

Annika Bodemar

# Aspiring leaders at sport events

Perception and enactment of leadership

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*For Moa & Noël*



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Some months ago, our son asked, “What exactly is a PhD?”. That is a good question, and as always in academia, there are multiple explanations. I will frame it as an educational journey that I never would have completed without inputs and support from several people.

This dissertation is built upon data about two major sport events. I would like to thank all the interviewees for sharing reflections, taking their time and thereby making this research possible. Some of the statements of my interviewees were rather critical, and I would like to remind the reader to pay attention to the fact that they also expressed enjoyment, satisfaction and admiration of the accomplishment behind this criticism. The positivity behind the criticism inspired my research.

The dissertation has been supervised by Dag Vidar Hanstad and Eivind Skille. Dag Vidar, thanks for encouraging me to apply for the position and being patient, even during times when you regretted it. Eivind, you have a broad theoretical mindset (“new theories we learn”) and ingenuity to smoothly glue them together. You will both probably agree that this journey has been anything but straightforward. Thank you for your inputs, swift replies, and all the time you spent on my project. I am thankful that you gave me academic freedom to choose my path and did not give up on me.

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Oslo, February 2022

Annika Bodemar

## **ABSTRACT**

The empirical context for this dissertation is leadership in sport and particularly leadership at sport events, within the academic research field of sport management. This dissertation aims to analyse aspiring leaders in sport events, specifically how young people (aged 24–34 years) perceive and enact leadership in various institutional settings in the sport event contexts. To do so, in this dissertation, I examine four research questions: (a) the influence of the institutional context on aspiring leaders' perceived agency; (b) aspiring leaders' coping strategies to deal with uncertainty and ensure successfully completed events; (c) the influence of institutional contexts on aspiring leaders' conformity processes; and (d) the reasons for diminishing leadership and replacement by conformity in the sport event context.

The applied theoretical framework combines neo-institutional theory and two critical leadership perspectives (modes of organizing and functional stupidity). Neo-institutional theory was used to explain how different event contexts enable and constrain leadership. Modes of organizing helped to determine the organizational processes at play and functional stupidity was used to explain the outcome and key drivers behind the organizational processes. The research design is a multiple-case study drawing on qualitative data gathered at two large-scale sport events: the 2012 Innsbruck Youth Olympic Games (YOG) and the 2012 World Snowboarding Championships (WSC). The study uses a qualitative inquiry comprising 47 interviews with staff, representing various hierarchal levels in the organizing committees and is supported by observations before, during, and after the events captured in field notes and documents.

The findings showed that aspiring leaders in highly institutionalized settings, such as the YOG, and loosely institutionalized settings, such as the WSC, perceived pressure, resulting in perceptions of restricted aspiring leaders' agency and, consequently, leadership. Agency seemed minimized, controlled, and disciplined by top leaders and constrained by external pressure. However, the two institutional contexts created pressure differently. In the YOG, pressure related to institutional expectations to conform to norms and regulations, but in the WSC, a lack of orientation in a loosely structured institutional setting and top managers' authoritarian behaviours caused pressure. Cross-comparative analyses of the events further revealed two main types of conformity responses towards the pressure and constrained agency: reflexive and cynical. The results show that conformity modes highly depend on the degree of institutionalization of



practices, rules, and power structures within the event's organization. The contextual velocity within sport events, power structures, and pressure towards conformity lead to the phenomenon of fading leadership. To ensure successful event implementation, alternative modes of organizing replace leadership. I observed, for example, aspiring leaders applying management towards volunteers, horizontal processes between the aspiring leaders at the same hierarchical level, and power between the CEO/event owner and the aspiring leaders. Furthermore, pressure towards conformity seems to be a fast-paced process. Therefore, capturing young people's reflections, especially when they first enter an organization, is important because sport organizations will benefit from reflexive leaders and managers who can solve current and future challenges.

Previous sport management research commonly applied single hierarchical level analyses to study leadership, yielding inaccurate distinctions and definitions of organizational processes that shape leadership. This dissertation contributes to the literature of leadership within sport management by applying multiple hierarchical level analyses and by examining agency through critical leadership studies, consequently exploring aspiring leaders' possibilities to act as leaders. More specifically, it provides a deeper understanding of how the institutional context affects aspiring leaders' agency and pressure towards conformity. A main limitation of this dissertation is that it can only provide a snapshot of a few selected cases that represent extreme institutional contexts. Therefore, future research should explore several institutional contexts and apply a long-term perspective.

This dissertation is the first to examine organizational processes in sport events at the microlevel with a critical approach. It explains key drivers and outcomes of conformity processes in different event contexts and illuminates how and why leadership as an organizational mode of organizing fades within a sport event context. Furthermore, this dissertation is the first to examine young peoples' perceptions and enactments of leadership in sport events. It provides valuable practical implications to owners and organizers of sport events, which have become popular for educating young aspiring leaders.

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

|        |  |
|--------|--|
| FIS    | Fédération Internationale de Ski                   |
| IOC    | International Olympic Committee                    |
| IYOGOC | Innsbruck Youth Olympic Games Organising Committee |
| OC     | Organizing Committee                               |
| OG     | Olympic Games                                      |
| RQ     | Research Question                                  |
| TAC    | The Arctic Challenge                               |
| TD     | Technical Delegate                                 |
| TTR    | Ticket to Ride                                     |
| WSC    | World Snowboarding Championships                   |
| WSF    | World Snowboard Federation                         |
| YOG    | Youth Olympic Games                                |

## LIST OF ARTICLES

### Article 1

Bodemar, A., & Skille, E. (2016). 'Stuck in structure': How young leaders experienced the institutional frames at the Youth Olympic Games in Innsbruck, 2012. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 51(8), 940-956. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690214563198>

### Article 2

Bodemar, A., Strittmatter, A.-M., & Fahlen, J. (2021). Doomed to fail? A study of how junior managers at a major sport event cope with leadership issues. *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*, 20 (3-4), 271-288. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJSMM.2020.110845>.

