3 Theories Applied in this Study

Higher education research on leadership has not yet produced with a theory that suits the analysis of leadership at universities. Many reasons have been put forward for this such as: unclear expectations of the presidential role (Kerr 1963), constraining factors like faculty characteristics, institutional prestige, and resources (Cohen/March 1974), and the absence of formal assessments for presidential performance (Neff/Leondar 1992). Birnbaum even doubts that university presidents have any lasting effect on their institutions suggests in a study on presidential succession:

“in general some functions of institutions of higher education do not appear to be significantly affected by who the presidents of these institutions are or by what these presidents do” (Birnbaum 1989a: 123).

However, as he concedes later on, there might be no perceptible effect because of the fact that the “training and socialization of a new president” is likely to be “similar to that of the predecessor president” (Birnbaum 1989a: 132).

As there are hardly any scientific studies about leadership in German universities, the empirical part of my study begins with a brief examination of presidential career paths in order to examine whether presidents are really that similar to each other in terms of training and socialization as Birnbaum suggests. Since it can be assumed that the events leading to a presidential career influence the way how university presidents perceive leadership (Birnbaum 1986: 382), a section on how the interviewed German university presidents perceive their role as university president follows in chapter six. This part will be linked with Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the scientific field. The following chapters, how German university presidents handle reform projects, how they cope with resistance, etc. will be analyzed with micro politics since this concept allows an analysis of individual actions on a micro level. Finally, I will analyze whether and how their career paths and their self-perceptions influence the way they handle reform projects and conflicts that occur in the process of reform implementation.

In this chapter I will introduce the two major theoretical concepts I will work with for interpreting my data: Bourdieu’s scientific field and micro politics, also referred to as organizational politics.
3.1 Analyzing Career Paths of University Presidents with Bourdieu

Which steps on the career ladder need to be climbed before someone becomes university president? As far as German university presidents are concerned, this question has as yet remained largely unanswered. This is quite astonishing because organizational outcomes and personal background characteristics of management are assumed to be interrelated (Hambrick/Mason 1984; March/Simon 1958). Birnbaum assumes a similar socialization and background of university presidents to be responsible for the lacking impact that he observed after presidential turnover (Birnbaum 1986).

These observations can be put in perspective with Bourdieu’s theory of the scientific field, including the concepts of scientific habitus and scientific capital (Bourdieu 2004; Bourdieu 1998a, b). It has been shown that the richness of Bourdieu’s approach “comes from its integration of a theory of the individual (habitus), a theory of social structure (the field), and a theory of power relations (the various forms of capital)” (Dobbin 2008: 53). This study is concerned with individuals (German university presidents) in the scientific field equipped with scientific capital. Bourdieu’s theory is among the few that allow for a comprehensive understanding of such rather complex objects of study. The following sections will provide a brief overview of Bourdieu’s concepts that are used in this study: scientific field, capital, and habitus.

3.1.1 The Scientific Field

Fields, according to Bourdieu, are

“structured spaces of positions (or posts) whose properties depend on their position within these spaces and which can be analyzed independently of the characteristics of their occupants (which are partly determined by them)” (Bourdieu 1993: 73).

They are highly differentiated but thematically linked social spaces, structured by a web of objective relations which connect different positions with specific laws and regulations (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1996: 127). In short, they constitute a social world imposing specific requirements upon individuals (Bourdieu 1998b) like a university does onto the academic faculty.

Fields originate because of actor’s shared interest in a certain subject area and the struggles deriving from their efforts to accumulate field-specific capital. This opposes theories of functional differentiation (Luhmann 1977; Schimank 2000) where the adoption of social functions leads to the establishment of a system. Therefore, it is the interest in the accumulation of certain field specific traits, for example political power or scientific reputation, that leads to the emergence of different fields. Bourdieu states, that for a field to function there need to be objects