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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Keywords: Institutional entrepreneurs Activists Institutional work Rhetoric Social mobility

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 authors would like to thank our editor, Roy Suddaby, our anonymous reviewers, and Mike Pfarrer for the insights they shared in the development of this manuscript. We also would like to thank Jocelyn Leitzinger for her helpful support of the data effort for this project.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2014.06.006
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Please cite this article as: Waldron, T.L., et al., Institutional entrepreneurs’ social mobility in organizational fields, J. Bus. Venturing (2014), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2014.06.006
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 faithfully 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). 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). 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. 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).
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 unique process, comprised of three rhetorical practices, 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 (Green, 2004; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005), we focus on the implications of rhetoric for the actors catalyzing such change (Suddaby, 2011). 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 (cf., Suddaby and Viale, 2011), and that rhetoric crucially facilitates these concurrent processes.

Our paper proceeds as follows. First, we explain our methodological and analytical approaches. Second, we briefly summarize the RAN case. Third, we convey our findings about how RAN, as an exemplar marginalized entrepreneur, used rhetoric to advance its social standing in the retail-home improvement field. Fourth, we translate our inferences about RAN into a theoretical process model that proposes how marginalized institutional entrepreneurs perform social mobility work. Finally, we examine the scholarly implications of our study.

3. Methods

We used a qualitative, inductive methodology to analyze a longitudinal case; namely, RAN’s campaign (1997–2002) to modify an important sourcing practice, and, concurrently, its own social position in the field of retail-home-improvement. The case method involves making inferences about latent theoretical processes, practices, and mechanisms from observable phenomena (Marshall and Rossman, 1995; Yin, 2003). This method’s interpretive nature allowed us to make sense of how, using rhetoric, marginalized entrepreneurs leverage one type of change to enact another (Langley, 1999). In our research setting, we sought to discern how RAN’s rhetoric convinced home-improvement retailers to go “old-growth free,” and, in the process, to view RAN as an elite member of the retail-home-improvement field. To do so, we carefully evaluated the substantive and symbolic meanings reflected in the observable features of RAN’s communications (Gephart, 1993).

3.1. Data sources

We sought to collect data that would inform evaluations of how RAN used rhetoric to become more influential in the retail-home-improvement field. RAN’s communications with home-improvement retailers, which aimed to convince the retailers to go “old-growth free,” provided the primary foundation for such inferences. Other field members’ communications about the campaign supplemented those from RAN, enabling us to develop a complete picture of campaign milestones and to assess the robustness of our evaluations. Pertinent communications, including website matter, press releases, speech transcripts, national and local media reports, advertisements, pamphlets, letters, emails, and (internal) memos, originated from Factiva, the Internet Archive, and Business Source Premier. One particularly noteworthy source was the archive of RAN’s campaign documents at UC-Berkeley’s Bancroft Library. The archive not only contained many of the same communications as the aforementioned public sources, but it also included private correspondence within and between focal organizations. Overall, accessing and comparing data from multiple actors and sources provided a relatively complete, reliable perspective of key events and a foundation for making robust inferences (Eisenhardt, 1989).

3.2. Data analysis

Analysis of the data consisted of four stages. First, we coded each data segment according to its source (e.g., press releases, website content, campaign materials, media reports), and arranged the segments chronologically (Miles and Huberman, 1984). Data segments refer to distinct narratives, such as the raw communications comprising our sample, published at specific points in time by identifiable sources (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). Coding the source of each data segment provided a foundation to evaluate the importance of campaign events, based on the attention given to each event by the different campaign actors. Chronologically arranging source-coded data segments facilitated our evaluation of event importance by locating different accounts of the same event together. It also provided a “roadmap” of the pertinent events in RAN’s campaign, which facilitated the development of a campaign history (Langley, 1999) and the examination of RAN’s rhetorical practices (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005). Table 1 presents the account of major campaign events.

Second, using the chronological account, we uncovered relevant blocks of text within each data segment and “open coded” the text blocks to identify first-order conceptual categories and their properties (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This analytical stage discerned specific passages within each of RAN’s communications that captured RAN’s “raw” language for persuading elite retailers to move away from old-growth products. Our objective at this point was to determine the complete range of these observable arguments, rather than to infer their latent meaning (cf., Berg, 2004; Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006). Upon isolating the distinct arguments contained in the text blocks, we assessed the distinguishing attributes of each argument, grouped arguments with similar attributes into categories, and assigned labels to each category capturing its unique features. This process yielded an account of the different
observed arguments that RAN used during its campaign and provided the foundation to uncover RAN’s rhetorical practices for performing mobility work.

Third, we moved to “axial coding” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), which describes the inference of second-order theoretical categories from open codes and then general aggregate dimensions from the second-order categories (cf., Corley and Gioia, 2004). Our objective during this analytical stage shifted toward evaluating how RAN used its observable arguments—namely, those for convincing retailers

Please cite this article as: Waldron, T.L., et al., Institutional entrepreneurs’ social mobility in organizational fields, J. Bus. Venturing (2014), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2014.06.006
to implement new sourcing practices—to improve its social standing. To accomplish this, we iteratively cycled between the data analysis and theory development in two stages (cf., Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003). The first stage involved identifying the methods of persuasion reflected in the first-order codes, grouping conceptually similar codes into second-order theoretical categories, and then developing labels for and descriptions of each category. The second step was a nuanced iteration of the first one, and involved consolidating conceptually similar second-order categories into aggregate theoretical dimensions. These aggregate dimensions constituted theoretical representations of RAN’s rhetorical practices for performing mobility work and informed the exploration of its patterns for enacting these practices. Table 2 provides examples of our analytical progression from text blocks to each theoretical dimension. Fig. 1 provides an illustration of the findings obtained during each stage of the data analysis.

Fourth, we integrated output from previous rounds of data analysis, along with supplementary evidence, into a chronology that reflects the process through which marginalized entrepreneurs like RAN improve their social standing. We adopted the schematic approach employed in prior research (e.g., Bingham and Davis, 2012; Langley, 2007; Van de Ven, 1992). With the original chronological account as a framework, we coded RAN’s communications, captured in the text blocks, for the theoretical constructs that emerged.
during axial coding (i.e., the aggregate theoretical dimensions portrayed in Fig. 1). We then examined other field members’ communications, contained in the broader sample of data segments, for evidence of shifts in their attentiveness, tenor, and responsiveness to RAN. The resulting data helped us to identify changes in the interactions between RAN and the targeted retailers, as well as changes in the collective perceptions of RAN’s social position. Finally, we used arrows to depict the process relationships between the theoretical constructs in the chronological account, and then created a map of the basic construct interactions over time (cf., Bingham and Davis, 2012). As Fig. 2 demonstrates, our schematic analysis yielded a diagram of patterns in RAN’s rhetorical practices for initiating and leveraging interactions with elite retailers to alter perceptions of its social position. This process model provided a platform to explain the process and composite practices through which RAN, and, more generally, marginalized entrepreneurs perform mobility work.

Next, we offer an historic overview of our case to contextualize our findings, theoretical inferences about marginalized entrepreneurs, and discussion of scholarly implications.

