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Professionalization and its consequences: how active advocacy may undermine democracy

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ABSTRACT
Research question: The paper aims to build knowledge on the trade-offs and unintended consequences of professionalization in the context of sport policy advocacy. Two questions are addressed: (1) What institutional roles make up the sport policy ‘advocacy team’ and what trade-offs are inherent in the formation of this team? (2) How do the unintended consequences of this trade-off precipitate a cross-level diffusion of professionalization?
Research methods: Data from interviews with 46 staff and elected representatives of 19 Swedish Regional Sport Federations forms the empirical base.
Results and findings: The formation of the advocacy team points to an efficiency/democracy trade-off. An unintended consequence of this is a cross-level diffusion of professionalization that undermines the general standing of elected boards.
Implications: Management should consider the trade-offs inherent in professionalization reforms, because in some cases they may contain the seed of their own reconstruction and reflect ill-considered management practice.

Professionalization is one of the most enduring themes in research on non-profit sport. An important reason for this is the transformative processes that occur when values, structures, and processes of professionalization clash with those of multi-level sport systems based on volunteerism and bottom-up democracy. To the extent that volunteerism and bottom-up democracy bestow sport with internal and external legitimacy, the very meaning and continued development of sport and its role in society are at stake in processes of professionalization. That professionalization is a core theme in sport management research is evidenced not least by two recent review papers (Dowling, Edwards, & Washington, 2014; Nagel, Schlesinger, Bayle, & Giauque, 2015), both of which constructively pinpoint its various forms. To this end, Dowling et al. (2014) distinguish between three classifications in previous research on professionalization in sport: organizational-, systemic-, and occupational professionalization. Nagel et al. (2015) similarly suggest that it is fruitful to differentiate between three forms of professionalization, that of (1) activities, (2) individuals, and (3) structures and processes. Disentangling aspects of
a phenomenon, per Dowling et al. (2014) and Nagel et al. (2015), is necessary to gain an overview of existing knowledge, identify research gaps, and provide analytical clarity for future research undertakings. However, it simultaneously risks leading to isolation of discrete variables and a fragmentation of knowledge production. Indicative of this, both Dowling et al. (2014) and Nagel et al. (2015) call for more comprehensive approaches to the study of professionalization. Thus, with the recognition of the ‘inherent overlap between at least two of the three levels of analyses’ (p. 526), Dowling et al. (2014, p. 526), suggest that ‘understanding professionalization would be greatly enhanced by examining across these units of analysis rather than solely within them’ and that therefore ‘more research is needed to explicate the relationships that exists between these forms of professionalization and to understand how they impact and influence one another’. Similarly, Nagel et al. (2015), while claiming that it is necessary ‘to gain a clear picture of the different forms that characterise professionalization’ (p. 410), build their paper on the premise that ‘The current research usually focuses only on single aspects of professionalization and does not consider the interaction of a broad range of causes and consequences’ (p. 409). Thus Nagel et al., propose a multilevel view and, like Dowling et al. (2014), ask for cross-level analyses of professionalization.

Nagel et al. also particularly highlight the potential for professionalization to have both intended and unintended consequences. That principles of organizing can have unexpected effects is fairly well-established in the broader social science, policy, and management literature (e.g. Hood, 1991; Merton, 1936; Suchman, 1995), and in sport studies, this view is represented for example by the works of Waddington (2016), Aggestål and Fahlén (2015), Fahlén (2017a), Sam (2009; 2011; 2016), and Fahlén and Stenling (2018). At a general level, the premise of this type of work is that all principles of organizing, regardless of the values that underpin them, have trade-offs (e.g. Clegg, da Cunha, & e Cunha, 2002; Fahlén, 2017b; Fahlén & Skille, 2017; Hood, 1991; Sieber, 1981) and because of this, any change in organizing will generate both intended and unintended consequences. In that sense, and as foreseen by Nagel et al. (2015), processes of professionalization in one area may have intended and desired outcomes, yet simultaneously produce unintended, and potentially undesired consequences in a seemingly unrelated part of the same organization or organizational system. Professionalization is thus one type of process of change that has an inherent potential to produce rather unpredictable cross-level ‘ripple’ effects.

**Purpose and key concepts**

Acknowledging the above cross-cutting dimensions of professionalization, and as a response to the calls by Dowling et al. (2014) and Nagel et al. (2015), the overall aim of this paper is to advance knowledge on the trade-offs and unintended consequences of processes of professionalization. More specifically, this study focuses on advocacy (i.e. activities carried out to influence political decisions and public policy on behalf of a collective interest [Jenkins, 2006]), as one of the contemporary features of professionalized, non-profit organizations. Drawing from Barley and Tolbert (1997), we are concerned with how this newly adopted organization-level role might translate into unintended professionalization within the organization itself. To this end, our aim is to investigate the trade-off between efficiency and representation/democracy that may result from processes of
professionalization, and on the cross-level dissemination of professionalization (i.e. how professionalization ‘ripples’ through institutional roles at different levels).

The empirical context for this analytical venture is the public policy advocacy increasingly carried out by non-profit sport organizations. From a theoretical standpoint, we view the emergence of advocacy activities as a manifestation of a transformation of the inter-organizational institution that structures the sport-government relationship, a transformation that involves the emergence of the organization-level role – the Active Advocate (Stenling & Sam, 2019) – enacted particularly by the umbrella organizations of non-profit sport. Taking this as our point of departure, we explore how the formation of the ‘advocacy team’ – comprising the various roles that conduct advocacy – impacts the intra-organizational level institution that structures the relative authority between paid professionals and elected officials (e.g. board members) in non-profit sport.

