Understanding Institutional Defiance in an Institutionalized Field: A Case Study of the 1968 Olympic Games

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It has been approximately 50 years since the world stood aghast at the sight of U.S. sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos' silent protest during the men's 200-meters medal ceremony at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City. Having recently won gold and bronze, respectively, Smith and Carlos audaciously wore black socks without shoes, each extending one black-gloved fist above their lowered heads in protest of state-sanctioned policies that discriminated against Black Americans (Smith & Steele, 2007). Whenever social change such as this is desired, social actors with the means to influence (e.g., Smith and Carlos) confront serious questions as to how to bring about the change they long for. For instance, what if the institutional strategy (see Lawrence, 1999) best served to highlight the concern(s) violates the institutional rules and norms of the institutionalized field being utilized to highlight the issue(s)? For example, International Olympic Committee (IOC) Rule 50 states the following: “No kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas” (IOC Charter Rule 50).

However, despite the ever-present nature of institutional rules and norms in sport, there are gaps in our understanding of how those subjected to the rules and norms perceive them. Specifically, there exist a dearth of literature examining defiance of individuals to field-level rules and norms (Lawrence, 2008). In general, much of what we know from current literature emanates from studies on challenges to broad, societal-level institutions or actors’ defiance of supervisory power in organizational settings (Lawrence, 2008). To that end, the purpose of this study was to better understand how institutional rules are sustained and why defiance of an institution may not produce lasting change. The following question guided the research: how do actors reflect upon and discuss defiance to a field-level rule? To answer our research question, 59 members of the 1968 U.S. Olympic Team present in Mexico City at the time of Smith and Carlos' protest were interviewed.

Theoretically, the study is grounded within the neo-institutional theory tradition (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). The institution at the center of the study is the Olympic Games. Conceptually a field-configuring event, we argue the Olympic Games have become institutionalized (i.e., taken for granted, clearly has cognitive and normative legitimacy), given its global investment and significance (Andranovich, Burbank, & Heying, 2010). Moreover, an institutional perspective suggests individuals’ perception and judgment of what constitutes proper conduct is dependent on the institutional logics within an organizational field (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999). In short, these logics are a set of belief systems and guidelines that prescribe how people and organizations understand and function within a given context. They also establish guidelines for appropriate behavior and provide prescriptions for how to succeed (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton, 2004). We understand the participants’ responses from an institutional logics lens.

One of the larger concerns within this body of literature is when organizations “confront incompatible prescriptions from multiple institutional logics” (Greenwood et al., 2011). Because different logics operate from opposing central assumptions, approaches to action and sense of meaning may differ. The degree of incompatibility between the logics ultimately breeds conflict, resistance, and struggle among the organizational actors exposed to the logics (Bourdieu, 1977; Greenwood et al., 2011). Scholars refer to this as institutional complexity (Greenwood et al., 2011). For example, Washington and Ventresca (2008) underscored the prevailing logics in professional sports as sports as entertainment, sports as athletic competition, and sports as a business. Each of these logics has varying central assumptions concerning how to function and make decisions on key issues. Thus, they may come to different conclusions when crafting solutions to a problem. This industry, in particular, brings together different
stakeholders—athletes, executives, coaches, sponsors, media, and consumers, among others—each of which have a different worldview and interests. These varying interests contribute to the conflict within the field. Accordingly, sport management scholars have undertaken work to demonstrate logics working within sport. For instance, studying NCAA Division I men’s basketball tournament broadcasts, Southall, Nagel, Amis, and Southall (2008) found that the prevailing education logic is at odds with that of the commercialization logic.

In order to historically examine this iconic demonstration and begin mapping how Carlos and Smith’s teammates viewed the protest, interviews were conducted with members of the 1968 U.S. Olympic Team. With detailed descriptions provided, an in-depth analysis of prevailing institutional logics was possible along with additional findings that emerged from the data. Along with an oral history research team, the authors conducted 59 interviews (i.e., primary data source) with members of the 1968 U.S. Olympic Team. In terms of gender, the sample contained 42 male participants and 17 female participants. With respect to race, 47 of the Olympians were White, 11 were Black, and one was Hispanic. Finally, athletes who competed in 18 Olympic sports were represented in this study.

Following the professional transcription of the data, the interviews were analyzed with QSR International’s NVIVO 11 software. Initially, the authors independently coded each line of the data to produce as many ideas and codes as possible. During analysis, the research team was mindful of the existing literature on institutional logics (e.g., Greenwood et al., 2011) and institutional change (e.g., Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009). However, the authors were also open to findings emerging from the data. The first stage of coding process produced 29 first-level codes. After independent coding was completed, the research team then clustered the codes to begin determining significant themes and establishing if data saturation had been achieved.

Findings were organized around the institutional logics of the Olympic Games: the Olympic Games as (1) competition; (2) politics; (3) entertainment; and (4) nationalism. Overall, several of the athletes had negative sentiments about the protests. For instance, within the Olympic Games as competition theme, one athlete worried that the protests would “mar the reputation of the Games.” Speaking to the Olympic Games as entertainment, athletes alluded to the Games as a “special place,” “a festival,” and a “celebration.” Thus, protests would take away from that, they argued. More quotations will be provided in the presentation.

Normally, these logics would be in competition, but the data tells us that while contending logics exist, in this instance, they were not competing or coexisting as much of the literature emphasizes (e.g., Dunn & Jones, 2010; Lounsbury, 2007; Reay & Hinnings, 2009). Instead, the dominant logics seemed to be in agreement in discrediting the action (i.e., protests) that would potentially give rise to institutional disruption and affirm a non-dominant logic (i.e., Olympic Games as politics) within the Games. The presentation will further discuss our findings with regard to the linkages between field actors, institutional logics and institutional change. It will also include contributions to institutional theory, limitations and ideas for future research. From a practical perspective, we will also provide eight lessons for sport managers and organizations.