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4. Change in the home-improvement retail industry

In January 1997, RAN launched the Old Growth Campaign. The campaign’s objective was to stop the extraction of old-growth wood—such as Lauan, Mahogany, Ramin, Cedar, Redwood and Douglas Fir—from mature, indigenous forests by removing the demand for products utilizing old-growth wood (described henceforth as old-growth products). A critical facet of the broader campaign was RAN’s effort to alter the field of retail home-improvement, which consisted of firms that sold an array of old-growth products—including lumber, cabinets, and doors—as part of their core product mix. RAN ultimately wanted all home-improvement retailers to increasingly attend to the environmental impact of their operations, which in this case meant developing and abiding by policies for replacing old-growth products with environmentally certified varieties. Since it maintained few—if any—impactful relationships with elite retailers, RAN occupied a marginal position in the retail home-improvement field during this early phase of the campaign. Interestingly, and despite its lower standing, RAN initially focused its efforts on a field leader, The Home Depot (hereafter, ‘Home Depot’).

4.1. RAN’s initial target: Home Depot

RAN delivered persuasive discourse in diverse ways to convince Home Depot to eliminate old-growth products from its inventory. It first entered negotiations with the company in mid-1997. However, the talks yielded no commitments to change from the company’s management, so RAN made its arguments more visible in October of that year through a variety of approaches. These included demonstrations at Home Depot stores; written petitions from (non-) celebrity supporters; sponsorship of shareholder resolutions; development of advertisements; and the introduction of stories to the news media. When Home Depot still did not respond, RAN took its case to the political arena in the last half of 1998 by working with city councils to oppose the construction of new Home Depot stores across the U.S.

While escalating their efforts against Home Depot, RAN’s representatives continued to meet and negotiate with the Home Depot’s executives. Home Depot’s executives, for their part, took steps to signal its concern for RAN’s requests. Suzanne Apple, Home Depot’s
Director of Community Affairs and Environmental Programs, exemplified this point in a letter to RAN’s leaders that called for RAN to focus more on collaborating with the company than on conducting protests at the company’s retail stores:

We share RAN’s concern for the environment, however, this protest today represents a misplaced criticism of a company that has led the industry in environmental practices. We are constantly striving to raise the bar on environmental issues and recognize that this particular issue is not just a Home Depot issue, but an industry and world-wide issue...Instead of demonstrations, RAN might consider joining us and others in the effort to develop alternative products, educate consumers, and pioneer green building practices that can be used in all types of construction (private letter, 2/12/1998).

A solution seemed imminent in September 1998 when Home Depot’s executives pledged to develop a policy for eliminating old-growth products from their shelves. However, the pledge turned out to be empty: Home Depot neither formally released a new policy, nor took any substantive steps to enact one. As Randy Hayes—RAN’s president—communicated, “They gave us lip service of all sorts” (Carlton, 2000). Fueled by Home Depot’s passive resistance, RAN announced in February 1999 that it would “continue [its efforts] until Home Depot commits to end all sales of old growth wood [products]” (RAN press release, 2/28/1999). RAN increased the intensity of its arguments for Home Depot to change during 1999. In March, RAN arranged and carried out a massive protest against Home Depot:

Activists converged on more than 150 Home Depot stores in 35 states and provinces in the U.S. and Canada. In addition to the usual grassroots activism toolkit of civil disobedience, banners, inflatables, picket signs, and bullhorns, activists commandeered Home Depot’s intercom system. All over the continent, activists directed Home Depot’s customers directly to the old growth wood for sale on its aisles (RAN website archive).

RAN followed the mass protest in May of that year by arranging for the hereditary leader of the Nuxalk Tribe, an indigenous tribe from British Columbia, to speak at Home Depot’s annual shareholders’ meeting in Atlanta, Georgia. Old-growth products on sale at Home Depot stores had been traced back to Nuxalk land. Accordingly, tribal leaders—with support from RAN—planned to highlight the negative impact that logging old-growth wood had on their people and environment, and to confirm RAN’s call for Home Depot to stop selling derivative products. However, despite being shareholders of the company, the tribe’s leaders were barred from the meeting on the day of the event. The decision generated significant media coverage (e.g., NPR and The Wall Street Journal), and served as a publicity boon to RAN’s campaign.

The confluence of RAN’s protests, petitions, and political actions continued until August 1999, when Arthur Blank—Home Depot’s CEO—announced that his firm would change its policy on the sale of old-growth products. Blank stated that:

Home Depot embraces its responsibility as a global leader to help protect endangered forests. By the end of 2002, we will eliminate from our stores wood from endangered areas—including certain lauan, redwood and cedar products—and give preference to ‘certified’ wood (Home Depot press release, 8/26/1999).

This announcement marked the beginning of an increasingly substantive relationship between RAN and Home Depot, with the two jointly crafting and implementing a plan for rapidly replacing old-growth products with suitable substitutes. It also provided a crucial beachhead for RAN to call for similar behavior by other major retailers.

4.2. RAN’s “lost” target: Lowe’s

RAN also entered negotiations with Lowe’s at the onset of the campaign. Lowe’s and Home Depot maintained comparable levels of dominance in the field, and, not surprisingly, each one served as the other’s main competitor. Unlike Home Depot’s executives, though, Lowe’s executives proactively addressed the old-growth issue and even began to craft a plan for going “old-growth free.” This stance was evident in a formal letter from Dale Pond—Lowe’s executive vice-president of merchandising—to Michael Brune—RAN’s campaign director—that touted Lowe’s ongoing effort “to set global [environmental] standards for the entire retail home improvement industry” (Private letter, 10/13/1999).

Interestingly, RAN never claimed Lowe’s efforts to change as a victory or used this outcome to secure similar concessions from other retailers during the main body of the campaign, as it had done with Home Depot and subsequent targets. One possible reason is that Lowe’s desire to become the field’s environmental champion limited RAN’s ability to use Lowe’s as evidence of its own authority on environmental issues in the field. When Pond’s letter informed RAN’s leaders of Lowe’s environmental objectives and did not assign credit to RAN, RAN personnel marked the correspondence with the clear directives, “Do not distribute!, “For Private Review Only,” and “Not to be leaked to press.” The decision to obscure this information and the absence of discourse mentioning Lowe’s, which would have made RAN’s arguments for field change more compelling, point to the importance RAN assigned to its own social ascent in the field. Appendix A contains Pond’s private letter to Brune.

4.3. RAN’s subsequent targets: the Foolish Five and other home-improvement retailers

Ultimately, though, RAN sought to bring environmental logic to the fore of the field’s meaning system by transforming a practice accepted and used by most home-improvement retailers. Just before Home Depot’s policy change, RAN sent a letter to other retailers enticing them “to get the jump on Home Depot while taking responsible action for the world’s forests” (RAN website archive). None responded, so once Home Depot agreed to change, RAN sent another letter to those firms in September 1999. This letter highlighted
Home Depot’s recent commitment to stop selling old-growth products and suggested that other home-improvement retailers follow suit to avoid action by RAN.