This cross-level analysis of professionalization is informed by Barley and Tolbert’s (1997 see also Berger & Luckmann, 1966 and Schütz, 1967) understanding of institutions as ‘shared rules and typifications that identify categories of social actors and their appropriate activities or relationships’ (p. 96). As noted by Barley and Tolbert (1997), this definition does not make any ‘assumption of the identity of relevant social actors’, and it is therefore ‘applicable to various levels of analysis’ (p. 97). In this perspective professionalization is a process that constructs institutionally legitimate roles which in turn prescribe the appropriate links between certain activities and certain actors, the appropriate interaction between such roles, and different roles’ relative position in an organizational hierarchy (c.f., Abdelnour, Hasselbladh, & Kallinikos, 2017). Being institutionally constructed, roles gain their legitimacy from broader systems of meaning (i.e. institutions) such as managerialism or democracy, while simultaneously (re)producing such systems of meaning and associated practices and structures. Following Barley and Tolbert (1997), roles may be located at, for example, the inter-organizational level, (where organizations are transformed into Active Advocates), or at the intra-organizational level, (wherein the roles that make up the advocacy team, or the more general roles of paid staff and elected officials are transformed).

To fulfill our purpose, we draw on the above notion of institutional roles as we address the following research questions (RQs). First, what institutional roles make up the sport policy ‘advocacy team’, and what trade-offs are inherent in the formation of this team? Building on the analysis related to this RQ, we move on to the Discussion section where we ask, second, how do the unintended consequences of this trade-off precipitate a cross-level diffusion of professionalization?

The significance of this work lies in the recognition of trade-offs and unintended consequences related to professionalization as particularly important in the context of non-profit sport. Professionalization, like ‘modernization’ is a term that tends to produce almost exclusively positive connotations. ‘To professionalize’ therefore appears as a suitable solution to a wide range of problems (e.g. stagnant growth, board parochialism, etc.). Due to the concept’s positive allure, problems arising during professionalization tend to be interpreted as stemming from incomplete or insufficient professionalization, where the remedy for these problems is more professionalization (Sam, Andrew, & Gee, 2018). Moreover, because the antonym ‘unprofessional’ implies ignorance, incompetence, ineffectiveness, inexperience and inability, criticising and/or resisting professionalization is not only contrary to everyday thinking, it also goes against contemporary logics of
appropriateness, putting one at risk of being deemed reactionary and ‘unmodern’ (Houlihan & Green, 2009). Due to these properties, professionalization is susceptible to causing normative and mimetic isomorphic pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), with ill-considered reforms as a result. Because processes of professionalization are underpinned by values of efficiency and effectiveness, they carry a potential trade-off with values, processes, and structures of representation and [internal] democracy, elements that are held high in many sport systems (e.g. Houlihan & Green, 2009; Kikulis & Slack, 1995; Kikulis, Slack, & Hinings, 1992; Sam, 2009; Stenling & Fahldén, 2009; Tacon & Walters, 2016; Thibault, Slack, & Hinings, 1991). This trade-off bears consideration since regardless of the past decades’ professionalization of sport, representation and democracy continue to be important for the internal and external legitimacy of many sport systems, not least those with federative structures. The inherent values of representation and democracy aside, to professionalize may therefore be incommensurate with sport management practice. Accordingly, the practical value of this research lays in helping to unveil the trade-offs and unintended consequences of professionalization, allowing practitioners to make informed decisions about its prescriptions.

Literature review

Professionalization and the efficiency-democracy trade-off in non-profit sport

Research on professionalization in sport has been carried out over an extended period of time, across national contexts and levels of organization (e.g. local, regional, and national), and with various theoretical underpinnings. Despite its disparate character, a key insight that emerges from this body of work is the interrelation between changing contextual conditions and shifts in the institutional roles of paid staff and elected officials. Whether described as a transition from a kitchen table – to an executive boardroom institutional archetype (e.g. Kikulis, 2000; Kikulis & Slack, 1995; Thibault et al., 1991), as ‘modernization’ (Adams, 2011; Dowling, Denison, & Washington, 2015; Green & Houlihan, 2006; Grix, 2009; Houlihan & Green, 2009; Lusted & O’Gorman, 2010; Sam, 2009; Sam et al., 2018; Tacon & Walters, 2016; Walters & Tacon, 2018), or as a contextual imperative to professionalize sport organizations and their boards (e.g. Ferkins & Shilbury, 2015a, 2015b; Ferkins, Shilbury, & McDonald, 2005, 2009; Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011), emerging tensions appear to be most pronounced in processes of decision making, and particularly in the relative authority between paid staff and elected officials. In that sense, our first RQ is grounded in decades of research that indicates how an erosion of values, processes, and structures related to representation and democracy is a common trade-off for professionalization, and how changes in decision making augment broader organizational and systemic change.

Early on, studies carried out in the Canadian context (Kikulis, 2000; Kikulis & Slack, 1995; Thibault et al., 1991) used the term ‘high-impact system’ (Greenwood & Hinings, 1988; Kanter, 1984) to conceptualize this central role of decision making in broader processes of change. A high-impact system embodies core organizational values and is therefore more resistant to change than other processes are. However, precisely because of this property, changes in high-impact systems simultaneously signal – and potentially drive – fundamental organizational reorientations. Changes in decision making processes in sport
are, in these studies, therefore interpreted in relation to transformations of overall organizational designs. For example, Thibault et al. (1991), Kikulis et al. (1992), Kikulis and Slack (1995), and Kikulis (2000) shared an interest in understanding Canadian National Sport Organizations’ (NSOs) trajectory towards a professional bureaucracy. A core theme of these studies is that as organizations move along this trajectory, lines of authority and accountability between paid professionals and elected officials are (re)drawn. This is perhaps most clear in Kikulis et al.’s (1992) conceptualization (and later empirical applications) of the Kitchen Table-, Boardroom-, and Executive Office design archetypes, implying three sets of relative authority and accountability between paid professionals and elected officials (volunteer led- and assisted-, volunteer led- and professionally assisted-, and professionally led- and volunteer assisted decision making).

