Legitimizing Amateur Baseball: A Conceptual Framework of "Town Ball" in Rural Minnesota

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Management - Organizational Behavior (Amateur Sport) Thursday, June 7, 2018
Poster 2:10 PM
Abstract 2018-074 Room: Halifax

Extant Sport Management literature has been predominantly centered on the more visible forms of sport (e.g., professional sport). However, scholars within the discipline of Sport Management have begun to focus on less popular systems of sport (e.g., amateur sport). In continuing this renewed emphasis on amateur sport, we propose an alternative utilization of institutional theory within Sport Management literature. Washington and Patterson (2011) warned of the temptation to apply known institutional theory paradigms into the sport environment and subsequently proclaiming that a new revelation has been found. Instead, we put forth an original application of institutional theory by relying on the amateur sport setting.

Meyer and Rowan (1977) offered a general definition of institutionalization, stating that it “involves the processes by which social processes, obligations, or actualities come to take on a rule like status in social thought and action” (p. 341). These rules and regulations are important to the organization because they help influence the environment to become deterministic. Scott (1987) described how Selznick expanded the applicability of institutional theory and environmental forces by referring to the organization as “an adaptive vehicle”. Through this adaptive vehicle analogy, Selznick explained that an organization is consistently in the state of reacting to the “influences and constraints from the external environment” (Scott, 1987, p. 494). Relatedly, organizations have been shown to seek approval and legitimacy from their peers (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The quest for legitimacy is directly related to an institution’s chance of survival. Therefore, organizations are thought to follow the rules, norms, and practices of legitimized institutions in their organizational field (Aldrich & Baker, 2001; Welty-Beachey & Bruening, 2011). Sport organizations require competition among themselves, such interactions serve as a reinforcement of legitimacy. That is, the existence and subsequent exchanges between teams supports the legitimacy of the teams, various leagues, and communities.

Legitimacy has been defined as “a generalized perception or assumption that actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Legitimacy is promoted when organizations conform to the rules, norms, cultural values, and expectations that are relevant within the broader social system and organizational field (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Though, legitimization can also be fostered via isomorphic behaviors. It is believed that organizations engage in isomorphic behaviors to gain legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1997). As described by DiMaggio and Powell (1983), “isomorphism is a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions” (p. 149). Since organizations are constrained by the same external environments, a cycle of mimicry occurs with successful behaviors between legitimized institutions (Katz, Pfleegor, Schaeperkoetter, & Bass, 2015). Those organizations that refuse to undergo the process of homogenization and fail to adopt isomorphic norms with other institutions will eventually become nonexistent (Cunningham & Ashley, 2001; Washington & Patterson, 2011). As such, “conformity is expected…. and organizations are incentivized to conform because of the ultimate goal of legitimacy” (Katz et al., 2015, p. 107). Past scholars have utilized this approach to help explain organizational behaviors of sport organizations (e.g., Amis, Slack, & Hinings, 2004; Danisman, Hinings, & Slack, 2006; O’Brien & Slack, 2003; Slack & Hinings, 1994; Washington, 2004; Washington & Ventresca, 2008). Whereas amateur baseball teams in rural Minnesota might engage in isomorphic behavior out of necessity (i.e., an inelastic supply and demand for the product likely fixes the price of attendance across the league), the teams may engage in isomorphic behavior as a requisite to build and sustain legitimacy. The teams are essentially buoyed with the same level of resources—save for their human capital. Restated, there is not a “model” organization to look favorably upon or to replicate. Rather, the teams are likely forced to mimic professional or collegiate teams. Although teams possibly depend on one another to bolster their
Legitimacy, the isomorphic behaviors are also likely to contribute to their legitimacy as consumers can make the connection between the practices of the team and that of a professional organization (e.g., uniforms, charging for attendance, paid umpires). When individuals recognize the legitimacy of the teams, the host community’s legitimization is also expected to be positively affected. As such, we posit a theoretical model that utilizes institutional theory to better understand the practices of amateur baseball teams.

Amateur baseball in the state of Minnesota consists of three classes of competition. We have focused our attention on the class that represents the smallest communities, as their desire for legitimacy is likely to eclipse that of larger communities. As an example, the Stearns County League consists of ten communities, some of which have populations less than 500, that support a baseball team. Players on the team are either current or former members of the community. Moreover, the players are not compensated for participating on the team, but rather they pay a small fee to be a part of the organization. The games themselves support the notion of legitimacy via several means: teams wear embroidered uniforms, financially compensated umpires monitor the games, official standings are kept, stories describing the events of the games appear in local newspapers, official brackets are created for the League’s playoffs and for a state-wide competition, and patrons pay to attend the games. The Stearns County League has been in operation since the 1950s, and the existence of amateur baseball in central Minnesota has been a fixture of the area since the 1920s (Schneider, n.d.). In many ways, the baseball teams are the signature external representation of the community. While the presence of past leagues and an official organization aid the legitimacy of the proficiency of the baseball in the area, the use of theory might offer a more nuanced explanation of the behavior of the small-town baseball teams/organizations. Further, the sport contests of the Stearns County League resemble that of a collegiate or professional sport organization save for the players paying a fee to participate on the team. More pertinent to the amateur sport environment, this setting induces participants to pay to play as opposed to being compensated for their efforts, and might represent one of the last remaining forms of truly amateur athletics.

In all, we propose that the organizational processes of teams within the Stearns County League—and similar teams—are byproducts of institutional theory. The practices that reinforce and sustain the legitimacy of amateur baseball teams (i.e., uniforms, paid umpires, field and facility maintenance), are forms of isomorphic behaviors and other practices that invoke legitimacy. Failure to adhere to the established norms of the various leagues may diminish teams, and perhaps more importantly, could have dire consequences on the social fabric of communities represented by said teams. The importance of the connection between the team and the community is embodied by their local popularity and support (Schneider, n.d.). Then, the legitimacy of the team is a representation of the legitimacy of the community. We hope to fill in the gaps of literature that exist for specific sport applications of institutional theory by applying institutional theory to the amateur setting.