Indeed, RAN singled out a set of prominent home-improvement retailers when the broader field remained largely unresponsive. In early October 1999, RAN placed an advertisement in the New York Times that publicly commended Home Depot for its policy change and warned five of the company's top competitors—84 Lumber, Homebase, Menards, Payless Cashways, and Wickes—of escalated pressure if they did not follow suit. RAN made good on its promise later that October when it publicized these firms as the Foolish Five and initiated massive demonstrations at their stores. At the same time, RAN negotiated with the executives of the Foolish Five to switch from old-growth products as Home Depot had done. These efforts elicited a chain of concessions from this group of firms from the end of 1999 to 2000. Even firms that RAN had not engaged, such as IKEA and Lanoga, began to adopt comparable changes. By the end of 2002, most major home-improvement retailers had initiated or already transitioned from old-growth to environmentally certified products, leading RAN to end its campaign.

These concessions also marked the beginning of more significant relationships between RAN and the members of the Foolish Five. As with Home Depot, RAN worked with many of these firms to identify acceptable product substitutes and construct formal plans for implementing these policies. It then oversaw the enactment of the policies and threatened action against laggard or non-compliant firms.

5. Findings

The preceding history provides context to present our findings about RAN, and, in turn, to advance theory on the role of rhetoric in marginalized entrepreneurs’ mobility work. Three rhetorical practices—contextualization, elicitation, and formalization—emerged from our analysis. We first introduce the observable arguments underpinning each rhetorical practice, and describe how RAN used these arguments to introduce new sourcing practices in the retail home-improvement field. We then elaborate how these arguments also constituted the essence of RAN’s rhetoric for construing itself as a more elite member of the field. The essence of our findings is that, to construe and realize their aspirant social position, RAN rhetorically linked itself to the field issues, elites, and arrangements that defined its change project.

5.1. Contextualization

RAN began its campaign by establishing old-growth deforestation as a general issue facing the retail home improvement field. RAN’s initial arguments during this stage of its campaign conveyed objectively framed information and statistics that defined the nature and impact old-growth deforestation, and hinted at the need to curb this phenomenon. The crux of such arguments was to alert members of the retail home improvement field, in general terms, that the destruction of old-growth forests was having an observable, quantifiable effect on the natural environment. RAN made such an argument in one press release, linking the demise of old-growth forests with harmful climate change:

Old-growth forests are important storehouses of carbon, which moderate the Earth’s climate. Logging these forests contributes significantly to global climate change. Only 22 percent of the world’s old-growth forests remain intact; in the United States, less than 4 percent of the old growth forests are still standing (10/14/1997).

Upon establishing old-growth deforestation as a substantive issue, RAN introduced more socially oriented arguments that made the issue more captivating, troubling, and identifiable to home-improvement retailers. One of these arguments built on the emerging normative trends of environmentalism and sustainability to challenge the legitimacy of manufacturing products from old-growth wood. The core idea was to convey that the commercial activities facilitating this issue contradicted society’s expectations and therefore represented the “wrong” thing to do. A RAN press release, for instance, explained that its “campaign galvanizes the public’s existing feeling that cutting old growth forests to turn them into 2 x 4’s and pulp is simply unethical and that a mature, modern society has outgrown such practices” (10/14/1998).

The other arguments invoked intense imagery, metaphors, and verbiage to make old-growth deforestation a more empathetic issue. The core function of such arguments was to elicit visceral disdain for old-growth deforestation, often by associating this issue with other despised acts. RAN sought to create a social environment where members of the retail home-improvement field cringed when they thought about contributing damage to old-growth forests. For instance, a press release from Christopher Hatch—RAN’s executive director—suggested, “selling old-growth wood products is like killing elephants for ivory, or making ashtrays out of gorilla paws” (8/17/1997).

The observable arguments for defining old-growth deforestation as an issue also constituted the essence of RAN’s rhetoric for symbolically construing its aspirant social position. RAN, at this early phase of its campaign, had yet to develop a body of meaningful interactions with major home-improvement retailers. The basic function of such rhetoric, described henceforth as contextualization or contextualizing rhetoric, was to create a suitable environment for RAN to feasibly redefine itself as a field elite. By problematizing old-growth deforestation using the logics of environmentalism and sustainability, which were relatively foreign to the retail home-improvement field, RAN established a new sub-community in the field based on these logics and crafted a backdrop to redefine its social position. This sub-community was akin to a parallel or alternate reality in the field, where home-improvement retailing was secondary to old-growth preservation. Henceforth, we describe the new sub-community as the old-growth community.

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RAN leveraged three forms of contextualizing rhetoric—rationalization, moralization, and dramatization—to convey its authority in the emerging old-growth community. The observable arguments designating the logical, ethical, and emotional dimensions of old-growth deforestation reflected different facets of RAN’s authority on the issue. Rationalizing rhetoric, which manifested in arguments about the factual parameters of old-growth deforestation, depicted RAN as the retail home-improvement field’s intellectual expert on old-growth deforestation. Moralizing and dramatizing rhetoric, which manifested in arguments infusing ethical and emotional concerns into the old-growth issue, held up RAN as the field’s champion of morality and humanity, respectively.

The signals conveyed through rationalization, moralization, and dramatization provided a foundation for RAN to ascend into a more elite social position in the retail home-improvement field. Although RAN still was a marginalized member of the field according to the commercial logics of home-improvement retailing, its contextualizing rhetoric repositioned RAN as an elite member of a new field sub-community based on the social logics of old-growth preservation. This niche space afforded RAN with a “home-field advantage,” enabling it to subject major home-improvement retailers to the community’s alternative logics, adjust the retailers’ social positions on these terms, and even broker meaningful exchanges with these firms.

5.2. Elicitation

As old-growth deforestation became a more familiar issue in the retail home-improvement field, RAN increasingly unfurled two types of arguments that linked the issue to major retailers. One type of argument adopted a negative stance, attributing old-growth deforestation to powerful home-improvement retailers that sourced old-growth products. Initially, these negative arguments focused on villainizing Home Depot for maintaining such practices. RAN suggested that, by purchasing old-growth products, Home Depot was destroying ancient ecosystems, harming the broader environment, wronging indigenous forest inhabitants, and ignoring society’s growing call for sustainability. The function of this message was to harm the company’s reputation and consequently to pressure it to cease undesirable behavior. Mark Westland—RAN’s director of communications—communicated one such argument in an interview with NPR:

Home Depot makes much of its reputation as a company involved in the community that it works in. But as long as they’re selling old-growth wood, they’re doing something that is really unconscionable… (NPR’s Marketplace Report, 5/25/1999).

RAN modified the content of these negative arguments, and the retailers such arguments targeted, once Home Depot agreed to eliminate and refrain from stocking old-growth products. This transition involved using Home Depot’s agreement to change, rather than the old-growth issue independently, to motivate similar behavior by the Foolish Five. In general terms, RAN delegitimized old-growth products by painting agreements from adopters as signs of fundamental shifts in what constituted acceptable behavior for all field members. An important facet of these communications was that RAN hinted at the illegitimacy tarnishing retailers that did not follow the example set by earlier adopters. In a RAN press release, for instance, Michael Brune leveraged Menards’ new sourcing practices as a platform to propose that “it’s no longer a question of whether home improvement stores will stop selling old growth wood, but when they will stop (1/28/2000).”

