bandeira et al. (2009) about the construction industry in Brazil, for instance, this is evident in the dependence relations between the typical small suppliers and the large construction companies. In such conditions, power may be functional for setting the bases for SCM, as suggested by Lauer (2000), Benton & Maloni (2005) and Tate et al. (2011).

*Propositions 3a: The establishment of the agreements underlying SCM will depend more heavily on the social skills of actors in the emergence of SCM practices, especially when the asymmetries of power are not very stark.*

*Proposition 3b: Power asymmetries among actors involved in the constitution of the supply chain practices will enable the construction of cultural grounds based on which it will operate, with powerful actors tending to impose their conceptions over others.*

In established supply chains, the meanings enacted by actors stabilize and practices unfold based on a regular and relatively predictable fashion. Challengers may not agree with the constructed social order, but they maintain a cautious attitude, tacitly accepting the foundations of the chains' organization. Social skilled actors have little space to maneuver, especially if the established order is hierarchical, and actors behave in a predictable way most of the time. In line with studies on power in SCM, SAF approach suggests most of the time power is exercised in indirect and implicit fashion, with situations of coercion and explicit demonstrations of power being relatively rare and usually seen as harmful (French & Raven, 1959; Cox, 2001; Benton & Maloni, 2005; Ireland & Webb, 2007; Zhao et al., 2008). In the case of automobile chains studied by Rachid et al. (2006), for example, this is reflected in the pervasive influence of the most powerful firms in the internal management practices of the others. As authors notice, their practices are seen as a reference by smaller companies, inspiring them, what may be seen as a sophisticated influence. When stabilized, power relations in supply chain dyads may also be typified based on models like the ones offered by Gereffi et al. (2005). Techniques and technologies to SCM are seen as relevant to the measure they fit to the recognized representations and power relations (Lauer, 2000; Cox, 2001; Tate et al., 2011).

*Proposition 3c: In established supply chains, management is based on a socially constructed social order biased by power relations that tend to be reproduced. The practical sense and the meaning in the field mediate power relations that are exerted mainly indirectly.*

*Proposition 3d: In organized supply chains, techniques and technologies are considered to be appropriate as long as they fit into established representations and power relations among companies.*

As in the other levels of analysis previously assessed, the order of supply chains may get disrupted when external factors influence the field, framing new opportunities for challengers to put the established management paradigms into question using their resources. Actors mobilize to put their view of the supply chain and its management forward and to enhance dominated resources. Challengers also use their social skills to build strategies to subvert the field order and dominants try to reinforce the establishment. Studying the food industry, Silva et al. (2015) show some struggles and strategies in the process of rearrangement of power relations between industrial companies and supermarkets, due to the concentration of the retail sector in the 1990s, for example. The deployment of the disputes is influenced by the internal dynamics of the companies, the sectors they belong to and other higher level spheres with which they keep dependence relations. These changes in interpretations generate a sense of crisis in the SCM, which is only surpassed when a new way of making sense of the world becomes dominant.

*Proposition 3e: The cultural and political foundations of supply chain coordination will be put into question by challengers when political opportunities arise. Order will be reestablished when incumbents or challengers succeed in use their resources and social skills to create a new representation about the supply chain that may stabilize its relations.*

A total of 13 propositions presented in the essay and that may be validated by future empirical works are summarized in Table 1. They were constructed for three levels of assessment - the organization, the sector and the supply chain - and are related to three stages of fields - emergence, establishment and crisis.

Table 1. Summary of the propositions.