Although not always acknowledged, Slack and colleagues’ insights on how professionalization involves an efficiency-democracy trade-off in (what is now called) governance, are echoed in more recent work that takes an interest in the impact of attempts to ‘modernize’ sport clubs (Adams, 2011; Lusted & O’Gorman, 2010) and NSO level (Dowling et al., 2015; Green & Houlihan, 2006; Grix, 2009; Houlihan & Green, 2009; Sam et al., 2018; Tacon & Walters, 2016; Walters & Tacon, 2018). While diverse in terms of the organization in focus and national contexts (i.e. Australia, Canada, England, New Zealand, United Kingdom), these studies again share some important findings. In addition to a valorization of managerial knowledge at the expense of sport-specific knowledge (e.g. Grix, 2009; Houlihan & Green, 2009; Lehtonen, 2017) and a circumscription of the content of decision making (e.g. which strategic goals to pursue, Adams, 2011; Walters & Tacon, 2018), studies show how processes of modernization have impacted on the structure (e.g. size) and orientation (e.g. strategic vs. operational) of boards (e.g. Houlihan & Green, 2009; Tacon & Walters, 2016). Even more pertinent for the present study is the observation that within modernization frameworks, and often under the auspice of ‘codes of good governance’, merit and skill – not representation – are the main criteria invoked in processes of board recruitment and composition (Houlihan & Green, 2009; Sam, 2009; Tacon & Walters, 2016). Tacon and Walters (2016) NSO board study is a particularly detailed illustration of how tensions related to ownership, authority, control, and accountability arise from the modernization agenda. The study, like Slack and colleagues’ work, shows the importance of changes in board level decision making because these express and shape shifts between efficiency and representation/democracy, two conflicting values with very different organizational implications (Sam, 2009). Along these lines, it is commonplace among modernization scholars to speak about the creation of a systemic-level ‘democratic deficit’ (Adams, 2011, p. 39; Dowling et al., 2015, p. 97; Fahlén, 2017a, p. 718; Houlihan & Green, 2009, p. 696; Sam, 2009, p. 509; Sam & Macris, 2014, p. 526) as a result of lines of accountability being drawn ‘upwards’ and ‘outwards’ instead of ‘downwards’ (Adams, 2011; Dowling et al., 2015; Green & Houlihan, 2006; Grix, 2009; Houlihan & Green, 2009; Lehtonen, 2017; Sam, 2009; Walters & Tacon, 2018).

A third group of research that underpins our study takes its point of departure in the inherent tensions between paid professionals and elected officials that are created by contextual changes (e.g. Ferkins et al., 2005, 2009; Ferkins & Shilbury, 2015a, 2015b; Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011). These studies on Australian and New Zealand NSOs seek to understand how boards can increase their decision making efficiency and strategic capability so as to retain power and control in the face of an inflow of paid professionals, thereby avoiding
‘the tail wagging the dog’ (Ferkins, Shilbury, & McDonald, 2009, p. 268). Importantly, a common theme and suggestion in this work is that to be able to handle a professionalized environment, and develop ‘professionalised business systems’ (Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011, p. 119), volunteer boards need to become more professional, or in the words of Ferkins et al. (2005, p. 203), there might be a need for ‘a new breed of “professional” volunteers comprised of professionally-skilled strategic thinkers.’ However, boards that ‘work professionally’ demand more knowledge, skills, time, and commitment of the incumbents of board positions (Ferkins et al., 2009; Ferkins & Shilbury, 2015a; Grix, 2009; Sam et al., 2018; Walters & Tacon, 2018). It thus follows that the number of people perceived to be appropriate for such positions is reduced, something that in turn is likely to create a recruitment problem. Indeed this is possibly what led Ferkins et al. (2009) to suggest that:

Perhaps in the future, the chairperson in particular and board members in general may need to be compensated for their expertise and time so that the transformation from an amateur to a professional operating environment within national sport organizations may be further advanced. (p. 273)

The ‘trickle down’ character of professionalization

Despite the disparate research, it is possible to discern a pattern in how processes of professionalization may ‘travel’ within and between levels. In most sport systems, actual sport activities are carried out in local sport organizations, which are often far less professionalized than NSOs (Adams, 2011; Lusted & O’Gorman, 2010; Stenling & Fahlén, 2009, 2016). In effect, whereas professionalization of decision making processes in NSOs (e.g. through a shift towards ‘merit’-based or corporate boards) might appear as a solution to problems of inefficiency, it is equally likely to transmute into a systemic-level alignment problem for NSOs.

Indeed, the adoption of professionalization in NSOs depends to a great extent on lower tier organizations’ stance towards this development (Nagel et al., 2015). However, because regional and local sport organizations are often the legal ‘owners’ of NSOs (e.g. Ferkins & Shilbury, 2015b), it is unsurprising that sport governance research has detected resistance among such organizations towards the strategic objectives and plans of NSOs (Adams, 2011; Ferkins & Shilbury, 2010, 2012; Lusted & O’Gorman, 2010). Such resistance might range from ‘a lukewarm welcoming of additional resources and support to downright hostility’ (Lusted & O’Gorman, 2010, p. 145) and efforts to implement programs with professional/modernist overtones have been shown to ‘elicit resentment and even rebellion’ (Adams, 2011, p. 39) on the part of local sport actors.

It is likely this resistance derives from an interpretation among regional and local organizations of an infringement by NSOs on the sport system’s democratic governance structure and values, and on regional and local sport organizations’ autonomy and legitimate ownership of higher tier organizations (e.g. Lusted & O’Gorman, 2010; O’Boyle & Shilbury, 2018). Nonetheless, from the perspective of (professionalized) NSOs, such resistance becomes an efficiency problem that needs addressing. This is because regardless of a NSO’s capability to develop strategy, its delivery capacity is dependent on getting lower level organizations on board (Dowling et al., 2015; Ferkins & Shilbury, 2010, 2012). Democratic governance structures, therefore, come to be interpreted by NSOs (and at times by
researchers) as ‘a stumbling block’ (Ferkins & Shilbury, 2010, p. 236) to the enactment of centrally formulated change programs.