In more specific terms, RAN unfavorably contrasted newly targeted retailers with recent adopters. These messages indicated that, if new target retailers did not agree to implement RAN’s proposed changes, they would remain as laggards in the field and continue to face the same stigma that motivated earlier adopters to change. In a report titled “HomeBase: For Old Growth Forest Destruction, ‘Go to the Base’,” for instance, RAN contrasted HomeBase’s ignorance with Home Depot’s submission and hinted at the possible stigma that awaited HomeBase if it failed to act:

Last spring, RAN contacted HomeBase to determine why the company had not previously addressed this [old-growth] issue, and to identify steps that HomeBase could take to help alleviate old growth forest destruction. Despite the urgency of the crisis in the Earth’s forests, HomeBase did not respond to our letters or phone calls. In contrast, Home Depot resolved a years-long conflict in August when it announced plans to completely eliminate old growth wood from its stores (10/15/1999).

RAN also provided more explicit ultimatums, articulating that, if the retailers did not act in desired ways, RAN would increase the intensity and visibility of pressure on them. A National Home Center News interview with Michael Brune highlighted the forthcoming consequences if HomeBase and Menards continued to resist RAN’s overtures:

These companies refuse to address the [old-growth] issue, so our actions against them will be quite diverse. Both dealers can count on demonstrations outside their stores every week for the next several weeks. RAN next month also intends to launch a newspaper ad campaign that will be directed at the two chains’ customers (10/27/1999).

The other major type of argument for linking the old-growth issue to major retailers adopted a positive stance and portrayed the issue as an opportunity for the retailers to prosper. RAN’s positive arguments often unfolded in tandem with its negative messages and thus manifested in a similar sequence. Initially, the positive arguments focused more on conveying the gains associated with going “old-growth free” for Home Depot. RAN emphasized emerging social norms, at times exemplifying these norms with the actions of firms in other industries, to provide Home Depot with constructive reasons for establishing new supplier relationships. Such arguments indicated that, if Home Depot changed, it would comply with society’s call for sustainability, become an environmental

Please cite this article as: Waldron, T.L., et al., Institutional entrepreneurs’ social mobility in organizational fields, J. Bus. Venturing (2014), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2014.06.006
leader in the field, achieve celebrated standing in society, and even realize performance boosts. Effectively, RAN encouraged Home Depot to “do the right thing” and to keep pace with firms already working to protect old-growth forests. For example, RAN explained in a public action alert that:

As a powerful force in its industry, Home Depot can slow the pace of rainforest destruction by committing to stop selling products from old-growth forests. Other industry leaders such as IBM, Hallmark, Kinko’s, Hewlett-Packard, and others have already made this commitment, clearly it is time for Home Depot to do the same. Immediately (01/08/1999).

RAN modified the content of its positive arguments as Home Depot agreed to eliminate and refrain from stocking old-growth products. Like RAN’s negative arguments, the crux of this transition involved using Home Depot’s agreement to change, rather than just the old-growth issue or the members of foreign fields, to motivate similar behavior by less prominent retailers. Unlike RAN’s negative arguments, though, incentivizing comparisons held up home-improvement retailers that had already changed their sourcing practices as the “gold standard” for lagging retailers to attain through change of their own. For instance, RAN placed a New York Times advertisement—located in Appendix B—that held up Home Depot’s decision to eliminate old-growth products as motivation for the Foolish Five to do the same:

Without smart business policies like The Home Depot’s, our last-old-growth forests will be gone forever. Please visit our website and encourage other companies to meet or beat The Home Depot’s example [singling out Homebase, Menards, Payless Cashways, Wickes, and 84 Lumber in a separate graphic] (9/22/1999).

A powerful byproduct of RAN’s arguments during this phase of the campaign was that it incited other field members, including consumers, city councils, celebrities, and other activist organizations, to sympathize with RAN’s cause and to convey their own versions of RAN’s messages. This support amplified pressure on the home-improvement retailers to stave off damage or to pursue gains described in RAN’s positive and negative arguments. Ed Asner—a well-known American actor—wrote one such letter to Home Depot’s executives on November 6, 1998 (RAN web archive):

I have heard from my friends at Rainforest Action Network that you are presently considering a phase-out of the purchase and use of old growth wood. I hope this is accurate, as it would be an invaluable step in saving the very last of our planet’s ancient forests. I urge you to be decisive and to announce your intention to phase out old growth timber products and to phase in certified wood. But make your decision a strong one; continuing the trade in old growth will not be acceptable to the American public in the next century (11/6/1998).

The observable arguments for pressuring the major home-improvement retailers to go “old-growth free” also constituted the essence of RAN’s rhetoric for construing and beginning to verify its aspirant social position relative to these firms. The basic function of such rhetoric—described henceforth as elicitation or elicitive rhetoric—was to pull home-improvement retailers into the old-growth community established during contextualization. By linking target retailers to old-growth deforestation, RAN subjected the retailers to the community’s logics and defined the retailers as referents for situating its own social position in that setting. Stated more basically, RAN’s elicitive rhetoric ranked home-improvement retailers according the values, norms, beliefs, and rules of an alternate reality in the field. This move “level[d] the playing field” between RAN and the target retailers, enabling the former to compare itself to and inspire status-building interactions with the latter.

Using two forms of elicitive rhetoric, stigmatization and incentivization, RAN constructed the social order in the old-growth sub-community. RAN’s positive and negative arguments for pressuring the home-improvement retailers to change their practices provided the essence of each form of elicitation. Stigmatizing rhetoric, which manifested in arguments about the negative effects of target retailers’ practices, portrayed the retailers as counterproductive laggards or outliers in the old-growth community. By contrast, incentivizing rhetoric, which manifested in arguments about the benefits associated with change, suggested that target retailers would achieve better standing in the community if they embraced the “old-growth free” mentality. Both types of rhetoric reinforced RAN’s position as the authority in the old-growth community, implying that RAN was the only field member capable of helping target retailers resolve the problem or realize the opportunity. This subtle message, embedded in the explicit threats of loss or promises of gain, motivated target retailers to dialogue with RAN as they grappled with whether and how to eliminate old-growth products. Each exchange, whether it involved resistance or cooperation, reflected RAN’s influence over target retailers and provided evidence of the social order, including RAN’s elite position, in the old-growth community.

The subject of RAN’s stigmatization and incentivization transformed as it positioned home-improvement retailers within the social order of the old-growth community. RAN initially signaled that Home Depot maintained a lower social position than its own in the old-growth community by highlighting inconsistencies between the company’s actions and the community’s logics. Once Home Depot agreed to move away from old-growth products, RAN began to signal that the members of the Foolish Five maintained even more marginalized positions in the community by contrasting their resistance with Home Depot’s cooperation. This pattern repeated as individual retailers agreed to change, with RAN comparing resistant members of the Foolish Five to retailers that had eliminated old-growth products, until all major players cooperated with RAN. Each retailer that conceded provided RAN with evidence for more explicitly substantiating its elite standing in the old-growth community and ultimately extending that standing to the broader field of retail home-improvement.
Finally, RAN’s elicitive rhetoric also brokered support for its social position in the old-growth community from outside of the old-growth community. Such rhetoric implied that, since consumers, investors, suppliers, media outlets, and lesser retailers subscribed to the same (commercial) logics as the targets, these field members were party to the old-growth issue and could thus experience the same gains or losses as the targets. This message extended awareness of the old-growth community’s logics, participants, and social hierarchy in the field, enticing field members to consider their associations with the community. Sympathetic field members opted into the old-growth community and corroborated RAN’s elevated standing in it. Some of these supporters, like Ed Asner, explicitly used rhetoric that depicted RAN in a positive light while admonishing target retailers for sourcing old-growth products. Others used rhetoric that did not explicitly mention RAN, but paraphrased RAN’s “talking points.” The following excerpt, for instance, from an expose in Time Magazine, synthesized content (italicized) from RAN’s contextualizing and elicitive rhetoric:

Most American consumers know better than to buy ivory, or ashtrays made from gorilla paws, or tuna caught in nets that are not “dolphin free.” But when they stop by Kinko’s for stationery or Home Depot for plywood, will they ask themselves, “Is this old-growth free?” (Hornblower, 1998).

