Social Spaces and Field Boundaries in Reputation Formation: An Introduction

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Abstract

This article introduces a symposium on *Social Spaces and Field Boundaries in Reputation*, which includes four sociological articles. Here, we have provided a general context to the symposium by discussing reputation research and exploring new sociological directions. Despite its importance to understand cooperation in various social contexts (e.g., groups, populations, and organizations), and its centrality in many socially constructed systems of evaluation (e.g., online markets, science, and intellectual professions), reputation is still under-investigated in sociology. At the same time, current reputation research in other disciplines, such as behavioral sciences, evolutionary biology, and management studies, neglects the importance of sociological factors, including the role of contextual features and boundary conditions across various social fields. This symposium aims to tackle these challenges by presenting a selection of articles that focus on the uniqueness of reputation-driven human cooperation, the relationship between social evaluations and governance failures, the gender dimension of reputation, and the role of reputation repair in international politics. We believe that these articles offer a compact overview of the different ways in which social evaluations can contribute to explain social dynamics. By considering different levels of analysis, i.e., micro, meso and macro levels, they can stimulate sociological research and debate on this important topic.

Keywords: Reputation; cooperation; organization; gender; politics.

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1 Introduction

Promoting environmentally sustainable actions, funding charities, organizing social movements are all examples of an age-old question: How can individuals be motivated to cooperate and contribute to the collective good, despite the temptation of exploiting others' effort without paying any material or immaterial cost? In a world of self-interested and socially unrelated individuals, helping someone with no guarantees of reciprocity can be detrimental. In the course of their evolution, human societies have developed various norms, institutions, and governance tools to promote and enforce socially desirable behavior that benefits the collective. Research in various disciplines suggests that reputation, as a decentralized and distributed form of social control, plays a major role to solve the "problem of social control" (Kollock, 1998). This has been observed in social contexts as diverse as, for instance, organizations (Ellwardt et al., 2012; Wittek & Wielers, 1998), small-scale societies (Besnier, 2009; Gluckman, 1963), and college rowing teams (Kniffin & Wilson, 2005). Reputation is an evaluative belief, an opinion grounded in personal experience or in information from others. It is a "set of judgements a community makes about the personal qualities of one of its members" (Emler, 1990, p.171), but is also "the aggregate asset of recognitions received" (Lin, 2002 p. 152). As such, it has a collective and socially-shared nature (Giardini & Conte, 2012), and is based on sophisticated socio-cognitive mechanisms that preside over evaluations and their multiple dimensions (Giardini & Wittek, 2019a).

Firms, NGOs, political parties and all collective actors have an interest in maintaining a positive reputation. For instance, not backing down in an international crisis is an important reputational asset for political actors, from local politicians to states (Dafoe et al., 2014). Reputation is also mentioned as a motive for social mobilization (Rogers et al., 2018) and has effects on the dynamics of anti-corporate movements (Bartley & Child, 2014). Reputation is obviously an asset for firms and corporations (Rhee & Haunschild, 2006; Riel & Fombrun, 2007), and several management scholars have been focusing on strategies for preventing and repairing damage to organizational reputation (Dukerich & Carter, 2000; Heugens et al., 2004).

Online markets, recommendation systems with reviews and rankings of almost anything, from teachers (ratemyprofessor.com) to restaurants (Tripadvisor), not to mention academic science with the proliferation of quantified evaluation, have implemented reputation indicators to standardize socially shared evaluations (Masum & Tovey, 2012). The increasing need for accountability, transparency and efficiency has resulted in the design of policy interventions in which assessments of past behavior in the form of rankings can determine actors' opportunities in multiple and disconnected domains, from healthcare providers to university rankings, with mixed and often unexpected results (Espeland & Sauder, 2007).

In order to scale-down macro dynamics to individual mechanisms, a consistent amount of work has been devoted to identifying the psychological mechanisms supporting reputation, ranging from theory of mind and working memory (Manrique et al., 2021), to the need for recognition (Rochat, 2009). As suggested by Rochat:

> […] to be human is to care about reputation. The caring about reputation is just part of the human struggle for recognition. We care about what others think of us simply because we need their approval to exist. This is a major trait of the human psyche, the major psychological distinction of our species […]. To be ignored and rejected by others is indeed the worst punishment and the worst of all sufferings. It is psychological death (Rochat, 2009, pp. 223–224).

Multi-disciplinary work suggests that understanding the multiple ways in which reputations work is of primary importance (Giardini et al., 2021; Giardini & Wittek, 2019b), especially in contemporary complex, globalized societies in which traditional ways to enforce pro-social behavior — trust, punishment, social identity — seem less effective. However, there are still aspects of reputation that have only been partially explored, including the role of social spaces and field boundaries in reputation formation. This symposium aims to explore these aspects by collecting four articles that analyze and discuss the social construction of reputations by considering micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis. Here, we present these articles by providing a general thematic context that suggests new directions of research starting from these articles.