As a response, NSOs often seek to establish a ‘spine of accountability’ (Houlihan & Green, 2009, p. 689) through rationalizing system-level structural reforms, or through the introduction of various performance management tools (e.g. Grix, 2009; Houlihan & Green, 2009; Lusted & O’Gorman, 2010; Macris & Sam, 2014; Sam & Macris, 2014). However, especially in countries with a strong federative tradition (e.g. Norway, Canada, Australia), such coercive tools are not always legitimately at the disposal of central organizations, or they may face decoupling strategies by clubs. Hence, alongside, ‘sticks’, NSOs are impelled to use ‘carrots’, such as advisory groups (Sam et al., 2018) or programs specifically designed to professionalize lower tier organizations, for example the FA Charter Standard Club Programme (Adams, 2011), in order to ensure alignment and thereby increase delivery capacity.

The use of such ‘soft’ power strategies is also reflected in the emergence of research on partnership/network governance (e.g. Phillipots, Grix, & Quarmby, 2010), collective board leadership (Ferkins, Shilbury, & O’Boyle, 2018), and collaborative governance (O’Boyle & Shilbury, 2016a, 2018; Shilbury & Ferkins, 2015; Shilbury, O’Boyle, & Ferkins, 2016), most recently defined by O’Boyle and Shilbury (2018) as ‘a type of governance where national and state (regional) organizations work collectively in distinctive ways, using particular processes, to establish mechanisms for the provision of whole of sport progression in their respective networks.’ (p. 3). However, as previously indicated, solutions to one problem tend to generate new problems, and research on collaborative governance is a particularly good illustration of this. Even though it has been proposed as a way to combine top-down alignment with bottom-up co-determination by legitimate ‘stakeholders’ (Ferkins & Shilbury, 2015b), studies show that federative (i.e. democratic) structures are a barrier to the full potential of collaborative governance. It has thus been suggested that representative voting structures – the so-called federal model of governance – should be dismantled and replaced by a unitary model (O’Boyle & Shilbury, 2016b, 2018), and that boards should be appointed and not elected (Bradbury & O’Boyle, 2015; Ingram & O’Boyle, 2018).

To summarize, the extensive body of literature touching upon the topic of professionalization grounds, frames, and motivates our RQs. In relation to our first RQ, previous literature tells us that although professionalization may lead to valued outcomes (e.g. faster, expert-informed decisions), it simultaneously undermines values, processes, and structures of representation and democracy, and this is precisely because professionalization is a process underpinned by efficiency. For our second RQ, the preceding analysis (hopefully) illuminates that even though organizations (e.g. local sport clubs) may resist professionalization, especially if it originates from higher tier organizations (e.g. NSOs), processes of professionalization have a tendency to ‘trickle down’ sport systems.

**Non-profit advocacy**

Much like sport management professionalization, non-profit advocacy is an interdisciplinary research area that addresses a multitude of questions, in numerous empirical contexts (excluding sport), and drawing on a wide variety of theories. Although research in this area has paid relatively little attention to the subject of individual/group roles and their
associated advocacy tasks, a careful reading of this varying literature from the perspective of the questions addressed in this paper provides a sense of what we might expect to find in our analysis. In particular, five advocacy roles (that indicate the interrelation between the growth of advocacy and shifts in relative authority) may be gleaned from the various strands of the non-profit advocacy literature.

The first role is enacted by rank-and-file members or end-users who are encouraged to participate in advocacy because they are believed to bring ‘real-world’ credibility to the problem descriptions that are conveyed in advocacy (Clear, Paull, & Holloway, 2017). Board members of advocating organizations occupy the second advocacy role that we identified in the literature. Board members are recognized as important players on the advocacy team because their often extensive contact networks facilitate access to decision makers (Clear et al., 2017; LaPira & Thomas, 2014; Mosley, 2010). In addition, board members are seen as important in meetings with elected politicians because they give democratic legitimacy (Clear et al., 2017). Importantly, this indicates an appreciation for the role that elected board members can play in signaling member-based organizations’ input legitimacy in advocacy processes (Fraussen & Halpin, 2018). The third advocacy role is played by top-management personnel. Research shows that as advocacy becomes an increasingly important task for non-profit organizations, there is an increase in the perceived value of advocacy-related knowledge and skills gained through management training, knowledge of the advocating organization, its operations and managerial networks (de Figueiredo & Richter, 2014; Donaldson, 2007; Lowery, 2007; Mosley, 2010, 2013a, 2013b; Öberg & Svensson, 2012; Schmid, Bar, & Nirel, 2008). However, the growth of advocacy means that it consumes more and more of managers’ time, hence competing with other managerial tasks. This is perhaps why line staff are increasingly encouraged to see advocacy as part of their day-to-day work. Line staff thus perform the fourth advocacy role, and in doing so they are considered a valuable source of regional and local community embeddedness (Clear et al., 2017; Donaldson, 2007; Mosley, 2013a; Sarmiento Mellinger, 2017). Advocacy is to a great extent a purposive framing activity that is intended to persuade targets of a particular interpretation of reality, and this is perhaps why the fifth and final role that we have identified is that of the expert communicator (Öberg & Svensson, 2012; Schmid et al., 2008). Viewed together, these five roles are occupied by a mix of paid, unpaid, executive and non-executive individuals, suggesting a strong link between advocacy activities, professionalization and changing authority structures and values.

**Methods**

This paper builds on data from a larger project exploring advocacy and its sport-internal consequences in all 19 Regional Sport Federations (RSFs) in Sweden. As the regional extensions of the Swedish Sports Confederation, the RSFs have two main tasks. The first is to develop sport activities in the approximately 20,000 sport clubs that are all federated under one of the 19 RSFs. The second – and increasingly important (c.f., Stenling & Sam, 2017, 2019) – task is prescribed by the Active Advocate role, and it implies the representation of sport vis-à-vis non-sport actors, primarily the Swedish national, regional, and local governments that are the main resource providers to Swedish voluntary sport. The RSFs vary in size, but have an average 8.5 employees (SISU Idrottsutbildarna, 2010). The staff includes a head manager [Distriktsidrottschef] who oversees the
implementation of policies and programs, and manages day to day activities and personnel. In most cases, the head is assisted by one or several line managers [Verksamhetsledare], and a number of sport development officers and temporary project staff (e.g. carrying out immigration projects).