As more field members identified with the old-growth community, RAN received mounting recognition of and support for its standing as the elite player in this setting.

5.3. Formalization

As the major home-improvement retailers began to cooperate, RAN increasingly introduced two types of arguments that proclaimed such change as the dawn of a “new age” in the field. One type of argument lauded cooperative retailers as “heroes” or exemplars of ideal practices for agreeing to move away from old-growth products. The theme of such arguments was that, for rectifying the issue or acting upon the opportunities highlighted via negative and positive arguments, the home-improvement retailers transformed from the causes of the old-growth issue to the leaders of the movement to eradicate the issue. By positively reinforcing major players’ changes, RAN sought to establish going “old-growth free” as an accepted, taken-for-granted practice in the field. Home Depot represented the first, and perhaps the most highly lauded, of the retailers. For example, RAN placed a New York Times advertisement—located in Appendix B—that heralded Home Depot’s decision to eliminate old-growth products as “bold,” “smart,” and stemming from Home Depot’s enlightened view (influenced by RAN) of such change as “good business” policy:

Our sincere thanks to The Home Depot for recognizing that ancient trees are worth more in the forests than in their stores. In a bold policy turnaround, The Home Depot says it will stop selling wood products from endangered forests by the year 2002. The Home Depot also recognizes that it’s good business to be environmentally responsible, knowing customers want to spend their money with companies who do the right thing. Without smart business policies like The Home Depot’s, our last old-growth forests will be gone forever (September 2, 1999).

RAN also commended members of the Foolish Five as each retailer in this group agreed to change. The arguments, though, were less vociferous than for Home Depot and declined in intensity as the concessions came from less prominent retailers. Michael Brune, for instance, recognized Wickes in a RAN press release, stating that the company “has joined a growing movement among powerful wood consumers who recognize that selling old growth wood is unacceptable” (11/4/1999). As more retailers agreed to go “old-growth free,” such arguments increasingly enabled RAN to depict this move as legitimate and attractive for resistant retailers.

Beginning with RAN’s praise of Home Depot, a recursive, symbiotic relationship emerged between RAN’s arguments validating and challenging the practices of target retailers. Arguments lauding retailers that had agreed to change provided a baseline for arguments contrasting these newly minted “heroes” with retailers that had not yet changed. RAN’s glowing reviews of cooperative retailers often immediately preceded and provided the context for pressuring resistant retailers. This phenomenon is evident in a press release where Michael Brune distinguished Home Depot and Wickes from the remaining members of the Foolish Five: “Now that Wickes and Home Depot are setting high standards for wood products, it is high time for HomeBase, Menards and others to follow suit” (11/4/1999).

The other type of argument attributed home-improvement retailers’ decisions to go “old growth free,” as well as support from other field members, to RAN’s efforts. When making such arguments, RAN often described how its pressure turned resistant retailers into collaborators. The fundamental value of this message was that it subtly warned the remaining retailers of old-growth products what would occur if they failed to comply with RAN, hastening its engagements with these organizations. As the following press release indicates, Home Depot represented the first and perhaps most prized subject of these attributional arguments:

Home Depot, which announced August 26 plans to go old growth free, had been the focus of a two-year international campaign urging the retail behemoth to stop selling old growth wood. RAN staged high-profile demonstrations at Home Depot headquarters, including hanging a giant banner there last October with the words: “Home Depot, Stop Selling Old Growth Wood.” RAN also worked with major institutional shareholders, fought Home Depot expansion plans at local city council meetings, coordinated a hard-hitting national ad campaign, and organized demonstrations at several hundred Home Depot across the U.S. and Canada, as well as in Chile (11/4/1999).
RAN replicated this approach for each retailer that it lauded. Another statement from Michael Brune illustrates this point for Wickes Lumber.

Wickes Lumber, the tenth largest home improvement retailer in the United States, announced yesterday that the company plans to stop selling wood from endangered old growth forests by 2001. Rainforest Action Network (RAN) had included Wickes Lumber as part of the “Foolish Five,” the largest home improvement stores still selling old growth wood. Wickes’ announcement came just eight days after the company had been targeted with demonstrations as part of a nationally coordinated day of action. The “Foolish Five” is 84 Lumber, Home Base, Menard’s, Payless Cashways, and Wickes. Of over 100 protests nationwide—organized by RAN, Student Environmental Action Coalition and Free the Planet—fifteen were at Wickes stores in the U.S. northeast and midwest (11/04/1999).

The observable arguments for normalizing home-improvement retailers’ transition away from old-growth products also constituted the essence of RAN’s rhetoric for substantiating its aspirant social position. The basic function of such rhetoric, described henceforth as formalization or formalizing rhetoric, was to convey the impact of RAN’s interactions with target retailers. By linking itself to home-improvement retailers’ agreements to adopt new sourcing practices, RAN confirmed its elite standing in the old-growth community and even extended this position into the broader field.

Two types of formalizing rhetoric, sanctification and cooptation, substantiated RAN’s elite standing among home-improvement retailers in the old-growth community. RAN’s arguments for certifying and attributing target retailers’ changes to its efforts constituted the essence of each type of formalization. Sanctifying rhetoric, which manifested in arguments praising the retailers for their agreements to go “old-growth free,” moved these organizations from outliers to leaders in the old-growth community. Cooptational rhetoric, which manifested in arguments attributing the retailers’ change agreements to RAN, indicated that the retailers’ ascent from “social purgatory” resulted from RAN’s pressure, blessing, and assistance. When considered in tandem, then, these rhetorical forms signaled RAN had established substantive relationships with major retailers and exerted valuable influence over each one.

The nature of RAN’s formalizing rhetoric transformed with each target retailer that agreed to change. Once Home Depot agreed to go “old-growth free,” RAN proclaimed Home Depot as a corporate leader in the effort to preserve old-growth forests. However, by highlighting the extent of pressure that it applied on Home Depot to prompt this change, RAN portrayed itself, not the company, as the fundamental reason for this outcome. RAN then emphasized the Home Depot’s agreement in elicitive rhetoric about the Foolish Five, portraying those firms as laggards relative to Home Depot. Foolish Five retailers that agreed to change received commendations, associations with Home Depot in the leader group, and positive mentions in later elicitive rhetoric. RAN afforded later adopters with less praise than earlier adopters, suggesting that the later adopters offered weaker signals than earlier adopters of RAN’s influence in the field.