2   Why Reputations Matter

Reputation has always been important in sociological discourse (Giardini & Wittek, 2019a; Goffman, 1959), even only in an often ancillary role (Coleman, 1994). At the individual level, the relationship between status and reputation has been thoroughly explored, emphasizing the processes by which status, identities and reputation develop (Fine, 2019). At the meso-level of markets, organizations and communities, shared evaluations are the building blocks of what constitutes legitimate and appropriate behavior within communities. In economic sociology, the link between reputation and trust has received particular attention, with important historical analyses showing how different communities of merchants built trust in their exchanging partners via reputational information (Greif, 1989; Milgrom et al., 1990). More recent work on transactions in online markets stressed how reputation system design is pivotal to prevent frauds and dishonesty in evaluations, and protect buyers from information asymmetry and opportunism (Diekmann et al., 2014).

Yet, reputation is still not sufficiently central in the sociological discourse, while current reputation research in various disciplines has weak sociological ground. For instance, with brilliant mathematical and computational modeling research, an evolutionary theory of indirect reciprocity has been developed, which accounts for the evolution of cooperation in large-scale, biological and social systems. Unfortunately, this research did not consider the role of language or other uniquely human features sufficiently, including the development of complex communication and cognitive artefacts co-evolving with human societies (Henrich & Henrich, 2007; Sapolsky, 2017). Although highly generalizable, these reputation theories have two important limitations, especially for anyone interested in understanding how reputations form and develop in complex social contexts. First, they are void of any socially rich contextual feature. For instance, by the theory of indirect reciprocity (Nowak & Sigmund, 1998, 2005; Santos et al., 2018, 2021), we can predict that, whenever reputation allows us to discriminate cooperators from defectors accurately and reliably, cooperation will proliferate to reach evolutionary stability. However, social groups are structured and segmented into complex, dynamic social spaces that shape, constrain and distort evaluations via multiple, co-existing, sometimes conflicting values, criteria, and standards (Stark 2011). The inevitable simplification of mathematical models imposes a purge on important features, such as the structure and dynamics of social environments, the difference of cultural values, and the institutional landscape (Romano et al., 2021), with only few exceptions, mainly from anthropology (Garfield et al., 2021). This calls for more context-specific theories and analyses reconstructing the interplay of contexts and social communication processes, accepting to pay a price in terms of weaker theoretical generalizations.

A second limitation of current theories of reputation lies in the under specification of boundary conditions, which penalizes the possibility of making any prediction about reputational success or failure. Social spaces and fields influence information externalities and communication flow due to complex group structures and boundaries with sometimes overlapping, often-dissonant social standards of evaluation. We believe that this is a key-point where sociological research can contribute, and this symposium aims precisely to bring reputation back to the center of sociological debate, by considering multi-level, complex dynamics and contexts of reputation.

In his article on "A Reputation Centered Theory of Human Cooperation and Social Organization", Károly Takács (2022) proposes an evolutionary framework that gives reputation a key role in explaining social complexity, including the uniquely human capacity of developing social norms and institutions that promote cooperation between non-closely related individuals by enforcing social order at the collective level. The author discusses how human societies have transformed socio-ecological environments via complex socio-cognitive communication artefacts, including language. He considered the roles and dimensions of reputation in scaling problems, by exploring social interdependencies of various structures, e.g., from dyads to small groups, from intergroup relations to large-scale societies. The article can stimulate sociological research in overcoming what Norbert Elias (1987) called "the retreat of sociologists into the present" and benefiting from a long-term perspective on social evolution, at the same time providing insights on the relevance of sociological factors to behavioral scientists and social evolution scholars.

In her contribution in "Period Stain and Social Evaluation. The Performance of Shame", Olga Sabido Ramos (2022) discusses the 'period stain' as a symbolic and material object with strong moral overtones. By linking the analytical literature on reputation and gossip with Simmel and Goffman's relational sociology, as well as feminists' theories, the author provides an interesting perspective on the staining of clothes with menstrual blood and the impact on the social evaluation of bodies from a woman's point of view. The author's theoretical analysis is complemented with survey data on the experience of menstruation in the context of the pandemic caused by Covid-19. This paper provides an interesting perspective on how shame is socially constructed in relation to gender, but also discusses mockery as a way to destroy reputation. These findings exemplify reputation as an instrument of social control: where norms have emerged to manage mutual interdependencies, the beneficiaries of the norm have a regulatory interest to sanction free-riders (Coleman, 1994; Boero et al., 2009). Reputation-mediated social control is very effective in small groups and communities, especially those in which honor and family reputation are linked to individuals' actions (Ellickson, 1994), or there is a strong interdependence among the members, like in sport or work teams (Kniffin & Wilson, 2005).

Studies on reputation systems for governance have revealed severe unintended negative consequences of evaluations. For instance, public quality rankings of physicians, introduced to improve treatment quality, resulted in a higher number of sick patients not admitted in hospitals, because sick patients are more likely to negatively affect their scores (Werner & Asch, 2005). Credit Ranking Agencies (CRA), which have a fundamental impact on countries' economies and citizens' welfare face a dilemma given that on the one hand, there is "need to maintain a reputation for accuracy for their ratings to have any value; on the other hand, a reputation for leniency helps attract a larger number of issuers" (Bouvard & Levy, 2018, p. 4755).