	Emergence	Establishment	Crisis
Industry	<p><i>Proposition 1a: In emerging industries, the adoption of supply management practices is influenced by experiences developed in other influential sectors, which may increase its legitimacy.</i></p> <p><i>Proposition 1b: Managers and professionals of companies of novel sectors use the resources and social skills available to develop their supply chain practices in a relatively independent fashion from their competitors, framing their own understandings about the contributions of SCM to the business.</i></p>	<p><i>Proposition 1c: SCM practices tend to diffuse throughout stable economic sectors when they are seen by incumbents as efficient and effective tools for improving performance. The extent of this diffusion process will be proportional to the concentration of power in the field.</i></p>	<p><i>Proposition 1d: In periods of crisis in industries, the contributions of SCM practices to improve the performance may be called into question, depending on the new dominant conceptions of the field arising.</i></p>
Company	<p><i>Proposition 2a: Supply chain practices will be shaped by different meanings attributed to them in subfields of companies. In stable companies, units with more resource endowments and skills will impose their views about the SCM over others, being influenced by the dominant conceptions stemming from higher order fields.</i></p> <p><i>Proposition 2b: In emergent companies, the meanings associated with SCM practices will be more sorely disputed between business units. The actors to be involved in it and the scope of these practices will be at stake.</i></p>	<p><i>Proposition 2c: Actors will use their resource endowments to try to impose their conceptions and act strategically based on their social skills. The result of these disputes will be influenced by contests over the control of the whole organization and by the structure of higher order fields.</i></p>	<p><i>Proposition 2d: Under favorable external conditions, the field of SCM in organizations may get disrupted. In this case, a situation of crisis will arise, with challengers promoting the escalation of perceived uncertainty and using their resources and social skills to impose their conceptions about SCM.</i></p>
Supply Chain	<p><i>Propositions 3a: The establishment of the agreements underlying SCM will depend more heavily on the social skills of actors in the emergence of SCM practices, especially when the asymmetries of power are not very stark.</i></p> <p><i>Proposition 3b: Power asymmetries among actors involved in the constitution of the supply chain practices will enable the construction of cultural grounds based on which it will operate, with powerful actors tending to impose their conceptions over others.</i></p>	<p><i>Proposition 3c: In established supply chains, management is based on a socially constructed social order biased by power relations that tend to be reproduced. The practical sense and the meaning in the field mediate power relations that are exerted mainly indirectly.</i></p> <p><i>Proposition 3d: In organized supply chains, techniques and technologies are considered to be appropriate as long as they fit into established representations and power relations among companies.</i></p>	<p><i>Proposition 3e: The cultural and political foundations of supply chain coordination will be put into question by challengers when political opportunities arise. Order will be reestablished when incumbents or challengers succeed in use their resources and social skills to create a new representation about the supply chain that may stabilize its relations.</i></p>

Source: Elaborated by the authors, based on Fligstein & McAdam (2012).

## 7. Final remarks and conclusions

In this essay, contributions of the SAF approach to the study of SCM practices were outlined. This broad perspective accounts for the dynamic of stability and change in organizations and assume that supply chains are social constructions mediated by power and culture. In line with the ethnographic approach, attention here is directed to understanding the practical sense of managers, shaped by relations circumscribed to fields. Theory is formed by articulated and flexible concepts that work as heuristic tools for analysis, preventing that the views and theoretical frameworks used by scholars bias the analysis.

SAF approach employs a conception of power intrinsically integrated to culture and meaning making. Indirect and non-coercive aspects of power are emphasized, with power being related to the capacity of shaping the paradigms that organize social action, including the dominant conceptions of interest. Coercion is only rarely



exercised and it is considered as a less effective and sophisticated form to exert influence and control, mainly used in periods of crisis in the field. While it is compatible with other approaches used in SCM to address power relations, this field theory offers a more comprehensive view of power, linked to a very general and a relational view of social and organizational dynamics.

The perspective is also useful to identify and integrate several levels of assessment that shape supply chain practices. The paper emphasized it may be used to understand the practices and relationships occurring within the sectors in which the companies operate, within organizations and in the supply chain fields. These three basic levels illustrated here correspond to important contexts that need to be considered and connected.

Research on supply chains and organizations constitute two distinct and specialized fields in management and their cross fertilization involve significant challenges. Each arena has its own consecrated authors and ideas, its rules and prevalent views and attributes values for distinct resources and properties of scholars. The view of certain supply chain scholars questioning the assumptions of theoretical models prevalent in the field and defending an approximation with theories of organizational analysis generates an opportunity to establish connections that may contribute to its progress. By doing so, a more interdisciplinary and plural view of operations management is put forward.

The elaboration of this essay was the selected strategy to bridge the two fields. It involves an analytical effort to assess how this unfamiliar approach may be appropriated by SCM scholars and the generation of insights about how their specific research object may be framed using these analytical tools. The elaboration of propositions was a form to systematize key issues to be investigated. This seems particularly useful considering the Strategic Action Field approach deals with the complex issue of the dynamic of stability and change in cultural-political relations. The relevance and adequacy of the perspective should be tested in empirical studies. While there are certainly other issues that may be assessed according to the goals of empirical research, the propositions in this essay illustrate the discussed perspective and, somehow, outline a general research agenda based on it. Future studies should be done using the concepts presented here in a flexible way, as a tool to facilitate an analysis that is solidly embedded in a sophisticated view of the functioning of contemporary societies. The use of these tools may help to overcome both empiricist and scholastic accounts of SCM and enable progress in the field.

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