Finally, formalizing rhetoric extended RAN’s elite social position in the old-growth community to the broader retail home-improvement field. RAN, to this point in its campaign, used the advantageous confines of the old-growth community to interact with and position itself favorably relative to home-improvement retailers. However, as more (target) major retailers went “old-growth free” and other (non-target) field members bought in to this idea, the lines between the old-growth community and the broader field setting blurred and the logics of the former became more taken-for-granted in the latter. Additionally, by sanctifying and coopting target retailers’ agreements to change, RAN signaled that its authority in the old-growth community translated to the broader field. Such rhetoric suggested that RAN had motivated the retailers—elites themselves according to the commercial logics of home-improvement retailing—to adopt operating practices stemming from old-growth (environmental) logics. Recognizing that RAN could develop meaningful relationships with and exert influence over major retailers’ commercial activities repositioned RAN from a marginal to an elite member of the field as a whole, not just the old-growth community.

6. A process model of using change for social mobility

The present section synthesizes our evaluations of RAN to provide a theoretical account of the overarching process through which marginalized entrepreneurs may leverage change projects to improve their social positions. The three rhetorical practices—contextualization, elicitation, and formalization—serve independent and interrelated functions in achieving this outcome. Fig. 2, which diagrams the process links between the rhetorical practices, indicates that mobility work involves recursive relationships between the composite practices.

At the onset of change projects, marginalized entrepreneurs’ observable arguments for introducing field issues double as the entrepreneurs’ contextualizing rhetoric for construing themselves as field elites. In general terms, contextualizing rhetoric yields new sub-communities, based on logics from other fields, and thus produces openings for marginalized entrepreneurs to move into more elite social positions. In more specific terms, the forms of contextualizing rhetoric begin to symbolize marginalized entrepreneurs as elites in the new sub-communities and to establish the nature of their authority in those settings. Rationalizing rhetoric uses logical appeals about the objective parameters of field issues to signal marginalized entrepreneurs’ intellectual authority. Moralizing rhetoric uses ethical appeals about the moral underpinnings of field issues to signal the entrepreneurs’ normative authority. Dramatizing rhetoric uses emotional appeals about the affective meaning of field issues to signal marginalized entrepreneurs’ humanitarian authority. By symbolically positioning marginalized entrepreneurs as the elite members of sub-
communities, contextualizing rhetoric provides a foundation for the entrepreneurs to interact with and define their standing relative to traditional field elites.

As they construct favorable social contexts, marginalized entrepreneurs shift toward observable arguments that tie elite field members to field issues. These arguments double as the entrepreneurs’ elicitive rhetoric for construing their status relative to those elite members. Such rhetoric ties elite field members to the sub-communities created during contextualization, subjects them to a new social order, and facilitates interactions between entrepreneurs and the field elites. The forms of elicitive rhetoric signal that, in the sub-communities, marginalized entrepreneurs maintain more influential social positions than extant field elites, effectively inverting the traditional social hierarchy according to broader fields’ logics. Stigmatizing rhetoric uses negative arguments about the field elites’ practices to depict the elites as marginalized members of the sub-communities. Incentivizing rhetoric uses positive arguments about the benefits associated with cooperation to indicate that, although field elites occupy marginalized positions in the sub-communities, adopting new arrangements will enable them to climb the sub-communities’ social ladder.

The confluence of stigmatization and incentivization holds important implications for marginalized entrepreneurs’ efforts to construe their relative status. Such messages imply that elite field members can only prevent losses or realize gains with assistance from the marginalized entrepreneurs. This entices elite field members to interact with the marginalized entrepreneurs, generating some initial evidence of the entrepreneurs’ status. Additionally, such messages entice other field members to identify with the sub-communities and to expand awareness of and support for the entrepreneurs’ construed status in those settings. By favorably positioning marginalized entrepreneurs against established field elites, elicitive rhetoric provides a foundation for the entrepreneurs to confirm their status in sub-communities and extrapolate it to the broader field setting.

Finally, when elite field members agree to implement new arrangements, marginalized entrepreneurs craft observable arguments that depict such change as a legitimate facet of organizational life in their fields. These arguments double as marginalized entrepreneurs’ formalizing rhetoric for validating and extending their construed standing as elite field members. Such rhetoric takes two forms. Sanctifying rhetoric, which builds on arguments praising cooperative elite field members, redefines these actors as problem solvers—rather than problem creators—in the sub-communities. Cooptational rhetoric, which hinges on arguments attributing elite field members’ changes to the marginalized entrepreneurs’ efforts, indicates the former granted the latter’s better standing in the sub-communities. The confluence of sanctification and cooptation signals that marginalized entrepreneurs maintained substantive, influential relationships with elite field members. This provides evidence of the elevated social position in the sub-communities that the marginalized entrepreneurs construed for themselves during contextualization and elicitation.

A crucial implication of formalizing rhetoric is that it also allows marginalized entrepreneurs to establish more favorable social positions in the broader field. Because they occupy insignificant positions according to dominant field logics, marginalized entrepreneurs create sub-communities to cultivate relationships with elite field members. However, as elite field members begin to cooperate with marginalized entrepreneurs and sub-community logics assimilate into dominant field logics, the cognitive distinction between sub-communities and the main fields diminishes. Accordingly, when marginalized entrepreneurs claim responsibility for such change, the entrepreneurs signal that their authority over the elite members extends beyond the sub-communities. Such rhetoric recognizes that, by prompting elite field members to act and think more like them, marginalized entrepreneurs garnered more influence in their fields.

7. Discussion

This study sought to explain marginalized entrepreneurs’ rhetorical practices for becoming more elite members of their organizational fields. Our primary contribution is to expand the nature and implications of self-interest at the heart of institutional entrepreneurship. Research on institutional entrepreneurs has focused on how such actors’ social positions in organizational fields shape their efforts to introduce new arrangements to dominant field markets. Institutional entrepreneurs, particularly those with elite social positions, use these institutional change projects to maintain their standing (cf., Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006; Greenwood et al., 2002; Sherer and Lee, 2002). However, scholars report little about how institutional entrepreneurs, particularly those with marginalized social positions, use change projects to better their standing. Our study addresses this limitation by identifying how marginalized entrepreneurs’ efforts to institute new arrangements enable these actors to achieve more elite standing.

An important insight from our inferences is that the self-interest driving marginalized entrepreneurs to generate institutional change may, in some instances, stem from the entrepreneurs’ desire to acquire greater status in their organizational fields. This means that institutional entrepreneurs may not only pursue institutional change for its intrinsic value, but they may also use institutional change projects as a vehicle for achieving other objectives. Accordingly, although prior research has attended to the impact of institutional entrepreneurs’ projects on other field members, we report that such efforts can also have a profound impact on the entrepreneurs themselves.