Here, in his article on "Reputation Traps: Social Evaluation and Governance Failures", Rafael Wittek (2022) provides a theoretical analysis of reputation traps that considers reputational failures at the governance level. The article links institutional and organizational litera-

ture and focuses on formal governance structures, arguing that their declining effectiveness in supporting joint production motivation is because these structures are not equipped to sustain the salience of the normative mindset. This is also the case for governance structures that rely heavily on reputation management as their core device to secure cooperation. The author identifies four reputation traps that apply to existing cases of cooperation decay in various contexts. For instance, the 2015 Volkswagen emissions scandal showed how large corporations — and even entire countries — can be vulnerable to reputational damage from unforeseen 'spillover effects'. Volkswagen's public admission that it had gamed emission monitors to make millions of its cars seem 'greener' than they were had severe economic and reputational consequences not only for the company itself, but also for the reputation of the German automotive sector as a whole. Even more remarkable is the fact that many saw this scandal as a threat to Germany's reputation. How could a firm's reputational failure have consequences for a nation, affecting not one but several collective reputations of different actors?

In their article on "Tarnished Nationalism: Rehabilitating Serbia's Reputation on the World Stage", Brandt & Fine (2022) elaborate on the importance of building and maintaining a positive reputation for a country. Their analysis of the Republic of Serbia's reputation, in isolation and in comparison with Croatia's reputation, suggests that even nations with problematic reputations might have resources for reputational repair measures. In exploring how Serbia tried to alter its national reputation, they presented five examples: sport success, LGBT support, nightlife tourism, refugee policy and vaccine diplomacy. These domains were actively selected to reconstruct the country's difficult reputation and appear as a "normal," moral, progressive European nation. However, the desire of reputational entrepreneurs does not inevitably make it so. The analysis of Brandt and Fine shows that — in this case and likely in others — wishing for change is probably not sufficient, but that publicity, both positive and negative, makes change in reputation possible.

3   Beyond Current Theories: Reputations in Action

The four articles included in this symposium do not only allow us to reconsider the role of sociological investigation on reputation research, they also suggest certain directions for future research, emphasizing especially three aspects overlooked in current research.

First, reputation does not immediately follow from someone's action, but it is the result of how individuals evaluate and communicate about each other, possibly independent of the actual behavior evaluated cognitively and transmitted socially. For instance, we generally assume that evaluation is based on clear-cut, shared and reliable criteria that, once applied, allow us to distinguish cooperators from cheaters (Milinski, 2019). However, this does not leave any room for the ambiguity of criteria and the plurality of normative, cognitive, and practical standards. Nor does it allow for the strength of structural constraints that can be bias prone and convey (implicit or explicit) discriminatory beliefs or practices. This is confirmed for instance, by empirical research showing that evaluation of teachers in higher education is biased, with women receiving systematically lower grades than their male colleagues (Mengel et al., 2019). This applies also when considering objective measures, such as the amount of days before returning graded papers (MacNell et al., 2015). Student evaluations of teachers are important performance indicators, since they are used for tenure, salaries and other employment decisions. Even if designed to be as factual as possible and perceived as neutral, this implicit bias can have severe consequences on women's reputations and careers, although experiments showed that even minor interventions, such as using gender neutral language (Peterson et al., 2019), can be

effective in reducing this evaluation bias. This also applies to biases and stereotypes among students, often based on group reputation (e.g., women vs. men, feminine vs masculine subjects), which shape beliefs, ability attribution, and academic expectations (De Gioannis et al., 2023).

The second element not sufficiently accounted for by reputation theories is the embeddedness of reputations in relationships and evaluation networks. On the one hand, individuals are embedded in networks of interdependent relationships that constrain and shape their beliefs and actions. On the other, their evaluations of others' behavior are dependent on existing relationships (Cook et al., 2018) in a mutual, constructive process. This means that people are embedded in networks of interdependent relationships, which constrain and shape interactions, shaping in turn evaluations and determining how information flows (Lindenberg et al., 2020). The importance of networks to understand reputation formation and change, but also their effects on cooperation has been recently advocated by several scholars (Giardini et al., 2021; Takács et al., 2021). Unfortunately, this type of research is still in its infancy.

Finally, reputation is dynamic in that it changes over time due to imperfect memories, perception biases and miscommunications, not to mention the fact that actions from a multitude of individuals, organizations and observers can have unintended reputational consequences. Here, a sociological theory of second-order observation could be fruitfully combined with reputation theories to explore multi-level dynamics of evaluations and standardizations as forms to cope with semantic, cognitive and strategic uncertainty in complex, highly segmented social spaces (Esposito & Stark, 2019). Unfortunately, none of the reputation theories mentioned here have considered these complex dimensions seriously to answer this crucial question, i.e., how do individual reputations are created and transformed, as well as refracted or obfuscated across social spaces through field boundaries?

In conclusion, we believe that these three dimensions should inform future work on reputation by reducing the gap between abstract theories of how reputation works and social life instances, where we observe complex forms of reputation being established, changing, and evolving in often unpredictable ways, well beyond individual control.

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