### Article 3

Bodemar, A. (resubmitted to *Sport in Society*). The balancing act of conformity: Aspiring leaders' response to managerial pressure.

### Article 4

Bodemar, A. & Skille, E. Å. (submitted to *Sport Management Review*). The disappearance of leadership? Aspiring leaders' agency and conformity in various sport event contexts.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Focus on the education of young leaders,<sup>1</sup> managers, and coaches in sport organizations has increased (Redelius et al., 2004; Skirstad et al., 2017; Strittmatter & Skille, 2017). Such attention, for example, could decrease dropout rates among young people within organized sports. Involving young people as advocates of their own activity could help to solve that problem (Skille, 2005; Waldahl & Skille, 2016).

In sport event settings, educating leaders by involving young people in middle-level positions has become a popular strategy. The International Olympic Committee (IOC), for example, put this strategy on their agenda, especially when introducing the Youth Olympic Games (YOG), in which the organization applied the general principle of engaging young leaders, trainers, and officials (IOC, 2019). Other sport events, such as the World Snowboarding Championships (WSC), have commonly employed young people because the snowboarding sport has existed as a youth-driven culture since its origin (Strittmatter & Parent, 2019; Strittmatter et al., 2019; Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011).

Despite the increasing application of this practice, the small body of research explicitly interested in understanding youth involvement from young people's perspectives has shown that sport organizations have not created attractive environments for young people (Larsson & Meckbach, 2013; Meckbach & Larsson, 2011; Strittmatter, 2020; Strittmatter & Skille, 2017). For example, research has shown the reproduction of traditionally prominent values and a governance system ruled by older generations as salient features of such environments (Waldahl & Skille, 2016), which are perceived as obstacles for new ideas and perspectives. Traditional and institutionalized structures and practices do not create a welcoming environment for young people to engage with leadership positions in sport organizations (Strittmatter, 2020). The existing literature examining aspiring leaders' engagement in sport organizations and events has mainly applied a sport governance perspective.

Consequently, little research has focused on young people's enactment of leadership. If sport organizations want more young leaders to benefit from their youthful strengths, young people

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, I used different designations for the young people under scrutiny. *Young leader* is the designation used in the field of sporting organizations; however, I use the designation *aspiring leaders*. The end of the introduction presents explanations and rationales behind the designations.



need the chance to make decisions and to solve tasks creatively—not forced to conform to institutional practices or commands. In that respect, organizations enable and constrain their members' actions and decision-making capacity, and sport organizations are not exceptions. Within the institutional context, rules provide opportunities for action and set boundaries for actions and decision-making. Hence, institutional contexts facilitate creativity and demands conformity at varying levels. However, it can be difficult to understand the institutional context when entering new organizations. Previous research and practice experience show that organizations contract young people to act as leaders (e.g., Strittmatter & Skille, 2017). At the same time, young people have reported that they found it difficult to act as leaders because of pressure. However, research lacks a clear understanding of young people's perceptions and enactment of leadership and the ways different institutional settings can affect leadership. Therefore, researchers must critically analyse young people's perceptions in leadership positions within different institutional environments, hereunder how young people who are motivated and contracted to act as leaders who perceive the institutional environment of specific sport events. Further, we must examine the organizational processes at play in these working environments and the outcome of the processes in various contexts. Sport organizations will benefit from reflexive leaders and managers who can solve current and future challenges, such as implementing new sport activities and correcting integration and inequality issues.

Against this backdrop, this dissertation explores how aspiring leaders perceive and enact leadership within various types of sport events. Building on existing literature that examined leadership issues and processes in the dynamic context of sport events, this dissertation connects the leadership, agency, and conformity of aspiring leaders in various event settings. Hence, I approach leadership as a balancing act between agency and pressure towards conformity (presented in the Theoretical Framework chapter). This dissertation uses data from two major sport events representing two institutional contexts: the 2012 Innsbruck YOG and the 2012 Oslo WSC. The YOG and WSC explicitly aimed to involve young people in middle-level positions and to provide them with possibilities to influence decision-making processes actively.

### **Outline of research questions**

This dissertation explores how aspiring leaders perceive and enact leadership in various sport events. More specifically, it aims to provide a deeper understanding of how the institutional

setting in various sports events influences aspiring leaders' perceptions and enactments of leadership. I pursue this aim by answering the following four research questions (RQs).

*RQ 1: How does the institutional context of YOG enable and constrain aspiring leaders' perceived agency (Article 1)?*

*RQ 2: How does aspiring leaders' perceptions of uncertainty, determined by the internal and external organizational environment, influence aspiring leaders' applications of modes of organizing to ensure an external perception of success (Article 2)?*

*RQ 3: How do various institutional contexts of sport events influence aspiring leaders' conformity processes (Article 3)?*

*RQ 4: How is leadership often replaced by conformity in the context of sport events? and: Why does leadership fade (Article 4)?*

To answer RQ 1, I used concepts from neo-institutional theory to analyse institutional change and pressure as well as aspiring leaders' possibilities for influence in the YOG. For RQs 2 and 3, I applied two concepts within critical leadership studies. For RQ 2, I explored how aspiring leaders in the WSC, despite their perceptions of uncertainty, contributed to an external perception of an event's success. For RQ 3, I investigated how the distinct institutional contexts of WSC and YOG pressured aspiring leaders to conform and thus limited their opportunities to enact leadership. Drawing on functional stupidity (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012b), I analysed the conformity modes applied by young leaders. To answer RQ 4, I investigated the relationship between leadership and conformity through the lens of six modes of organizing (Alvesson & Blom, 2019; Alvesson et al., 2017) and functional stupidity (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012b; Paulsen, 2017). Therefore, in this dissertation, I aim to answer the research questions by applying a framework that combines organizational theory (neo-institutionalism) and two critical leadership perspectives, which I explain further in the Theoretical Framework section.

