A Longitudinal Analysis of the National Football League’s Responses to Institutional Change around Concussions

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Organizational theory/culture

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The Problem

Concussions pose a significant health problem for athletes across types of sports and levels. The CDC estimates that approximately 1.6 to 3.8 million sports- and recreation-related concussions occur in the United States (Langlois, Rutland-Brown, & Wald, 2006). For football players, in particular, repeated concussions pose long-term cognitive and neurobiological risks (Coughlin et al., 2015). Research on concussions has improved understanding of the diagnosis and treatment of concussions, and led to the development of technology and educational programs to prevent concussions (Mouron, 2014). New knowledge, products, and programs around concussions are indicative of institutional change. However, little is known about the organizational dimension of concussions. More specifically, we lack an understanding of how sport organizations, including leagues, have responded to the issue of concussions over time and what factors influence this organizational behavior. Thus, we are conducting a longitudinal study to examine how the National Football League (NFL) in the U.S. has responded to institutional change around concussions.

Objectives of the Research

The overall objective of this research is to investigate how and why the NFL has shifted its response regarding concussions, as the institutional environment changes. We chose NFL as our specific organizational context for several reasons. Football is the sport associated with the highest incidence of concussions (Daneshvar, Nowinski, & Cantu, 2011) and NFL is at the center of the media’s focus on concussions. Further, the NFL is a powerful sports organization with significant influence within and outside the industry. Additionally, by looking at a professional league, we can observe the influence of different and multi-level internal and external stakeholders (e.g. players, government, and scientific community). The longitudinal design also allows us to capture the sequence of events and process, in order to better understand causality. This research has the potential to inform other professional sports organizations and policy makers as they respond to the issue of concussions. The following two questions will be addressed:

(1) How has NFL responded to the institutional change around concussion over time?

(2) What factors have influenced NFL’s changing responses?

Theoretical Foundation

There has been a growing emphasis in the institutional theory tradition over the past several decades on understanding organizational responses to institutional change (e.g., Dacin, Goodstein, & Scott, 2002; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). In contrast to neo-institutionalist perspectives that emphasize conformity and isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), more studies consider heterogeneity in organizations’ responses to environmental demands, including the potential for resistance (e.g. Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011). For example, in the sport management literature, Trendafilova and colleagues identified variation in the extent to which professional teams in the U.S. were embracing and enacting environmental CSR (Trendafilova, Babiak & Heinze, 2012). Several scholars have developed typologies of strategic responses to institutional pressure. Oliver (1991), for example, identified strategies that vary from defiance and manipulation to acquiesce. Studies of organizational responses to institutional change have mostly focused on single organizational responses during one period of time (Greenwood et al., 2011). We know less about how and why organizational responses are altered and vary over time, particularly in the context of very powerful governing bodies, such as the NFL. Our study thus builds on this literature with a longitudinal approach that allows us to better understand shifts over time. Further, unlike
prior work, we consider how and why the NFL, in responding to institutional pressure, may, in fact, contribute to further institutional change. In doing so, we connect the literature on organizational responses to that of institutional work, which examines how organizations create, maintain and even disrupt institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2010).

Data and Method

We adopt a qualitative content analysis approach to our research. Our core data include 1) mainstream news media articles on the NFL and concussions from three national outlets (New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today) from 1991 to 2015 and 2) all publically-available NFL documents related to concussions and player health and wellness (e.g. NFL annual reports, protocols on concussions). In addition, we are conducting interviews with key individuals involved in the NFL’s concussion-related practices to inform our knowledge of the context and coding scheme (2 interviews conducted to date, 2 more planned). Since the NFL founded its first concussion-related committee in 1994, we defined our analysis time period starting just prior, in 1991, to 2015. We are conducting content analyses of the media articles and organizational documents using a coding scheme that was derived both deductively and inductively. To identify the NFL’s responses, we developed codes (and subcodes) based on the typology offered by Oliver (1991) (e.g. avoidance (concealment, buffering, escape), manipulation (co-opt, influence, controlling); as well as Lawrence and Suddaby’s (2010) typology of institutional work (e.g. creating institutions (advocacy, educating)). Based on our first round of coding, inductive codes for responses include organizational practices (e.g. rules, guidelines), structures (e.g. committees, subgroups), and partnerships (e.g. with government, corporations). To identify the factors influencing the NFL’s responses, current (inductive) codes include: concussion events, player retirements due to concussions, new research findings on concussions, and stakeholder reactions to concussions (e.g. players, union, physicians, government). Both researchers are performing the coding, allowing us to conduct reliability checks. We are using qualitative analysis software to aid in the coding process (NVivo).

Subsequent analyses will examine the connections between the NFL’s responses and the factors listed above, resulting in a model that specifies phases of responses and causal factors.

Discussion and Implications

Our initial results suggest that organizations may move through a series of responses that can vary widely from resistance to co-opting and leading change. The NFL’s responses to concussions, in particular, appear to shift from avoiding, to dismissing, to changing rules, and engaging in institutional work. The NFL’s has altered its behavior in response to the field, but also as the field itself changes with new research, products, new stories, and concussion events. By examining organizational responses over time, we are able to better understand these dynamics and the relationships between the institutional environment and organization. We expect that the findings of this study will have implications for other powerful sports governing bodies, such as FIFA and IOC that are experiencing pressure to change. Thus, this study contributes both to the general management and organizations literature and the sport management literature.