**“Changing the System While Leading an Organization”:**

**Multilevel Opportunity Processes and Hybrid Organization-Field Logics**

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*“We’re much more interested in ‘lower-case’ last-mile health succeeding – the idea that we should get healthcare to everyone, everywhere… – over the success of ‘capital’ Last Mile Health. This sounds heretical to anyone running a company, but we see ourselves as a means to that greater end, which means [our organization] also must be successful.”*

* Raj Panjabi, CEO of Last Mile Health[[1]](#footnote-1)

Organizational leaders vary widely in how they recognize and exploit opportunities to change field-level institutions such as public policy, markets, and norms and beliefs (Scott, 1995; Wooten & Hoffman, 2008) – particularly in their conceptualization of the means-ends relationship between organizations and institutional fields.[[2]](#footnote-2) On one conceptual extreme, archetypal leaders of profit-maximizing enterprises are guided by an organization-serving logic and use instrumental tactics to change field-level institutions for the purpose of organizational viability and growth (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994; Lawrence, 1999). On the other, archetypal leaders of social movement organizations are guided by a field-changing logic and may cease to exist in their current form once their goal of institutional change has been realized (Gamson, 1975). This dichotomy has never been fully reflective of reality, as observed by scholars of diverse motivations in commercial entrepreneurship (Segal et al., 2005) and of power and status battles in social change organizations (Vinokur-Kaplan, 1996). However, as boundaries blur between private, public, and nonprofit sectors (Nicholls & Murdock, 2012), contemporary leaders and their organizations are increasingly shaped by *both organization-serving and field-changing logics.* These logics manifest in their *material means*, such as practices, governance arrangements, and organizational forms, as well as their *symbolic elements*, such as shared beliefs, interests, preferences, and goals (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008).

Nowhere is this more evident than in the practice of social entrepreneurship. Social entrepreneurs pursue opportunities to catalyze social change and/or to address social needs, primarily in an organizational context (Mair & Marti, 2006).[[3]](#footnote-3) While some social entrepreneurs solely address local needs, the ‘social innovation school’ of social entrepreneurship (Dees & Battle Anderson, 2006) further aspires to make “systemic change which transforms the architecture of how things work” (Young 2006: 71). Where there are trade-offs, social entrepreneurs may ‘satisfice’ on organizational performance in order to maximize on institutionalizing a [social or societal] system (Santos, 2012). Thus, social entrepreneurs combine organization-serving and field-changing logics – and, as with other hybrid organizations that enact multiple, seemingly disparate logics at their core, they face tensions as well the potential for creativity and innovation (Battilana & Lee, 2014). While social entrepreneurs represent an ‘extreme case’ of hybridization, they are emblematic of broader economy-wide and society-wide activity at the interface between organizations and their environments, e.g., corporate engagement in industry-shifting corporate social responsibility (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012) and ‘political coresponsibility’ (Scherer & Palazzo, 2007), or social sector organizations’ pursuit of market-based strategies towards sustained social change (Bradach & Grindle, 2014).

Notwithstanding the increasing prevalence of hybrid organization-serving and field-changing logics (abbreviated as ‘*hybrid organization-field logics’*), theories of opportunity recognition and exploitation are underdeveloped across multiple institutional levels (Suddaby et al., 2015). To fill this gap, this study considers: *How do entrepreneurs with hybrid organization-field logics recognize and exploit opportunities for field-level change?* I will employ an exploratory inductive multiple-case study of an exemplar group – i.e., Ashoka Fellows (‘pattern-changing’ social entrepreneurs) who both lead a market-based organization and have a successfully changed a state or federal policy – in order to extend and build theory on processes of opportunity recognition and exploitation among actors who enact hybrid organization-field logics. Social entrepreneurs who change field-level institutions (i.e., public policy) represent an ‘extreme case’ of hybridization (Battilana & Lee, 2014) and thus provide a setting uniquely suited to the study of hybrid organization-field logics.

Drawing on my unique access to Ashoka, a global nonprofit that identifies and invests in leading social entrepreneurs, I have identified a theoretical sample of 13 social entrepreneurs (Ashoka Fellows) across two sectors (community development and health) who have been active in public policy. See **Table 1**. I will select approximately 8 cases after further conversations with Ashoka staff and initial interviews. Data collection will be through semi-structured interviews with key informants, as well as archival research and document analysis. I will focus on: initial conception of the entrepreneurial opportunity (theory of change and business model); how these evolved prior to and during the public policy incident; the detailed process of recognizing and exploiting policy change; anticipated outcomes to organization and field; and the social entrepreneur’s background and characteristics. While inductive research can turn in unexpected directions, my goal is to develop a process model for opportunity recognition and exploitation among entrepreneurs with hybrid organization-field logics. **My research will contribute to theories of multilevel opportunity processes and the coevolution of organizations and fields, with practical implications for social and sustainable entrepreneurs who address ‘grand challenges’ of society.**

*This project is my dissertation research. To date, I have completed data collection and analysis for one case study (written for a class paper). My preliminary findings were that (1) the Ashoka social entrepreneur followed an emergent path (Waddock & Steckler, 2016) to field-level aspirations, only seeking to ‘change the system’ after confronting a market opportunity (in contrast to others in my sample who followed a deliberate path and conceived their organizations as a vehicle to field-level change); and (2) the social enterprise business model inadvertently generated field-level institutional assets (e.g., cognitive legitimacy through demonstration of a new idea; normative legitimacy through a market-based model, rather than charity model; diverse stakeholders) that became useful in later field-changing efforts. I will begin data collection for my remaining cases this fall and believe the 2017 Sustainability Academy is ideally timed to significantly guide my analysis and focus my scholarly contribution.*

**Table 1. Sampling of Ashoka Fellows**

Sector 1: Health

Sector 2: Community Development





1. ‘Systems Entrepreneurship: A How-To Guide for a New Action Paradigm,’ Skoll World Forum 2017. Accessed from <https://youtu.be/FYDLH9N41yY> on June 14, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I define organizational field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Zietsma et al., 2017) in the sense of Hoffman’s (1999: 351) issue fields; an organizational field “forms around a central issue – such as the protection of the natural environment – rather than a central technology or market… fields become centers of debates in which competing interests negotiate over issue interpretation.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I include sustainable entrepreneurship in this concept of social entrepreneurship. Sustainable entrepreneurship is “focused on the preservation of nature, life support, and community in the pursuit of perceived opportunities to bring into existence future products, processes, and services for gain, where gain is broadly construed to include economic and non-economic gains to individuals, the economy, and society” (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2010: 156). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)