When is it time to stop doing the same old thing? How institutional and organizational entrepreneurs changed Major League Baseball

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1. Executive summary

How does institutional change arise such that organizations break from conventional wisdom and a change in thinking comes to be accepted that then guides organizational actions? Studies (e.g., Leblebici et al., 1991) address the role of organizational entrepreneurs, those agents that pursue institutional change to benefit their particular organizations. Other studies (e.g., Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005) look to the role of institutional entrepreneurs, those agents that seek institutional change in institutions and across an organizational field. Less emphasis, however, has been placed on the combined work of these two types of agents in effecting institutional change, and the bridging of their motives and the different levels of analysis at which they seek change. The argument developed in this paper is that the combined work of institutional and organizational entrepreneurs, whether these agents are acting separately or concertedly, produces challenges to conventional wisdom that lead to changes in thinking and consequent actions.

In the model developed in this study, institutional entrepreneurs challenge conventional wisdom and theorize alternative logics ( Battiliana et al., 2009; Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2011; Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Maguire et al., 2004; Sherer and Lee, 2002; Thornton and Ocasio, 1999; Wright and Zammuto, 2013) with the aim of effecting institutional change in institutions and across the organizational field. Their theorization is selected on and refined by organizational entrepreneurs to effect change in their specific organizations, and their success and visibility can lead to the acceptance of a change in
thinking. Thus, it is through the combined work of institutional and organizational entrepreneurs, whether they are acting separately or concertedly, that accepted new ways of thinking are produced.

The model is demonstrated via an institutional-historical analysis of Major League Baseball (MLB), the premier professional baseball league, located in North America. MLB serves as a window to see how organizations (in this instance, baseball teams) became boxed into conventional wisdom; how institutional entrepreneurs outside the mainstream challenged the logic of conventional wisdom and theorized counter wisdoms; and how organizational entrepreneurs from the mainstream selected and built on the theorization, which gained acceptance and became a new way of thinking that guided actions. As the case of MLB highlights, organizational entrepreneurs acted on the theorizing of institutional entrepreneurs, who were outsiders that were sufficiently peripheral that they lacked direct influence on MLB. As the case of MLB also highlights, there were prior “lone-hero” challenges by both institutional and organizational entrepreneurs to conventional wisdom, all of which failed to effect change. It took both institutional and organizational entrepreneurs to get a change in thinking.

The paper contributes to neoinstitutional theory and suggests future directions for theory and research. The model speaks to the importance of seeing how the work of institutional entrepreneurs operating at the institutional and field levels and organizational entrepreneurs operating at the organizational level, whether they are acting separately or in concert, produces institutional change. By bridging these different levels of analysis, the paper speaks to the theoretical question of how it is that less influential peripheral players or outside actors, who are institutional entrepreneurs, have a key influence on core or inside players and their organizations, what is conceived of in this paper as the “paradox of peripheralness.” The paper also contributes to understanding how it is that core players can see beyond what is socially embedded, what Seo and Creed (2002) view to as the “paradox of embeddedness”. These mainstream actors stand on the shoulders of peripheral players that have a different and unencumbered vantage point. As such, the combined workings of these agents speaks to the strengths and weaknesses in the division of labor of outsiders and insiders, with their different social standing and cognitive vantage points (Merton, 1972), in producing change. Beyond the value of this bridging for addressing the two paradoxes, the study calls for future research that looks at the different ways that institutional and organizational entrepreneurs work combines to effect institutional change, identifying not only the paths that can occur but also their relative frequency and the drivers of those paths, as well as examining the many failed efforts at change by institutional or organizational entrepreneurs who are often time working like “lone heroes”.

2. Introduction

How does institutional change arise such that organizations break from conventional wisdom and a change in thinking comes to be accepted that then guides organizational actions? Studies (e.g., Leblebici et al., 1991) address the role of organizational entrepreneurs, those agents that pursue institutional change to benefit their particular organizations. Other studies (e.g., Suuddaby and Greenwood, 2005) look to the role of institutional entrepreneurs, those agents that seek institutional change in institutions and across an organizational field. Less emphasis, however, has been placed on the combined work of these two types of agents in effecting institutional change, and the bridging of their motives and the different levels of analysis at which they seek change. The argument developed in this paper is that the combined work of institutional and organizational entrepreneurs, whether these agents are acting separately or concertedly, produces challenges to conventional wisdom that lead to changes in thinking and consequent actions.

How this argument unfolds follows closely with the evolution of the neo institutional theory of organizations. Over the course of four generations, neo institutional theory has evolved from a theory that focuses on institutionalization, by which organizations become isomorphic in that they come to conform to conventional wisdom in what is referred to as the iron cage, to a theory in which the focus is on challenges to conventional wisdom and the production and transmission of change via the agency of organizational and institutional entrepreneurs, particularly in regard to actors’ location in the core or periphery of a social structure (Battiliana et al., 2009; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, 1991; Greenwood et al., 2008; Greenwood and Suuddaby, 2006; Leblebici et al., 1991; Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Oliver, 1991, 1997; Seo and Creed, 2002; Sherer and Lee, 2002; Thornton and Ocasio, 1999; Wright and Zammuto, 2013; Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010; Zucker, 1977, 1983). Recent theory and research on institutional work (Lawrence et al., 2011; Lawrence and Suuddaby, 2006) highlights that actors acting singularly often lack the insight or influence to effect change, and that we, therefore, need to identify how multiple actors in their distributed agency combine in different ways when institutional change takes place. Institutional work, thus, moves the focus from simply an actor’s location in a social structure to an understanding of how institutional change comes about through the combined efforts of different agents, whether their efforts are coordinated or not. Institutional work provides the basis in this study for looking to the role of agents operating to effect change at different levels of analysis with different motives. Organizational entrepreneurs take pragmatic actions with the aim of benefitting their particular organizations. Institutional entrepreneurs engage in theorizing and mobilizing others so as to change thinking at the institutional level and across an organizational field.

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