### **The different designations of the studied young people**

In this dissertation, I used various designations of young people in leadership positions. In the first article, I used the designation *young leader* in line with the IOC's designation because the research context was the YOG. In Article 2, I changed the designation to *junior manager* in line

with the analysis outcome and according to the various modes of organizing suggested by Alvesson et al. (2017). In Article 3, I used the designation *aspiring leader* due to its focus on learning or, more correctly, on restricted learning. Considering this outcome and the call for studies on the implication of critical leadership in the field of sport management, I used aspiring leaders as the main designation in this dissertation. The aspiring leader designation can also associate with leadership development. The YOG and WSC aimed at educating young leaders, but there were no leadership education strategies. Therefore, I considered literature on leadership education and development out of this dissertation's scope.

In the next section, I provide a literature review of studies on leadership in sport management and sport event management, followed by a presentation of the theoretical concepts that guided the studies. I subsequently present the study context. Thereafter, I outline the research approach, design, and methods. I describe the findings in the results section, followed by the discussion. The dissertation concludes with implications for practice, notes for limitations, and suggestions for further research.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The empirical context for this dissertation is leadership in sport and particularly leadership at sport events, but the academic research field of this study belongs to sport management and sport events. In the dissertation, I use events as cases to understand young adults' perceptions and enactments of leadership. This chapter provides an overview of existing literature on leadership within the academic field of sport management in general and in sport events specifically. Further, I explain how my study will contribute to the existing literature based on previous research.

### **Leadership in sport management**

Research on leadership in the field of sport management has followed the development of the generic field on leadership and organizations. However, the sport management field lagged behind (e.g., Billsberry et al., 2018; Kihl et al., 2010). Within the literature of sport management, researchers have conducted most studies by applying quantitative approaches with leadership-centric theories, first by emphasising leadership traits and behaviour and later based on followers' perceptions.

Existing research on leadership in sports comprises two main contributions: leadership off field in administrative sports organizations (e.g., CEOs and administrative leaders, presidents, and board members of sports organizations) and leadership on field related to athletic teams (e.g., coaches, leaders, and managers surrounding the sport teams). Most research before 1990 applied normative approaches with self-reported scores to examine leadership behaviour and coaching style on-field. This research occurred primarily in North American intercollegiate sports (Chelladurai, 1990; Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980). Since the middle of the 1990s, sport management scholars have scrutinized administrators and executives of sport organizations by measuring organizational outcomes. These studies mainly applied trait, behaviour, and transactional/transformational perspectives of leadership (e.g., Burton & Welty Peachey, 2009; Cruickshank & Collins, 2016; Doherty & Danylchuk, 1996; Quarterman, 1998; Weese, 1995, 1996). Several studies have investigated managerial leadership related to effectiveness (Weese, 1996). Nevertheless, Soucie's (1994) review on effectiveness found managerial leadership in sport organizations to be complex and concluded that there was no generally dominant form of efficient

managerial leadership. From the middle of the 1990s, transformational leadership became a significant focus in sport management research. In this stream of research, the results also were inconsistent. For example, researchers found that transformational leadership was efficient for culture building activities in campus recreation programs (Weese, 1995). In contrast, a direct relationship between transformational leadership and organizational effectiveness was not revealed (Bourner & Weese, 1995; Weese, 1996). Several studies continued to look at leadership styles and found that transformational leadership was the preferred style in the United States and college sport organizations (Wallace & Weese, 1995). Researchers found that managers use the transformational and transactional leadership styles in change processes. However, these styles did not affect employees' job satisfaction (Wallace & Weese, 1995). Neither did Kim et al. (2012) find effects on transformational leadership for job satisfaction. In contrast, Wells and Welty Peachey (2011) found that lower turnover intention of voluntary assistant sport coaches related to transformational and transactional leadership behaviour.

More recently, the leader-member exchange theory emerged as an applied leadership theory (Bang, 2011; Hoye, 2003, 2004, 2006). Researchers found that increased performance in the board related to the quality of the perceived leader-member exchange relationship between the board and the administration (Hoye, 2004). The same applied to leaders and volunteers within sport events and clubs (Hoye, 2006). Ethical leadership is another current research focus to shed light on leadership in sports (Sagas & Wigley, 2014; Staurowsky, 2014; Vilaça & Varaki, 2021). Within this research stream, there is, for example, a study about the International Federation of Association Football exploring a shift in leaders' unethical practices and actions (Tomlinson, 2014).

Recent sport management research on leadership has dealt with tasks and skills associated with leaders in sport contexts. In this regard, scholars have researched stakeholders' views on management (Kihl et al., 2010). Research found that organizational processes affect how stakeholders experience an organization's management. Other studies have examined competence and management and found that the more sport competence a leader has, the more credible employees, members, or volunteers perceive this leader (Swanson & Kent, 2014).

Some of the most renowned scholars in leadership in sport management, such as Welty Peachey et al. (2015) and Burton and Welty Peachey (2013), argued for the potential in servant leadership and social construction of leadership. Another emerging theme in sport management

research is shared leadership, that is, the balance between the board volunteers and the administrative employees of sport organizations (Shilbury, 2001), and how this arrangement allows employees to influence the organization. Furthermore, research has applied collective leadership to explore leadership in the boardroom. Ferkins et al. (2018) examined how leadership at the national level influences a national network's overall leadership capacity and thus affects intraboard leadership capacity. Further applying collective leadership, O'Boyle et al. (2020) found a lack of leadership processes at the intraboard level and in the sport network as a whole. Researchers have also explored board interactions in nonprofit sport by applying authentic leadership, showing that self-awareness, balanced processing, and relational orientation help determine board effectiveness in a leadership capacity (Tako et al., 2018).