**Data collection**

This project is informed by an interpretive approach and draws from data collected through semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Snowball sampling started with head managers as the first point of contact. This strategy resulted in 46 staff members and elected officials being interviewed (see Table 1).

The interview guide used in the larger project contains questions under themes drawn from the advocacy literature (e.g. content, interest representation, tactics/strategies, venues/targets, purposes/antecedents, effects/consequences) but with cross-cutting analytical themes such as the one under study here. Sample questions that constructed to directly serve the purpose of this study were ‘How would you describe the board’s participation in advocacy?’, ‘What makes a person appropriate as an advocate?’, and ‘Who decides what the “advocacy team” look like?’ Except for two, all interviews were carried out face-to-face and lasted on average 68 min. To clarify the meaning of important themes and verify the interpretation of interviewees’ statements, summaries and follow-ups were used during the interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

**Data analysis**

All interviews were transcribed verbatim, with the large amount of data thereafter condensed through the meaning concentration technique (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The analysis then followed what Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 61) term the ‘accounting-scheme guided approach’, which involved a mixture of predetermined and emergent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RSF</th>
<th>Position (Gender)</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Board Chair (M); Head Manager (M)</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Board Chair (M); Head Manager (M)</td>
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<td>Board Chair (M); Head Manager (M); Line Manager (F)</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Board Representative (M); Head Manager (F)</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Board Representative (F); Head Manager (M); Line Manager (M)</td>
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<td>Head Manager (M); Line Manager (F)</td>
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<td>Board Chair (M); Head Manager (F); Line Manager (M)</td>
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<td>Board Chair (F); Head Manager (M)</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Head Manager (F); Line Manager (M)</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Board Representative (M); Head Manager (M); Former Head Manager (M)</td>
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<td>Board Chair (M); Head Manager (M); Line Manager (M)</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>Board Representative (M); Head Manager (M); Line Manager (F)</td>
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<td>Board Representative (F); Head Manager (M); Marketing and Communications Director (M)</td>
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<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Board Chair (M); Head Manager (F); Line Manager (F); Marketing and Communications Director (F)</td>
</tr>
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Note. M = Male, F = Female.
codes. The operational definition of institutions stated in the introduction was first used to sort out the data portions related to the purpose of the study. Second, applying our definition of roles as prescriptions of appropriate links between activities and actors (e.g. Barley & Tolbert, 1997), mutually exclusive advocacy roles were inductively constructed from the material using the contrasting/compare tactic (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 254). Following our understanding of a role prescription (as also indicating appropriate interrelations with other roles, as well as a role’s position in an organizational hierarchy), we then analyzed how roles relate to each other and how they are hierarchically structured in an advocacy context. Finally, we interrogated how the formation of the advocacy team impacts on the more general role make-up in RSFs (i.e. the relative authority between paid professionals and elected volunteers).

Analysis

The constitution of the ‘advocacy team’, and the extent to which it trades off broader lines of authority must be understood against Swedish sport’s and thus RSFs’ historical background. Internal democracy has always been a cornerstone of Swedish sport’s legitimacy vis-à-vis external stakeholders, not least in the sense that it provides the foundation for local, regional, and national public support to sport (Norberg, 2004). From a governance perspective, one of the utmost expressions of internal democracy is the member-elected boards, and the governing authority of all organizations in Swedish sport (including RSFs) resides with such boards. This means that for RSFs, the division of authority between paid staff and elected officials can be understood with reference to Kikulis et al.’s (1992) Boardroom design archetype, implying that constitutionally as well as culturally, RSFs have historically been ‘controlled by volunteer executives that direct the policies and resources of the organization’ (p. 358). As will become clear in the ensuing analysis, the professionalized advocacy team that is intentionally constructed by RSFs to be effective in their newly emerged organization-level Active Advocate role toward government agencies (Stenling & Sam, 2019) involves a trade-off that unintentionally undermines the previously fundamental role of elected officials as the governors of Swedish sport.

The ‘advocacy team’: institutional roles and their transformative potential

It is apparent from our data that conducting advocacy is becoming increasingly important for RSFs (see also Stenling & Sam, 2017). As a consequence, there is an increase in the value ascribed to knowledge of the advocating organization and its operations, knowledge and skills related to advocacy, and managerial networks that may be leveraged in advocacy activities (de Figueiredo & Richter, 2014; Donaldson, 2007; Lowery, 2007; Mosley, 2010, 2013a, 2013b; Öberg & Svensson, 2012; Schmid et al., 2008). Given this development, it is perhaps unsurprising to find agreement among interviewees of staff having the main responsibility for conducting advocacy. For RSFs, advocacy is an activity primarily carried out by professionals and in an increasingly ‘professional’ way. Table 2 provides an overview of the four advocacy roles constructed in the analysis, and three of these roles reflect that in many respects, the preferred advocacy role is a professional one.
The Advocacy Manager role

The Advocacy Manager role is enacted primarily by RSF heads and involves the overall management of advocacy activities. The Advocacy Manager is in charge of formulating policies on advocacy, delegating advocacy tasks, and allocating advocacy resources. The holder of this role also conducts advocacy activities that are believed to require ‘decorated boots on the ground’ (RSF Head, RSF 18). The Advocacy Manager gains her/his legitimacy from ideas of managerial authority, and is as such the role seen to have the highest status qua advocate. Indeed, the Advocacy Manager represents the organization in various inter-organizational networks and more generally ‘cultivate[s] relationships with [both public administrators and] politicians’ (RSF Head, RSF 5) that are seen as important from an advocacy perspective. This representation is expressed, for example, by the Head of RSF 2: ‘I’m the one who has personal relationships with [advocacy targets]. I know every single one of them by name and all that’. The Head of RSF 4 similarly states that: ‘The responsibility for advocacy is on me […] I’m the one who has the municipal contacts.’ S/he continues to say that:

If we look at how my job has changed over time, it has become more and more about working externally, being part of different networks, being responsible for our contacts/connections at the municipalities and other public actors, that’s what I spend most of my time on.

