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Institutional entrepreneurs' social mobility in organizational fields ☆

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how institutional entrepreneurs with marginalized social positions use institutional change to become more influential members of organizational fields. We analyze how the Rainforest Action Network (RAN) used rhetoric to garner more influence as it altered a key sourcing practice in the retail home-improvement field. Our findings indicate that RAN relied on three rhetorical practices, comprising an encompassing process, to cultivate positive associations between the new sourcing practices and its social position in the field. Overall, by specifying a marginalized entrepreneur's methods for leveraging one type of change to enact another, we enhance theory at the intersection of institutional entrepreneurship, institutional work, and rhetoric.

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1. Executive summary

Institutional entrepreneurs are actors who create new or transform established institutions in ways that diverge from the status quo (DiMaggio, 1988; Fligstein, 1997; Maguire et al., 2004; Rao et al., 2000). Research on institutional entrepreneurs has explained how the social position of actors in organizational fields affect their methods for fostering institutional change. However, it reports much less on how marginalized institutional entrepreneurs' use institutional change to improve their social positions. This omission is surprising, because institutional entrepreneurs fundamentally pursue change to realize their own interests. The purpose of this project is to explain how, as marginalized institutional entrepreneurs alter established arrangements in their organizational fields, they achieve upward social mobility.

To do so, we establish social mobility as a novel form of institutional work and employ a qualitative, inductive approach to examine the Rainforest Action Network's (RAN) rhetoric for attaining an elite social position in the retail home-improvement field. Using various forms of persuasion, RAN prompted home-improvement retailers to institute more environmentally friendly practices for sourcing wood-based products, and, more broadly, to place greater emphasis on the environmental impact of their operations. The evolution of new sourcing practices and changes to the field's meaning system also provided a platform for RAN to transform itself from an inconsequential actor in the field to an influential one that guided major retailers' decisions. Our analysis examines how RAN used rhetoric to alter perceptions of its social position in the field. Overall, we found that RAN enacted a deliberate process, comprised of three rhetorical practices—namely, contextualization, elicitation, and incentivization—to cultivate positive associations between itself, field issues, elite retailers, and institutional change.

The central theoretical contribution of this study is to enrich our understanding of the role of persuasive communication in facilitating a distinct type of institutional change. Rather than view rhetoric as a means for motivating, legitimating, and diffusing new arrangements, we focus on the implications of rhetoric for the actors catalyzing such change. The main takeaway of our study is that, while they use rhetoric to convince field members to accept new arrangements, institutional entrepreneurs also leverage such language to generate acceptance and influence for themselves. Fundamentally, then, we recognize that institutional entrepreneurs' change projects may emanate from the latent desire to attain heightened status in their organizational fields, and that rhetoric crucially facilitates these concurrent processes.

2. Introduction

Institutional entrepreneurs are actors who create new or transform established institutions in ways that diverge from the status quo (DiMaggio, 1988; Fligstein, 1997; Maguire et al., 2004; Rao et al., 2000). Prior research has explained how institutional entrepreneurs' social positions in organizational fields affect their methods for fostering institutional change, yet it reports much less on how the entrepreneurs' change efforts affect their social positions. This omission is surprising, because institutional entrepreneurs fundamentally pursue change to realize their own interests (Battilana et al., 2009; DiMaggio, 1983; Maguire et al., 2004). Elite entrepreneurs may use change projects to *preserve* their influential social positions (Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006; Greenwood et al., 2002), whereas marginalized entrepreneurs may use change projects to *improve* their inconsequential social positions.

The fact that the latter type of entrepreneur concurrently engages in both self and field transformation makes them particularly interesting. Marginalized entrepreneurs often overcome their lack of influence by relying on more elite actors to implement new structures (Lawrence, 1999; Maguire et al., 2004). This dependency creates an incentive for marginalized entrepreneurs to covet more elite standing, which would reduce their reliance on proverbial "middle men" and increase their ability to pursue their interests. This study seeks to advance understanding of this phenomenon by explaining how marginalized entrepreneurs use institutional change to improve their social standing.

Institutional work and rhetoric help to structure our examination of this phenomenon. Institutional work describes "purposive action aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions" (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006: 216). This perspective shifts attention from the general processes of institutional change to the particular practices through which institutional entrepreneurs enact these processes. Rhetoric, which describes the strategic use of persuasive language that simultaneously reflects *and* manipulates target audiences' meaning systems (Berkenkotter and Huckin, 1995; Miller, 1994; Orlikowski and Yates, 1994), represents a quintessential instrument for performing institutional work. Institutional entrepreneurs use rhetoric to transform other field members' perceptions of reality, motivating these audiences to accept and enact profound change (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005). Such actors argue that existing arrangements are problematic and that new arrangements resolve those problems (Greenwood et al., 2002; Heracleous and Barrett, 2001; Lawrence and Phillips, 2004; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005; Vaara and Tienari, 2011).

We suggest that rhetoric may also facilitate a related—yet distinct—type of institutional work, (social) mobility work, which describes institutional entrepreneurs' efforts to improve their current social standing in organizational fields. An organizational field describes "a community of organizations that partakes in a common meaning system and whose participants interact more frequently and fatefully with one another than with actors outside those settings" (Scott, 1995: 56). The composition and boundaries of these spaces continually evolve as organizations, through their interactions, attempt to construct, maintain, and tear down established arrangements (Greenwood et al., 2002; Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010). Such dynamics can stem from and result in social stratifications, with field members inhabiting social positions that range from elite (i.e., influential or central) to marginalized (i.e., insignificant or peripheral) (Bourdieu, 1991; DiMaggio, 1983; Eisenstadt, 1968; Shils, 1975).[1] The fact that rhetoric enables institutional entrepreneurs to redefine arrangements in ways that prompt change by field elites indicates that such discourse may also allow marginalized entrepreneurs to redefine field social positions in ways that elicit status-building interactions with those actors.

We employ a qualitative, inductive approach to examine the Rainforest Action Network's (RAN) rhetoric for attaining an elite (social) position in the retail home-improvement field. Activists like RAN qualify as marginalized institutional entrepreneurs when they attempt to "initiate divergent [institutional] changes and participate in the implementation of those changes" (Battilana et al., 2009) from inconsequential social positions (e.g., Maguire et al., 2004).[2] Despite their non-elite standing, such actors have successfully produced novel or heavily modified practices in diverse organizational fields—including financial services, grocery retail, and home construction (Waldron et al., 2013). Activists build their campaigns on broader social logics (Bennett, 2004; den Hond and de Bakker, 2007), leveraging rhetoric to convince more elite field members that change is necessary to resolve incompatibilities between field arrangements and societal expectations. Activists may also experience upward social mobility as their rhetoric catalyzes more regular, substantive interactions with field elites. RAN's activities in the retail home improvement field provided an ideal setting for studying this phenomenon. Using various forms of persuasion, RAN prompted home-improvement retailers to institute more environmentally friendly practices for sourcing wood-based products, and, more broadly, to place greater emphasis on the environmental impact of their operations.[3] The evolution of new sourcing practices and changes to the field's meaning system also provided a

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[1] On occasion, scholars have used the terms central and peripheral to describe actors' structural positions in fields. We use these terms to describe actors' social position in fields.

[2] Many social activists are institutional entrepreneurs, because they want to generate fundamental institutional change that differs from the status quo. However, not all institutional entrepreneurs are social activists.

[3] In this study, we implicitly recognize that organizations' actions, such as those of RAN and the home-improvement retailers, are attributable to their individual leaders (Meindl et al., 1985).