Our exploration of marginalized entrepreneurs’ social mobility expands the scope of research on institutional work, which provided the perspective to analyze and interpret RAN’s campaign. Such research has focused on the micro-practices underpinning the macro-processes of institutional change, and examined how individuals—whether independently or as organizational leaders—create, maintain, and destroy institutions (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Suddaby, 2010). We extend this conceptualization of institutional work by recognizing that marginalized entrepreneurs’ work to implement new arrangements concurrently supports their work to attain higher status. Recognizing marginalized entrepreneurs’ social mobility as institutional work extends the shift in research on such actors from the general processes of institutional change to the specific practices of individual actors. In doing so, we also amend research on institutional work to account for the inextricable link between practice and process. By identifying
the sequence and interplay of marginalized entrepreneurs’ practices for performing mobility work, we begin to connect the macro-processes that scholars of institutional work have sought to demystify and the micro practices that they have emphasized. Finally, we highlight the importance of rhetoric to institutional work by proposing that marginalized entrepreneurs’ rhetorical practices shift elite field members’ perceptions of the entrepreneurs’ social positions. Identifying institutional entrepreneurs’ methods for altering other field members’ perceptions demystifies the “conceptual black box” between institutional entrepreneurs’ change projects and other field members’ perceptions and actions.

Our study also advances research on how institutional entrepreneurs use rhetoric. At its core, rhetoric offers an instrument for shifting how an audience perceives reality (Bitzer, 1992). Although scholars have recognized that elite entrepreneurs may use institutional change to maintain their social positions (Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006), research on the role of rhetoric typically focuses on the change itself (Green, 2004; Green et al., 2009; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005). We enrich this proposal by reporting that rhetoric also serves a symbolic function, enabling institutional entrepreneurs—particularly those inhabiting marginalized social positions—to depict themselves as the primary facilitators of institutional change. Effectively, marginalized entrepreneurs embed an unspoken figurative message within a more literal one, suggesting what a marginalized entrepreneur does not say can prove as meaningful as what it does say. This inference indicates that marginalized entrepreneurs use rhetoric not only to manipulate elite field members’ perceptions of field meaning systems (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005), but also to manipulate elite members’ perceptions of the marginalized entrepreneurs’ social positions. Additionally, research suggests that elite institutional entrepreneurs often look to make new, divergent arrangements less controversial and more digestible through rhetoric that defines change as consistent with existing arrangements (Greenwood et al., 2002; Maguire et al., 2004). Our inferences paint a different picture: when engaging in mobility work, marginalized entrepreneurs use rhetoric that embraces the divergence of new arrangements from the status quo. Doing so may enable the entrepreneurs to construe themselves as the main arbiter of change and to position themselves to take credit for any resulting change. Finally, prior research on institutional entrepreneurship has delineated rhetoric as a means for generating institutional change, portraying rhetorical practices as discrete, sequential phenomena (Green, 2004). We qualify this idea by identifying that, when used for marginalized entrepreneurs’ social mobility, rhetorical practices can interact and unfold concurrently.

The three rhetorical practices that enable marginalized entrepreneurs’ social mobility—namely, contextualization, elicitation, and incentivization—believe a number of interesting theoretical insights. Each of these rhetorical practices uses different aspects of marginalized entrepreneurs’ arguments for institutional change to signal the entrepreneurs’ influence over elite field members. Contextualizing rhetoric signals marginalized entrepreneurs’ authority on the parameters of emerging issues, from intellectual, humanitarian, and moral perspectives, through arguments that introduce the issues to their fields. The core value of contextualizing rhetoric is that it establishes new sub-communities, which constitutes socio-cognitive spaces—within distinct norms, values, beliefs, and arrangements—where marginalized entrepreneurs can redefine themselves as elite actors. This revelation suggests that studies on the birth of new fields (e.g., David et al., 2012; Maguire et al., 2004) may, in some instances, actually examine the evolution of sub-communities in otherwise established fields (cf., Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005). Additionally, our inferences about contextualization offer an interesting contrast to how elite entrepreneurs protect their status. Evidence suggests these actors define field issues and resolutions as inevitable phenomena, with the eventual objective of motivating other field members to adopt arrangements that will preserve the entrepreneurs’ status (Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006). Effectively, elite entrepreneurs recognize themselves as the messengers—rather than the catalysts—of proposed change, which allows them to sustain their elevated social position over the longer term without threatening their current social position. By contrast, we propose that marginalized entrepreneurs use contextualization to create and tie themselves to field issues, setting themselves up as arbiters of change. Finally, we recognize that contextualizing rhetoric may convey reasoning based on the logics of foreign fields, rather than on the logics of the fields where marginalized entrepreneurs look to climb the social ladder. This tendency reinforces the proposal that actors engaging in institutional work can belong to multiple fields and transfer logics from one to others (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006).

Elicitive rhetoric signals that marginalized entrepreneurs occupy more favorable social positions than traditional field elites in the new sub-communities through arguments that define those elites as the causes of the emerging issues. Marginalized entrepreneurs convey their relative authority by stigmatizing elite field members for maintaining practices that contribute to field issues and by incentivizing those members to adopt new practices. The underlying mechanism at play here is akin to the one underpinning the good cop-bad cop routine for securing confessions, or the Sicilian Mafia’s methods for extracting rents. In both contexts, an actor creates a problem for a target (stigmatization) and positions itself as the solution to the problem (incentivization). Effectively, marginalized entrepreneurs like RAN use elicitive rhetoric to convey a clear message: “if you do what we want, all of your woes will go away, and if you do not, the problem will get worse.” Such rhetoric also relies on a more obvious mechanism—anakin to public pillorying—where authorities openly humiliate “problem causers” for their offenses. An interesting facet of elicitive rhetoric is that, like contextualizing rhetoric, marginalized entrepreneurs may draw their power from the meaning systems of other fields or contexts, at least when pursuing their initial, and highest-status targets. For instance, in our research setting, RAN played on the Protestant ethic of American culture by using the ideological delineation between saint and sinner, good and evil to make Home Depot’s practices appear more contentious (cf., Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005). This phenomenon is quite different from elite entrepreneurs’ looking to protect their status through institutional change. Such actors use rhetoric to align change with their audiences’ core identities (cf., Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005), whereas marginalized entrepreneurs simultaneously challenge and connect with aspects of their targets’ identities. This “good-evil” contrast points to an interesting difference in marginalized and elite entrepreneurs’ rhetoric. While elite entrepreneurs may motivate status-maintaining change through general overtures about issues

Please cite this article as: Waldron, T.L., et al., Institutional entrepreneurs’ social mobility in organizational fields, J. Bus. Venturing (2014), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2014.06.006
with the status quo (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005), marginalized entrepreneurs may motivate status-building change by “knocking down and building up” specific field elites.