As predicted by the literature (e.g. Mosley, 2013a), the growth of advocacy consumes more and more of managers’ time, hence competing with other managerial tasks. Although top management may garner more legitimacy in the eyes of advocacy targets, this development therefore leads managers to encourage line staff to see advocacy as part of their day-to-day work.

The Street-Level Advocate role

Reflecting the belief that there is ‘power in numbers’, respondents espouse the view that the more people talking on behalf of sport, the better (the more impact the message has). For staff, being a representative of sport is a 24/7 task that should be ‘in the blood, in the genes’ (RSF Head, RSF 11). From this notion emerges the Street-Level Advocate role, most often enacted by the RSFs front-line personnel – the sport development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role label/Enacted by</th>
<th>Advocacy activity</th>
<th>Legitimacy base</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Advocacy Manager/Administrative Heads</td>
<td>Management of advocacy activities (policies, planning, resource allocation, etc.)</td>
<td>Managerial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Build and maintain relationships with advocacy targets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Street-Level Advocate/Sport Development Officers</td>
<td>Act as 24/7 advocacy ‘boots on the ground’</td>
<td>Locality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use local embeddedness to lay the groundwork for future advocacy activities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Advocacy Spin-Doctor/Communications Directors</td>
<td>Proactively use expert knowledge to manage communicative messages</td>
<td>Communicative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assist management in the transitioning to the organization-level Active Advocate role</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Advocacy Door-Opener/Board Members</td>
<td>Leverage networks and politico-administrative knowledge</td>
<td>Political</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Facilitate access to politicians via symbolic representation of sport’s internal democracy</td>
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Note: Legitimacy base refers to the broader systems of meaning from which the roles gain legitimacy (see Suchman, 1995).
officers. The role includes doing ‘micro-advocacy’ and ‘laying the ground’ for future advocacy activities to be conducted either by sport development officers or by other members of the advocacy team. This latter function is emphasized by the head of RSF 11 who states that:

The line staff are absolutely the most important advocates. If he or she does a good job, then they [local decision makers] will like us, and an understanding of the stuff we do as really good stuff is going to spread throughout the municipality […] and that’s the very precondition for us to do the larger advocacy visits – that decision makers have a positive attitude when we come to visit.

Although there is a significant element of advocacy now requiring lots of ‘boots on the ground’, the primary legitimacy base for this role is the idea of local embeddedness as a prerequisite to build close and lasting relations with decision makers (Clear et al., 2017; Donaldson, 2007; Mosley, 2013a, 2013b; Clear, Paull, & Holloway, 2017; Sarmiento Mellinger, 2017). From this perspective, and under the condition that ‘the gun is properly loaded from the beginning, so that everyone knows the purpose, and can navigate accordingly, […] a decentralized advocacy mandate with everyday advocacy decision being made locally, close to decision makers, is preferable.’ (RSF Head, RSF 18) The Chair of RSF 11 explains how their decentralized organization allows sport development officers to build very close relationships with decision makers, many times up to the point that they are ‘more or less considered an employee at the municipality. S/he just walks into the municipal buildings, meets people, addresses issues that are important, and that’s advocacy too, even though we might not always speak or think of it as such.’ This local embeddedness of sport development officers create ‘tight-knit local relations [that are] definitely a positive thing, you gain a lot from [them], although these gains are not always measurable in numbers.’

**The Advocacy Spin-Doctor role**

Advocacy is to a great extent a purposive framing activity that is intended to persuade targets of a particular interpretation of reality (Stenling & Sam, 2017). From this follows that expert communicators are increasingly valued in advocacy work (e.g. Öberg & Svensson, 2012; Schmid et al., 2008), and this strategic communicative logic bestows legitimacy to the Advocacy Spin-Doctor role. Whereas the two previous roles signify changes in the meaning and tasks performed by RSF Heads and sport development officers respectively, the Advocacy Spin-Doctor is interesting since it involves the creation of a new role, and a new staff category – *communications directors*. The head of RSF 13 explains how they have put in place a completely new position, and that the

internal working title for that is ‘sport policy advocacy communications director’, because I want to be really clear internally and to the one being recruited [what the job’s all about]. There are more and more RSFs that take this step [hire a communications director], and it’s related to the fact that we need to be faster in our feedback to public authorities, we need to convey a clearer message, and work more proactive […] be more clear in our communication, be more proactive, initiate debate, and that requires a whole new level of competence.

This new role is thus a manifestation of a general and *intentional* move towards creating a proactively communicating organization whose purpose it is to ‘talk about sport’, where –
in addition to communications directors – the aim is that all ‘staff develop in the area of communications. All [number of staff] are communicators somehow, so we need to raise our communicative competence.’ (RSF Head, RSF 9) The head of RSF 12 describes how:

We had an internal staff meeting today where we decided that each of our areas of work, whether it’s doping, child sport, or whatever, should have communicative objectives. So the person in charge of each area is expected to deliver, for example, two debate articles, run a blog, and so on. And that’s primarily a proactive work. I mean, it used to be that we got attention in the media when things weren’t working well, particularly in child and youth sport, and then we had to defend sport by explaining those incidents. But now we’re all about being at the forefront, anticipating, being strategic and proactive.

The centrality of the Spin-Doctor role for the RSFs’ overall advocacy venture is furthermore indicated by the vertical placement of communication directors. As suggested by the Head of RSF 15, it may soon be routine for communications directors to be elevated to the management team, s/he reasons that ‘If we agree that external and internal communication is important, then the communications director should be part of the management team, and we might come to that too.’

The Door-Opener Advocacy role
As illustrated by the Head of RSF 11, interviewees repeatedly report how the professionalization of advocacy has far-reaching implications for the board’s role:

[The board’s engagement in advocacy] is a bit of a sensitive issue […] but the fact that conducting advocacy requires more and more knowledge, and I don’t want to bad-mouth my board, but there is perhaps 3–4 board members that have the knowledge and the ability to be out there, so they’re pulling a heavy load, especially the chair pulls a really heavy load. I mean [the staff] obviously has the upper hand when it comes to knowledge, an upper hand because this is our job. I can spend my entire days on this.