The existing literature on leadership in sports has shown that leadership takes place in a complex environment, not the least because the sport context forces leaders, employees, volunteers, and members in sport organizations to consider several different actors, rules, cultures, and so forth. Therefore, in sports, several actors try to influence and are influenced by decisions made by sports leaders. Therefore, a research on leadership through the lens of governance is receiving increasing attention (e.g., Dowling et al., 2018; Ferkins et al., 2005; Geeraert & van Eekeren, 2022).

Even though researchers have investigated how organizational complexity and political and decision-making processes influence leadership, several have raised criticisms about the existing literature on leadership in sport management. For example, Welty Peachey et al. (2015) claimed that research in a sport context was influenced by its focus on quantitative scale-oriented analyses, with the dominating transformational leadership theory revolving around a leader encouraging a follower to maximize their potential (p. 572). They also stated, "Most of the leadership research in sport management has paralleled the leadership theories in business management and social psychology" (p. 577), and cited Chalip (2006), who called for a more sport-oriented theory. Welty Peachey et al. (2015) proposed a multilevel theoretical framework for understanding leadership in sports, bringing in more elements that characterize the sporting context. This framework includes four different levels of analyses: the individual (i.e., the leader and his/her experience), dyadic (i.e., leader–employee relationship or leader–volunteer relationship), group (e.g., coach–athlete relationship), and organizational level (e.g., governance structures, organizational culture, etc.).

All these levels include antecedents to leadership and help explain leadership behaviour. Welty Peachey et al. (2015) further claimed that learning and reflection developed and cultivated through leadership. In other words, the effect of a leadership process has consequences for processes that occur on different hierarchical levels. Welty Peachey et al. (2015) argued that research must study leadership from different hierarchical levels. Previous research in sport management is mainly limited to analysis of one specific level. Therefore, a key to developing useful knowledge about leadership is to use multilevel perspectives. These arguments by Welty Peachey et al. (2015) correspond to claims made by scholars in the generic field of leadership (e.g., Yammarino, 2013; Yukl, 2010). This dissertation follows these claims, and therefore, I adopted a multilevel study design (see Methods).

Recently, researchers have called for an epistemological shift into social constructive perspectives to leadership (Billsberry et al., 2018; Ferkins et al., 2018). A special issue published in the *Journal of Sport Management* emphasized the social construction of leadership (Ferkins et al., 2018). In the articles published in this special issue, leadership was “viewed as a collective achievement, not something that belongs to an individual” (p. 77). Encouraging multilevel analyses and “new” theories, the special issue responded to a need for antihero perspectives in sport leadership studies, thereby referring to Grint (2005), who called for putting the “ship” back in leadership studies. Some of the “new” theories applied were shared-, servant-, and authentic-leadership theories examining collective achievement, dynamics between leaders and followers, relation orientation, collective capacity, and networks.

Parallel to the shift towards social construction of leadership, sport management scholars called for more critical studies (Amis & Silk, 2005; Frisby, 2005; Gammelsæter, 2021; Knoppers, 2015). These scholars urged the same for leadership research in sport events (Parent, 2015, p. 59). This dissertation follows this shift and responds to the call for new theories. It contributes to an understanding of leadership in a sporting context—namely that of sport events—by applying critical lenses to leadership. In the following subsection, I present existing literature on leadership in sport events.

### **Leadership in sport events**

Few studies have addressed research and theory development regarding leadership at sport events (with few exceptions; see, Parent, Beaupre, & Séguin, 2009; Parent, Olver, & Séguin,

2009). Scholars have addressed leadership as a key aspect for several event management processes, including recruiting, engaging, and retaining personnel (Hanlon & Cuskelly, 2002; Hanlon & Jago, 2004; Hanlon & Stewart, 2006; Sand et al., 2017) and volunteers (Rogalsky et al., 2016; Sheptak & Menaker, 2016); creating brands (Parent et al., 2012; Parent & Séguin, 2008); transferring knowledge (Parent et al., 2017); and managing risk (Andersen et al., 2015; Hanstad, 2012). Furthermore, research has investigated sustainable leadership in the context of sport events (Pernecky, 2015). These contributions have clarified leadership processes in sport events. However, most studies widely and sometimes uncritically defined leadership with a one-sided focus on the leader or the leadership (single hierarchal) level.

Moreover, researchers have claimed that the event lifecycle's structural and situational characteristics affect leadership and management processes (Hanlon & Cuskelly, 2002; Parent, 2008). Compared with generic organizations, the sport event's organizational context influences the practice of leadership. Staging an event within a given period gives sport events a clarity of purpose, and the sport event's rhythm entails an extreme one-time performance. Within a short life cycle with a fixed start and finish date, the organizational structure of sport events transforms quickly—the amount of personnel expands close to the event and contracts after game time. Major sport events also appear unique from an organizational point of view (Hanlon & Cuskelly, 2002), where organizational processes depend on how the organizational structure transforms (see also Theodoraki, 2001).

Being a leader at major sport events involves many diverse roles and responsibilities (Frawley, 2015; Parent, Beaupre, et al., 2009). Leaders must navigate stakeholders with conflicting interests, volunteers requiring training, and unexpected demands and risks (Andersen et al., 2015; Frawley, 2015; Leopkey & Parent, 2009; Parent & Séguin, 2007). As game time approaches, time becomes scarce; relationships move quickly; and normal patterns of deliberations in decision-making processes become exceptional. Hence, decisions may be rushed, and wrong decisions may be difficult to change because they extend down the system, where one action affects the next (Parent, 2010). In other words, a sport event's velocity creates an organizational environment in which time for thorough consideration is scarce. Thus, the high velocity and complexity of tasks often creates uncertainty among leaders and employees of sport events, and one main focus of leadership is problem-solving (Parent, 2010).



Leaders' required qualities for events are debated and depend on each event's context. The reported key leadership qualities comprise the following: energising people, appreciating employees' work, managing time and resources (Van Der Wagen, 2007), coping with diverse and fragmented activities, staying flexible with an orientation towards solutions (Parent, Beaupre, et al., 2009), and quick decision-making and time management (Parent, 2010).