Finally, formulating rhetoric substantiates marginalized entrepreneurs construed standing in subcommunities and translates this standing to broader field settings through arguments that normalize burgeoning change. Marginalized entrepreneurs leverage field elites’ change agreements as evidence that the entrepreneurs have established substantive, influential relationships with the elites, confirming the entrepreneurs’ construed social positions in sub-communities and signaling that this position extends into their broader fields. A closer look at formulating rhetoric suggests that it offers some interesting insights about marginalized entrepreneurs’ social mobility. Such rhetoric exhibits a symbiotic, recursive relationship with elicitive rhetoric: when field elites change, marginalized entrepreneurs elevate the elites’ social positions in sub-communities and take credit for the elites’ actions. This portrayal reverses the depiction of field elites as marginal members of sub-communities through elicitation and provides an alternative platform for targeting other, lower-status elites. For instance, once Home Depot conceded, RAN’s platform for stigmatizing other retailers shifted from a pure focus on cultural logics (e.g., the Protestant ethic) to the positive manifestation of those logics in Home Depot’s “saintly” decision to go “old-growth free.” Using these newly minted “saints” to publicly embarrass resistant field members reflects a transition toward symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1986; Herman and Reynolds, 1994; Snow, 2001). Such visible, unfavorable comparisons to one’s peers provide a potent motivator to mimic how those peers think and act (Leigh and Gabel, 1992). This effect may be particularly salient for field members with lower status, which tend to pay closer attention to the actions of higher-status field members than to more abstract environmental factors (Phillips and Zuckerman, 2001). The use of symbolic interactionism also points to a key distinction between marginalized entrepreneurs and elite entrepreneurs, since the latter does not appear to play specific actors against others when sustaining its social positions. Interestingly, the use of symbolic interactionism in this setting indicates that this concept extends beyond its micro-roots (i.e., individuals) into more macro-contexts (i.e., organizations). Overall, formulating serves a unique function in marginalized entrepreneurs’ mobility work, finalizing the entrepreneurs’ efforts to convert their aspirations into reality. The culmination of such efforts, when successful, is that elite field members buy into the marginalized entrepreneurs’ claims and come to perceive the entrepreneurs as elite, rather than as marginal, actors.

Some noteworthy opportunities exist to build on our work. The first opportunity deals with the effectiveness of marginalized entrepreneurs’ mobility work. Our study focused on RAN’s social climb in the field of retail home-improvement, yet we still know little about differences in the outcomes of such efforts. Indeed, change projects enable some—but not all—marginalized actors to attain higher status (cf., Leblebici et al., 1991). Holistic attention to the entrepreneur, the environment, or even the elite field members might provide a valuable starting point for future research on this topic. For instance, when marginalized entrepreneurs and field elites espouse different ideologies, the former may be less likely to achieve more favorable standing than entrepreneurs that share common ideologies with their potential targets. Other perspectives may involve studying the factors that enable marginalized entrepreneurs to improve their social positions without securing institutional change or that prevent such improvements even with the advent of institutional change.

The second opportunity deals with the sustainability of the social positions attained through mobility work. Our study focused on how RAN cultivated better standing in its field, yet we still know little about its subsequent tenure in this social position. Scholars can begin to examine whether, for how long, and through what means marginalized entrepreneurs sustain the elite standing produced by their mobility work. Various factors characterizing the divide, or lack thereof, between marginalized entrepreneurs and their potential targets may provide a useful starting point for such research. For instance, when a social activist organization (e.g., RAN) gains higher status among commercial firms (e.g., major home-improvement retailers), these status gains may erode more quickly than for institutional entrepreneurs that exhibit more similar objectives to their targets. Attending to whether the institutional change advocated by marginalized entrepreneurs “sticks” may also help to explain the longevity of the entrepreneurs’ newly attained status.

The third opportunity deals with the nature of marginalized entrepreneurs’ mobility work. Our study focused on the rhetorical practices and processes that enabled RAN—a social activist organization—to become an elite member of the retail home-improvement field. However, other types of marginalized entrepreneurs, such as new ventures or small firms (Garud et al., 2002), also may seek to attain better status through institutional change projects (cf., Leblebici et al., 1991). Scholars therefore could identify and explain differences in marginalized entrepreneurs’ rhetorical practices and processes. As with the effectiveness of mobility work, fundamental similarities or differences between marginalized entrepreneurs and elite field members may help to explain the advent of comparable or divergent behaviors. For instance, a small startup looking to attain a better social position in a software field may not need to engage in the same types and levels of contextualization and elicitation as an environmental activist organization attempting to improve its standing in the same setting.

The final opportunity deals with the broader implications of institutional entrepreneurs’ social mobility work. Our study focused on RAN’s social ascent in the retail home-improvement field, however, we know little about the impact of such change on RAN’s social position in other fields (e.g., the environmental movement field). Scholars can thus examine these spillover effects. Status in the fields where an entrepreneur claims membership, as well as structural differences between these fields, may designate whether the entrepreneur will experience status decline, growth, or stasis in one field as they climb the social hierarchy in another. For instance, if a socially motivated activist attains more elite standing in a field comprised of financially motivated members, the activists might experience social decay in a field comprised of similar, socially motivated members. Alternatively, the same activist might become more elite in the eyes of more socially motivated actors for imposing shared ideologies on fundamentally dissimilar actors.

In conclusion, our study enhances research on the activities of institutional entrepreneurs. We do so by explaining how, using institutional change, entrepreneurs with marginalized social positions can become more elite members of their organizational fields. We hope that our conceptualization will guide future inquiry into the dynamic link between institutional entrepreneurs’ change projects and their social positions.
Appendix A. Private letter from Lowe’s to RAN

October 13, 1999
Mr. Michael Brune
Old Growth Forest Campaigner
Rainforest Action Network
221 Pine St., Suite 500
San Francisco, CA 94109

Dear Mr. Brune:

Thank you for your recent correspondence concerning Lowe’s wood purchasing and selling practices. Lowe’s is concerned about the protection of the world’s environmentally threatened forests and understands that through the products we sell our company plays a pivotal role in determining whether these forests will remain for future generations. Lowe’s is dedicated to implementing a wood product procurement policy that will help to insure these forests are protected, and to insure that our company is in no way a participant in the loss of these global treasures.

As part of Lowe’s ongoing commitment to environmental sustainability and social responsibility, it is our full intention to eliminate sales of wood from environmentally threatened forests (including old growth). Lowe’s will embark upon a rigorous analysis to determine the origin of our company’s current wood supply and subsequently phase out products coming from environmentally threatened areas. Furthermore, we will find alternatives for those products in order to meet our customers’ needs while promoting responsible environmental practices.

Lowe’s is currently developing a comprehensive procurement policy, which we plan to announce within the coming months. We expect the policy to set global standards for the entire retail home improvement industry. This policy will include a timetable for phasing out any wood supply associated with environmentally threatened forests. Concurrently, we will increase our purchases of independently certified wood. The policy will also outline extensive measures Lowe’s will take to train employees on this and related issues.

It should be noted that Lowe’s has a long and proud history of product safety, community involvement and adhering to environmental regulations governing the products we sell in our stores. We embrace this new challenge to develop an ambitious wood policy in order to meet the evolving needs of our customers, employees and shareholders and the community-at-large. Lowe’s understands that the public’s awareness and support for responsible environmental practices is increasing and our company intends to respond accordingly. Far from following an industry trend, Lowe’s intends to lead the way.

We look forward to working closely with you in the future as we embark upon this challenge.

Sincerely,

Dale C. Pond
Executive Vice President
Merchandising/Marketing

Do not distribute!

For Private Review Only
(Not to be leaked to press)
Appendix B. RAN New York Times advertisement from September 2, 1999
References


Please cite this article as: Waldron, T.L., et al., Institutional entrepreneurs’ social mobility in organizational fields, J. Bus. Venturing (2014), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2014.08.006