To the extent that there is an advocacy role for board members to fulfill, it is that of the Advocacy Door-Opener. Resonating with findings in the non-profit advocacy literature (Clear et al., 2017; LaPira & Thomas, 2014; Mosley, 2010), the label signifies a role whose primary task is to use their political networks and institutional knowledge of the politico-administrative system to ‘open the door’ to advocacy targets. Due to this legitimacy base, the fulfillment of this role is dependent on board members having a background in the politico-administrative system, an area in which many of the board member interviewees were well versed. The chair of RSF 13, for example, admits that ‘I wasn’t elected because I’m super good at football, ice-hockey or floorball, but because I’ve got a network that can be useful in advocacy work.’ Board representatives are however fully cognizant of their limited role in advocacy, and accordingly describe their institutional knowledge as only one little piece in the advocacy puzzle. This is exemplified by the chair of RSF 5 who states that through their decades of political experience, board members learned something about how to influence a municipality, so we can be a ‘political lubricant’, we may know what buttons to push. But if we don’t have a working organization with staff, that won’t help. But if we do, then we can help put that last piece in to place.

Another element of the Door-Opener role is its facilitation of legitimate access to elected politicians. Board-members, as incumbents of this role, are recognized by
interviewees as the token of Swedish sport’s internal representative democratic governance, and thereby as sport’s ‘equal’ to elected politicians. As such, if board members are brought along to advocacy meetings, politicians will ‘know that it is not just management speaking’ (Clear et al., 2017, p. 3). The idea that politicians place value on, or even require, that board members attend advocacy meetings is shown in the much-repeated sentiment of ‘chief versus chief’ as an appropriate advocacy team formation. According to the head of RSF 7 it affords ‘a bit more status, if you bring your chair to a meeting with the chair of the municipal council, then it’s on the same level. Even though I’m the top administrator, I’m still just an administrator.’ This reflects the symbolic legitimacy underpinning the use of board members to achieve effective and efficient advocacy. However, the aspiration to increase the extent to which the RSFs ‘get their way’ also appears to drive the waning of an even symbolic use of board members to gain access. This development is indicated by the head of RSF 14 who says that s/he does not think the idea of ‘chief versus chief’ is ‘super important. I’ve had this position for two years, and from my perspective what matters is the result.’ S/he continues to say that ‘for me the most important thing is that we advocate around the right issues, that we’re transparent and that we approach the right target.’

While recognizing that it is a contentious issue, some staff avoided bringing board members along to advocacy activities, simply because their inadequate knowledge might undermine the success of these activities. The head of RSF 13 admits that among the members of her/his board ‘there are some that I honestly would not place at a table with politicians, because it would be political [suicide].’ The head of RSF 5 similarly states that if board members are not well-read and informed but ‘still make statements [during advocacy meetings], then things go really really wrong. So I can find myself in a meeting with the municipality, and be like “shut up, shut up shut up, we’re already doing that …” in my head.’

Staff do not per se oppose board members participating in advocacy. In fact, most of them would like board members to be more engaged, so long as they are well-read and up-to-date with the current advocacy activities. However, the professionalization of advocacy activities, and the level of knowledge and time investment consequently required has raised the issue of the board’s raison d’être among staff and board members alike. The Chair of RSF 3 illustrates this by saying that the RSF head ‘is a very good leader, and s/he’s got a very good staff, so what does the board really contribute with? Could s/he manage the RSF all by her self? She could. I mean, we don’t make any decisions anyway.’ The chair of RSF 9 similarly states that the way advocacy is performed triggers questions around the raison d’être of the board. I mean the staff works full time with this and has done so continuously, but us on the board, we’ve got other jobs, other things that we do, so we can’t be expected to know as much or put as much time into this, so the question of why the board exists is definitely relevant today.

As extensions of the Swedish Sports Confederation, RSFs do not have voting rights at the confederation’s general assembly, where all sport-wide policy documents and strategies are decided on. This means that for RSF boards, regional advocacy is the main task left for boards to deal with – i.e. the issue that is formally most in their control. In that sense, it follows that the growing disengagement from this task may leave boards feeling un-needed.
Discussion

Previous research shows that one of the major trade-offs of professionalization is in relation to the ideas, processes, and structures around representation and democracy (e.g. Houlihan & Green, 2009; Kikulis et al., 1992; Kikulis & Slack, 1995; Sam, 2009; Tacon & Walters, 2016; Thibault et al., 1991). In line with this, the formation of the ‘advocacy team’ certainly demonstrates how processes of professionalization redraw lines of authority. Our data illustrates that the make-up of the advocacy team privileges professional staff such that advocacy can be carried out in a ‘professional’ way (i.e. strategic, specialized, expert-based knowledge- and time-intense etc.). Such professionalization of advocacy, as Mosley (2010) notes, influences who can ‘meaningfully participate’ (p. 72) in advocacy, the content of advocacy, and the extent to which constituents’ interests (in this case member organizations and individual members) are adequately represented. Indeed, one of the roles found in the broader non-profit literature (e.g. Clear et al., 2017), but which was almost completely missing in our data, was the clubs and rank-and-file members of sport – arguably RSFs’ primary constituents. From an institutional standpoint, our analysis thus documents the construction of legitimate roles and the appropriate links between certain activities and certain actors (i.e. the four advocacy roles) and these roles are arguably important to recognize because they demonstrate who gets to speak on behalf of sport.