Furthermore, researchers have applied a stakeholder perspective in a sport event context. Parent, Beaupre, and Seguin (2009) reported networking and human resources as the most significant in large-scale sport events. Networks exist within various important areas, including political, business, and sport areas. The leader needs communication, human resource management, and financial skills to build such a network. In other words, hiring a leader with a network that fits the event's needs has many benefits. According to Parent, Beaupre, and Seguin (2009), this offers events access to recourses and opportunities for good public relations. Furthermore, hiring a leader with a network increases the event's credibility and recognition. In addition, it secures a leader with relationship-management capabilities because a leader with human resource management skills can establish and keep a personal network for several, benefits. Parent, Beaupre, and Seguin (2009) further claimed that stakeholder management for the event was critical. Leaders must possess the skills to keep important relationships because these relationships can affect legacy management, as involving stakeholders after the event is important for creating an event legacy.

Young middle managers, at ages between 25 and 35, are common in the context of sport events (Parent & Smith-Swan, 2013, p. 88). Such positions appeal to people without permanent employment and fewer family commitments. Sport events further tend to have restricted budgets (Parent, 2015) that may not accommodate highly qualified and experienced managers.

As this section showed, existing leadership in connection to sport events is mainly leader-centred, where the leader as a single person is a key player. In sum, existing research has provided the following knowledge on leadership in sport events. First, leadership has shown to be important in managing sport events. Second, sport event life cycle creates critical situations in which the organizational structure transforms. Third, a leader needs to relate to several stakeholders with different needs. Fourth, decision-making is challenging. Fifth, networking and human resources are crucial to creating a successful event. Research has given less attention to describing and analysing managers' work concerning their functions and the organization they lead. Parent (2015)

formulated this argument and commended applying critical management approaches to “provide additional insights into inner workings of organizing committees” (p. 59). My dissertation extends previous research and answers this call by exploring how leaders perceive and enact leadership in different sport event contexts, especially regarding how and which organizational processes in time and space impact leadership. Furthermore, another contribution I make to the existing literature is the focus on aspiring leaders, which I explain thoroughly in the following subsection.

### **Contribution to existing literature: a focus on aspiring leaders**

Many young people participate in managing sport events. However, research has not shown how they perceive and enact leadership or the outcomes of their leadership enactments. My dissertation thus contributes to the existing literature by providing an in-depth understanding of aspiring leaders’ perceptions and enactments of leadership in various sport event contexts.

In this study, *aspiring leaders* refer to persons aged 24 and 34 with a hierarchical position below the executive level and above volunteers, such as a department head or supervisor. The aspiring leaders occupy an unequal position in relation to the top managers above them and the volunteers. Academic literature often has included inconsistent and vague definitions and designations of *managers* and *leaders* (e.g., Collinson, 2011). In academic research and in practice, concepts and definitions of leadership and management overlap, including young adults in an organization's middle-layer hierarchy. The sport event context is no exception. This appears in the most common work titles, with top- and middle-management positions labelled as, for example, *event manager* or *department manager*. However, lower managerial positions coordinating volunteers are often framed as *volunteer team leaders*. While acknowledging the differences between leadership and management, I focused on the perceived possibilities and constraints within the leadership role. In this dissertation’s four articles, I applied various designations to refer to the leaders that I studied. I did so for two reasons. First, this dissertation contains academic articles focusing on various topics within the overall research aim. The publishing process encourages authors to cite former studies in the target journal and use designations commonly applied in the respective journal or stream of research—or those applied in practice. Second, my research process employed analytical frameworks situated in critical leadership studies with a general scepticism towards the uncritical framing of leadership (e.g., Collinson, 2011; Spicer et al., 2009). Therefore, I applied more nuanced terminologies.

The outset of the study concerns the fact that I studied young people. Upon the study's outset, I saw young people as less experienced than older people and young leaders as representing a generation different from that of the organizations' established leaders. I conducted a search for literature on different generations because each generation has characteristics influenced by society. The target group of this study (aged between 24 and 34 years), born in the 1980s and 1990s, grew up in an era of postmodernism, multiculturalism, and globalisation. In other words, the young people in this study are used to creating their own biographies based on reflexive and individualized choices and living in a time that provides them with numerous opportunities around the world. Moreover, this generation is familiar with accepting change and with importing and recombining elements from various contexts (Burkus, 2010; Opper, 2007; Tulgan, 2009). However, the literature characterizing various generations in the context of work has been criticized as inconsistent (Rudolph et al., 2018). Accordingly, scholars have found that the importance of age varies in different types of organizations (Oshagbemi, 2004). Consequently, scholars have claimed that young people's cognitive styles can differ due to growing up in a digital era (Bass & Bass, 2008). Therefore, their focus and experiences may differ from those of older leaders, including young people's higher activity orientation and higher consciousness regarding visible elements. Furthermore, young people are more used to utilising electronic tools, such as social media. Additionally, I assumed aspiring leaders undergo a learning process, where they must regulate themselves in relation to the leadership position with a constant process of reflecting on their decisions. Moreover, aspiring leaders should have the chance to act as less experienced, take advantage of opportunities to learn from mistakes, find their own "youngish" solutions as leaders, and develop their own styles because they are searching for their identities like all young people are. At the same time and in the same way as all employees, young people need to adapt and commit to regulations, expectations, and norms in organizations (Kunda, 2009). Therefore, the understanding of young leaders' perceptions and enactments of leadership must take into account this tension between independent decision-making and boundaries to it. Accordingly, in the following theoretical framework, I introduce theoretical concepts that allow for analysing and understanding leadership in different institutional contexts.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this dissertation, I aim to contribute to a better understanding of how various institutional settings in sport events influence aspiring leaders' perceptions and enactments of leadership. Leadership is contextual and occurs within the tension between organizations and individuals. Understanding leadership—through aspiring leaders' perceptions and enactments in this context—is complex. As Trail and James (2016) noted, “Most research, if it is substantial enough to have meaning and be of value to the field, likely cannot be substantiated solely by one theory . . . We should be thinking about the prospect of two or more theories serving as guides for our work” (p. 144). Following this perspective and considering the complex nature of leadership in various institutional settings, the theoretical framework combines neo-institutional theory and two critical leadership perspectives: modes of organizing and functional stupidity.

