Translating institutional change around concussions: The processes of high school athletic associations

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The Problem and Objectives
Concussion in young people from sports participation has become an important public health issue (Harvey, 2013). In recent years, new policies, new knowledge, and increasing government efforts around concussions in youth sports are indicative of institutional change. For instance, between 2009 and 2014, all 50 states passed similar legislation to address youth sports-related concussions. In the face of broader field-level pressure from new legal requirements, local organizations need to make corresponding adjustments. This process generates variation, as organizations translate field-level changes to the local context differently (Heinze, Soderstrom, & Heinze, 2016). Translation is the process of reshaping models derived from the field, in order to better address the interests of the organization (Zilber, 2006). Some organizations are more conservative in the translation process, in that they introduce local practices largely built on existing regulations from the field; while other organizations are more innovative, in that they go beyond what is regulated and create new practices (Kodeih & Greenwood, 2014). Little is known about how such innovative translation of institutional change occurs. More specifically, we lack an understanding of how and why some sports associations, in the translation process, are able to create new practices in the local context. Thus, this study intends to unpack a high school sports association’s innovative translation of institutional change around youth sports concussions.

Connecting the literature on organizational response to institutional change to that of translation, I center on the following research questions: In translating institutional change, how do local sports associations craft new organizational practices? And what motivates them to do so? To answer this question, I adopt a qualitative comparative case study approach. My focal case is a high school athletic association in the Midwest region. I use two other Midwest associations as comparison cases. The three associations have demonstrated variation in the translation process where the focal case has successfully produced innovative practices (e.g. 1st association of such to mandate record-keeping of concussion events) in the local context, and the other two are more conservative in their translation of change (e.g. adopt practices within the framework of existing policies). Further, they also share a number of similarities, such as geographical proximity and exposed to similar institutional pressure, which allow me to control for some alternative explanations.

Theoretical background
Over the past few decades, institutional scholars have produced valuable insights into organizational responses to institutional change, and spawned the new concept of translation (Zilber, 2006) to examine variation in organizations’ responses to environmental demands. The concept of translation emphasizes that organizational policies or practices, rather than being diffused intact, can “change as they travel in space and time” (Maguire & Hardy, 2009, p.284). The translation framework has also provided space for agency acts in that local actors contribute actively to make sense of institutional change (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008). For example, Binder (2007) looked at how three departments within a transitional housing organization respond differently to changes in federal funding, depending on each department members’ local meaning making process. The concept of translation, by directing attention to the interaction between field-level pressure and local actors, provides new insights on what leads to variation in local practices (Hallett, 2010). Under this perspective, organizations, rather than passively conform to institutional demands, can also actively translate field-level pressure into local contexts. However, we know less about how and why some organizations, in the translation process, are able to create new practices in the local context while others are not. This study thus builds on this literature with a comparative case study approach that advances our understanding of how and why the innovative translation occurs. This study will also contribute to sport management scholarship by shedding light on sports associations’ creative response to institutional change.
Methods
I adopt qualitative case study approach with one focal case and two comparison cases. By providing detailed explanations, qualitative case study helps elucidate organizational processes that occur within a specific context (Yin, 2009). Since the first youth sports concussion safety law was passed in 2009, and a previous study (Heinze & Lu, 2016) also found that the year 2009 is a key turning point of institutional change around concussions, I define my analysis time period from 2009 to 2016.

With the case study approach, I am collecting multiple forms of qualitative data from two primary sources, archival documents and interviews. Key archival documents for each association include the Executive Director’s official blogs, press releases, Executive Board meeting minutes, and official magazines. These archival documents can add to the knowledge of how each association translates institutional change, their corresponding practices, and their connection with the field and the local context. I also plan to conduct 10 interviews with leaders of each association. I will focus on questions such as: Can you describe how the concussion practices are created? What motivate the association to develop these practices? The interviews are semi-structured, tape-recorded, transcribed, and stored. I will use grounded approaches for theory building (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The codes will be derived inductively.

To further corroborate the validity of my findings, I will invite another researcher familiar with organizational theories to perform some coding, and then compare my codes with the second coder to resolve any differences. In addition, I will also triangulate across different data sources and perform cross-check analysis. Nvivo is used to facilitate the coding process.

Discussion and Implications
My initial results identify several factors that influence variation in the translation process, including organizational values and culture (e.g. whether institutional change resonates with organizational values), leadership (e.g. professional interests, commitment), network and partnerships (e.g. establishing effective partnerships with leading health and research institutions on concussions provide organizations with more access to the cutting-edge knowledge and resources to address the issue). I expect the findings of this research will advance the body of translation theory, and have potential to inform other sports associations, and sports governing bodies across levels (e.g., NCAA, NFL) that are experiencing institutional pressure around concussions to change.