Consistent with the postulate that all principles of organizing have trade-offs (e.g. Clegg et al., 2002; Hood, 1991; Sieber, 2013), the formation of the advocacy team means that elected officials are subscribed an advocacy role whose base of legitimacy is only symbolically connected to representation and democracy, while instead favoring board members’ politico-administrative knowledge and personal networks. In relation to this, our analysis shows how the formation of the advocacy team involves a reshuffling of interaction between roles as well as of roles’ relative position in an organizational hierarchy (c.f. Abdelnour et al., 2017; Barley & Tolbert, 1997), or, in other words, how professionalization may ‘crowd out’ democratic representation. This finding provides a transition to our second RQ, which asked how the unintended consequences of this trade-off precipitate a cross-level diffusion of professionalization. Notably, Stenling and Sam (2019) showed how sport’s changing institutional environment underpinned the emergence of a professionalized organization-level role (as an Active Advocate). Stenling and Sam’s (2019) findings, in tandem with the analysis presented here, indicate how professionalization may ‘ripple’ through institutional roles at different levels, from the organization-level Active Advocate role to the intra-organization level roles of the professional advocacy team, and on to yet another intra-organization level role: that of the board. Specifically, we show that an unintended consequence of intentionally constructing a professionalized advocacy team is an erosion of the value of boards, as evidenced by oft-repeated interview statements questioning boards’ ‘raison d’être’ in light of their weak role in this important activity (see statements by the Chairs of RSF 3 and 9).

In line with Nagel et al. (2015), our findings thus highlight the necessity of paying attention to the unintended consequences of professionalization. In the case under study here, a trade-off was the mechanism that propelled cross-level professionalization. Whereas trade-offs may be intentional, as with the formation of a professionalized advocacy team, cross-level diffusion of professionalization may be less so. In many federative sport systems, internal democracy – with elected boards as one of its most tangible
manifestations – is a cornerstone that holds together the system horizontally and vertically and bestows internal and external legitimacy (e.g. Fahlén & Stenling, 2016). Internal democracy is therefore indeed a ‘high impact’ system (Greenwood & Hinings, 1988; Kanter, 1984; Kikulis, 2000; Kikulis & Slack, 1995; Thibault et al., 1991).

From the data, it is clear that the reduced importance of boards that follows from the formation of the advocacy team is a consequence that was neither foreseen nor sought after. Staff and board members alike regret that boards have fallen behind, and wish that the boards played a more central role in advocacy. However, they consider this to be nearly impossible given what it takes to successfully conduct advocacy – an activity that is perceived as necessary for the survival of Swedish voluntary sport (Stenling & Sam, 2019). In that sense, the position of the board – the pinnacle of Swedish sport’s internal democracy and as such a foundational base for legitimacy – is traded off for efficiency, as represented by the hesitancy to bring board members along to advocacy activities and the value ascribed to managers’ and line staffs’ knowledge and skills in achieving advocacy success.

Advocacy research tells us that sport actors may be right to regret this development. According to Fraussen and Halpin (2018), policy-makers ‘cannot possibly speak to every group vying for their attention’ (p. 2). They therefore need to determine which advocate provides ‘the most accurate representation of the interests and preferences of [a] particular segment of society’, thereby evaluating the ‘claims to democratic legitimacy’ (Fraussen & Halpin, 2018, p. 2). Access to decision makers for advocates that have an identifiable membership, such as organizations in federative sport systems, is based on a representation logic (Fraussen & Halpin, 2018). This means that advocates signal their input legitimacy (Sam & Ronglan, 2018) through membership density and internal democratic processes, indicating that advocacy claims correlate to the constituent’s interests. With this in mind, it is notable that board members’ role transitions, as evidenced by our analysis, is likely to affect future board recruitment processes, with demands for more knowledge, skills, time, and commitments decreasing the number of people seen to ‘fit’ the profile (Ferkins et al., 2009; Ferkins & Shilbury, 2015a; Grix, 2009; Sam, 2009; Sam et al., 2018; Tacon & Walters, 2016; Walters & Tacon, 2018). However, the formation of the advocacy team may also involve the exclusion of board members altogether. The Active Advocate role ascribes importance to sport organizations’ communicative capacity – their ability to shape perceptions of sport through advocacy and other reality constructing activities, and this undermines boards’ raison d’être. Put differently, whereas the makeup of the advocacy team demonstrates who gets to speak on sport’s behalf, it may also precipitate who gets to govern sport. While this is a demonstration of how professionalization – and its attendant efficiency-democracy trade off – may travel, this development could also have implications for sport’s future possibility to conduct advocacy per the prescription of the Active Advocate role. In particular, should sport fail to exhibit ‘proof’ of its internal democracy, its legitimate access to decision makers according to the representation logic (Fraussen & Halpin, 2018) may be undermined.

**Concluding remarks**

For sport policy and management practitioners, the implications of this study’s findings is that professionalization, despite its positive connotations, may contain the seeds of its own reconstruction (see Macris & Sam, 2014) – most certainly an unintended consequence.
This is not to say that professionalization is problematic in all respects, but depending on the values that are traded-off, and the unintended consequences of this trade-off, professionalization may reflect ill-considered management practice. Managers therefore do best in submitting principles of organizing to scrutiny with regards to these aspects. In some cases, the trade-off may be worth it, in others it may not.

For researchers of professionalization, this study constitutes grounds for further inquiries into how processes of professionalization in its various forms may spread across levels, because, as suggested by Dowling et al. (2014) and Nagel et al. (2015), there is much to be gained from this perspective. The challenge with such studies is however ever-present, and the limitations of this study simultaneously reflect our attempts to address these challenges. Perhaps the primary challenge is to establish a framework that allows the exploration of phenomena across analytical and/or empirical levels, and with a concept that can be transferred across these levels without losing its meaning and analytical power. Our use of the institutional roles concept (Barley & Tolbert, 1997) is a reflection to resolve this challenge, and while this tool has ‘done its job’, our study is limited to how professionalization manifests in roles at various institutional levels.

Likewise, another challenge for this type of study concerns the interpretive nature of research seeking to demonstrate unintended or unanticipated consequences. Indeed such claims are only plausible and discoverable through interpretation and theory. As a counter-narrative for example, it is certainly the case that some modernizers explicitly intend to undermine democratic representation by advancing the need for corporate boards.1 Nevertheless, in this case, the line drawn between a professional practice like advocacy (that is not aimed explicitly at altering authority patterns) and its attendant side effects, merits further attention.

Note
1. We are grateful to one of the reviewers for raising this point.

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