Neo-institutional theory is applied to understand the environmental pressure of an organization. Thus, neo-institutional theory helps explain the processes, structures, and norms a (sport event) organization adopts. Sport events are different from each other, and some are more institutionalized than others. Accordingly, this includes examining how the institutional context affects aspiring leaders' abilities to enact leadership and deal with leadership issues. Aspiring leaders' perceptions of power to act are influenced by institutions, which enable and constrain individual action in an organization. Hence, concepts within the neo-institutional theory are applied to understand the pressure derived from the event context.

Moreover, leadership is characterized by decision-making. In that respect, *agency* is a central concept in this dissertation and is understood as aspiring leaders' subjective sense of power to take action. In this respect, the dissertation answers the call for critical perspectives into leadership research in sport management and sport event management, including modes of organizing and functional stupidity. Reflexive leadership, specifically modes of organizing (Alvesson & Blom, 2019; Alvesson et al., 2017), and functional stupidity (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012b) are applied to shed light on the intraorganizational behaviour of and between individuals in an organization. Therefore, neo-institutional theory covers the perspective of outside pressure on an organization whereas reflexive leadership and functional stupidity provide an “inside” perspective of organizational processes focusing on the individual. At the end of the chapter, I

reflect on the compatibility between the theories. In the following sections, I outline the main elements of the dissertation's theories.

### **Neo-institutional theory**

*Neo-institutional theory* helps researchers to understand how the organizational environment impacts norms, values, structures, and practices within an organization. Traditionally, neo-institutionalism has simultaneously focused on an organization's external dependency and internal strategy, including the tension and interplay between the external and the internal. Following the classic theories, I emphasize the taken-for-granted and hidden powers for defining acceptable behaviour among organizations in the field (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Three forms of isomorphism were identified to describe how values, norms, and behaviours spread in the field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Coercive isomorphism occurs when formal and informal pressures are exerted on an organization by another organization upon which the focal organization depends. Mimetic isomorphism emerges in response to uncertainty when the focal organization resembles similar organizations that appear successful. Normative isomorphism develops in a field via the mechanisms of filtering personnel with similar education or similar experience across organizations. Several studies in sport management have shown the relevance of neo-institutionalism and its reproductive focus on organizations resembling each other (O'Brien & Slack, 2004; Skille, 2010; Slack & Hinings, 1992). The theory has been widely applied in the study of sport organizations and systems, creating important insights into fundamental issues within sport, such as explaining why sport organizations become more similar, why and how organizations change, and why sport organizations adopt seemingly irrational practices (Robertson et al., 2021).

Early institutional studies in sport management examined how institutional arrangements influence sport organizations' practices, structures and designs, and behaviours (e.g., Kikulis et al., 1992; O'Brien & Slack, 1999). Scholars shed light on how sport organizations can navigate their own operations within their institutional environments and thus survive. For example, Slack and Hinings (1994) showed how national sport organizations respond to institutional pressures.

Within the sport management literature, there are numerous examples of how different subfields of institutional theory are applied to analyse reproduction and resemblance as well as change and pluralization within an institutional field (Fahlen et al., 2008; Leopkey & Parent, 2012;

Skille, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011; see also, Robertson et al., 2021). For example, the concept of isomorphism was previously applied in studies of national sport policy and local sport clubs (Skille, 2009). Furthermore, in the sport event management literature, institutional theory has been applied to investigate the pressures from the organization's environment.

Also in studies of youth sport events, Parent et al. (2015) used institutional theory combined with stakeholder network theory to explore the YOG's potential sustainability (survival and success). In the network analysis, the IOC, media, and parents of the athletes appeared to be central stakeholders. The institutional analyses revealed the IOC to be the most institutionalized stakeholder using coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures. That means the IOC is the most influential stakeholder of the Youth Olympic Games Organizing Committee (IYOGOC; Hanstad et al., 2013). In this dissertation, I use Hanstad et al.'s (2013) findings as a point of departure for analysing how the young leaders who are part of the IYOGOC perceive this influence. Other studies on the YOG have shown how leaders on an event's organizing committee (OC) are pressured to respond to the demands of the organizational environment and employ legitimating acts rather than follow their goals for increasing young people's involvement in sports (Strittmatter, 2016, 2017; Strittmatter & Skille, 2017). Hence, these studies have shown that neo-institutional theory is useful for explaining the strategic priorities of an event's OC.

Given the criticism of institutional theory's focus on external pressures and organizational homogenization, translation is another concept within neo-institutional theory that has been proven relevant for sport management studies (e.g., Skille, 2008, 2010; Stenling, 2014). A translation perspective offers a framework for change within organizations via two mechanisms. First, bricolage involves the recombination of existing institutional elements. Second, translation refers to how "new ideas are combined with the already existing institutional practices and, therefore, are translated into local practice" (Campbell, 2004, p. 69). Responding to the criticism of neo-institutionalism as taken-for-granted and imitative, translation implies that new elements are actively imported and adapted to the receiving context (Campbell, 2004). For example, Strittmatter and Skille (2017) showed that innovative elements from other sport organizational contexts were implemented in organizing the YOG.

Most of the literature on institutional entrepreneurship has focused on how the individual actor is capable of changing the institutional field. This is solved via considerations of power and interest in the analysis of the institutional field (Hardy & Maguire, 2008), although there is

disagreement in the literature about the power an individual entrepreneur may have to implement institutional changes. The point is that the perspective can assist in the analysis of young leaders of sport events because it focuses on the individual's strategic will and capacity to act and change (often referred to as "agency").

An unavoidable critique is that neo-institutionalism lacks a leadership perspective on studying sport organizations or events. Nevertheless, the classic version of neo-institutionalism and its successors constitute an appropriate framework for understanding the leader as part (influencing and influenced by) of an organization and its environment. Sport management researchers have suggested a more integrated perspective on the structure–agency axis (Kikulis et al., 1995; Stevens & Slack, 1998). In the case of youth sport events, especially inaugural events, it is interesting to look beyond the emphasis on similar organizations that create homogeneity in a context and follow the new ideas proposed to cover more internal agency and external pressure. In this dissertation, neo-institutionalism is applied to explain the organizational elements that exert pressure on aspiring leaders. However, it does not cover the individual and dyadic levels of leadership. Therefore, two critical leadership perspectives (reflexive leadership and functional stupidity) complement the theoretical framework. Taking all of these concepts together, I extend the literature by examining how young leaders perceive their possibilities for exerting influence when attempting to implement their own ideas, that is, to conduct agency, and simultaneously how the enablement and constraint of employing agency in leadership is framed by the institutional setting.

## **Critical leadership perspectives**

### *Modes of organizing within the reflexive approach to leadership*

The reflexive approach to leadership is a perspective that challenges traditional leadership perspectives by explaining how a reflexive leader can consider alternative ways of organizing work (as alternatives to leadership; Alvesson et al., 2017). Within the theoretical perspective of reflexive leadership, Alvesson et al. (2017) developed a taxonomy of organizational processes consisting of six *modes of organising* divided into two dominant orientations: vertical and horizontal.

In the first vertical mode, leadership is defined as “interpersonal influencing processes in an asymmetrical relationship, targeting meaning, feeling and values” (Alvesson et al., 2017, p. 18). In the second vertical mode, management refers to “direction and control based on formal rights

and hierarchy” (Alvesson et al., 2017, p. 18). The third vertical mode involves the exercise of power, in which authority is “based on force and/or political skills” (Alvesson et al., 2017 p. 18). Hence, the distinction between different modes of organizing provides a more nuanced perspective because it reveals that leaders’ activities include management, leadership, and power. Horizontal organizing also comprises three modes. The first mode is network (peer) influencing, or “guidance and support from peers within the same occupational specialty/community of practice (outside one’s own workgroup/organizational unit)” (Alvesson et al., 2017, p. 18). The second mode, group work, differs from networking because of its cooperative decision making and support within the group. The third mode is autonomy or self-management, in which people set standard plans and evaluate how to do the work (Alvesson & Blom, 2019; Alvesson et al., 2017).

According to Alvesson and Blom (2019), the horizontal and vertical modes constantly interact. The framework of six modes of organizing presents an alternative approach to understanding the organization of collective work. In doing so, the framework was aimed at redefining conventional leadership research and offers a critical, reflective alternative to the leadership-centred research approach. Thus, it helps define and address important alternatives by identifying the dominant form of organizing. As shown in the literature review, many of the existing studies look at the hierarchical position of a leader in relation to their employees, volunteers, and athletes. Alvesson et al. (2017) revealed alternatives beyond vertical leadership for the effective implementation of everyday activities within an organization.

The model can be described as a “Swiss army knife” (Alvesson & Blom, 2019, p. 35) that prompts people to consider the most efficient approach to a task or situation. Leadership within the six modes of organizing is seen as a process where the leader influences not only people’s meanings, values, and beliefs but also their identities in an unequal relationship (Alvesson & Blom, 2019; Alvesson et al., 2017). In other words, leaders influence followers’ hearts and minds. The leader inspires the followers cognitively and emotionally, for example, through using persuasive talk, showing direction, or providing inspirational examples. Importantly, followers must also want to be influenced to make this work.

The taxonomy of the modes of organizing allows for differentiation between the concepts of leadership and management more clearly. Alvesson et al.’s (2017) definition of leadership can still be perceived as simplistic. The leaders’ perceptions of agency can still be perceived as limited because of factors such as the coercive pressure stemming from the institutional environment. In



the study of aspiring leaders who are prompted to act as leaders, it can be important to examine the individual leaders' perceptions and sense of agency. Hence, the perceived influence of interpersonal acts must be considered. Therefore, the leadership definition presented in the taxonomy of the six modes of organizing is less action oriented. Although reflexive leadership allows for describing how the vertical and horizontal modes interact, it does not provide a framework for analysing the key drivers of the organizational processes and their outcomes. Therefore, in my dissertation, the leaders' perceptions of their own agency are important for exploring how the institutional setting facilitates and constrains leadership. Consequently, an additional framework was applied to understand the pressures enabling and constraining aspiring leaders' abilities to act as leaders. This also stems from the analysis results that revealed an apparent (external) success versus internal perceptions of chaos and the performance of everyday/"stupid" tasks. In the following section, I explain the concept of functional stupidity.

#### *Functional stupidity*

*Functional stupidity* is a concept developed by Alvesson and Spicer (2012b). The term "functional stupidity" refers to an "organizationally supported lack of reflexivity, substantive reasoning, and justification. It entails a refusal to use intellectual resources outside a narrow and 'safe' terrain" (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012b, p. 1196). According to Alvesson & Spicer (2012b), the unwillingness of managers to question and reflect on commonly accepted routines leads to *conformity* or functional stupidity (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012b).

The concept of functional stupidity was developed as a reaction to today's knowledge-intensive society to "shake up dominant assumptions about the significance of knowledge, intelligence, creativity, learning, and the general use of cognitive resources" (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012b, p. 1214). Alvesson and Spicer (2012b) claimed that functional stupidity is a general element of organizational processes in which symbolic manipulation is guided by an economy of persuasion where the organization's image is more important than its deeds (Hancock, 2005). According to Alvesson and Spicer (2012b), symbolic manipulation is not neutral, as, for example, neo-institutional theory can imply. Instead, it is a biased process of persuading managers and volunteers to undermine independent thinking and act according to organizational practices. Symbolic manipulation can take the form of charismatic leadership or a strong cultural identity, which increases followers' commitment to the organization. Symbolic manipulation is supported by a power perspective that recognizes at least four ways of exercising power: direct suppression,

setting the agenda, shaping the ideological settings, or the subject's direct submission (Fleming & Spicer, 2007). The exercise of such power hinders communication and results in stupidity management. Stupidity management further entails stupidity self-management. According to Alvesson and Spicer (2012b), behaviour is stupid when people are encouraged not to think for themselves. However, such behaviour can also contribute to the functioning of organizations and therefore is not necessarily negative. A potential positive outcome of functional stupidity as a managerial pressure approach is the maintenance of organizational order by simply encouraging people to accept demands and regulations from management and leadership to advance their careers.

Functional stupidity has been identified and applied as a concept in excessive work-time regimes (Alvesson & Einola, 2018), in everyday practice in construction (Love et al., 2018), and in sustainability issues (Sheppard & Young, 2020). Paulsen (2017) applied the concept of functional stupidity by asking, "How can employees who are highly critical of their organization also be highly active in reproducing it?" (p. 186). He identified 10 rationales behind stupidity self-management that represent different modes of reflections and explain employees' coping mechanisms. Building on this research, the framework of functional stupidity was empirically tested (Fagerberg et al., 2020). Recently, the concept of functional stupidity has also been applied in sport contexts. In a study of individuals in two British elite sports organizations, Feddersen and Phelan (2021) observed that behaviours reflecting a lack of reflexivity, justification, or substantial reasoning became gradually normalised and thus, threatened the organizations' professional and ethical standards. It was further evident that the speed of normalisation increased in periods of significant organisational change.

Functional stupidity has been criticized for its "lack of novelty" (Ehrensäl, 2019, p. 380), and Butler (2016) questioned the existence of functional stupidity due to generalizing without empirical references to support claims. As a response to this criticism, the concept of functional stupidity was built on previous research and has also been further empirically examined (Fagerberg et al., 2020). An important methodological question is how to examine a lack of reflexivity. Paulsen (2017) investigated compliance behaviour by hindsight reflections and thereby challenged the idea of a lack of reflexivity while claiming that the reflections behind stupidity self-management can be observable with hindsight. By doing so, Paulsen developed the concept of functional stupidity further by adding reflexivity to stupidity self-management. In that respect,

Paulsen combined agency with internal institutional pressure (cf. my theoretical outset). Furthermore, Paulsen proposed that nonreflexive behaviour could not generally be considered stupid. However, he also emphasized that such behaviour can be functionally stupid if the individual believes it compromises what they believe is ethically or professionally correct. Therefore, he added an ethical aspect to distinguish “stupidity from dumbness” (Paulsen, 2017, p. 190) and thereby separated functional stupidity from functional intelligence.

Addressing the presented shortcomings and following Paulsen (2017), I applied the concept of functional stupidity to explain how organizational pressure constrains leaders from doing what they perceive is right and how this leads to various modes of conformity where reflexive thinking can be observable.

Importantly, acting functionally stupidly is analytical, not normative (whether negative or positive), and has nothing to do with individual stupidity. My research interests are the reflections of aspiring leaders and the pressures behind them, as well as the coping mechanisms I assume lead to conformity. Here, conformity is normative, because it relates to unwritten rules that members of a group (in this case, aspiring leaders) agree upon, and it applies to attitudes, values, thoughts, and behaviours. Consequently, I draw on the concept of functional stupidity to claim that functionally stupid behaviour leads to conformity. Functionality can be positive and negative. It is positive because it makes employees do their jobs, and it is negative because it can result in a missed opportunity. Reflexive thought with hindsight can show how conformity is developed. The concept of functional stupidity provided me with a power perspective that blocks communication through direct suppression, setting the agenda and shaping the ideological setting, or the subject’s direct submission (Fleming & Spicer, 2007, p. 14). By adapting Paulsen’s (2017) development of the theory, I emphasized the managers’ reflections and the pressure towards conformity to stage a successful event or, as Alvesson and Spicer (2012b) explained, to achieve functionality.

In sum, the critical perspectives of reflexive leadership and functional stupidity are useful to understand better the intraorganisational processes that influence aspiring leaders’ perceptions of agency. Reflexive leadership provides an analytical tool for identifying organizational processes and leaders’ coping mechanisms. Functional stupidity inspired me to analyse aspiring leaders’ reflexive thoughts to explain how individuals deal with organizational pressures and outcomes.

## **Combining neo-institutional theory and critical leadership perspectives for studying aspiring leaders at sport events**

In this section, I address how the combination of the theories and concepts presented above can be used to develop a better understanding of how the institutional setting in various sport events influences aspiring leaders' perceptions and enactments of leadership. The choice of theories is characterized by the fact that I have searched for theories relevant to each article. I have, in parallel, sought to answer a call for new theories in sport management. These parallel processes have—especially when taken together—affected the choice of theories and hence their compatibility. This implied the need for a theory that could help explain how different event contexts enable and constrain leadership—a theory that could help determine the organizational processes at play and that could explain the outcome and key drivers behind the organizational processes.

First, as presented in the literature review, leadership at sport events involves *solving problems* (see, e.g., Parent, 2010). The perception of problems (e.g., tame, wicked, and critical) is socially constructed and relates to how leaders perceive a specific situation (Grint, 2005). This can be seen in the middle of Figure 1, which illustrates the relationship between and the complementarity of the core elements of the theoretical framework. It further shows how the theories are connected to the project's aim and the research questions. There are different alternatives to solving problems (the left top of the figure), and the modes of organizing provide a taxonomy for analysing the organizational processes at play (Alvesson et al., 2017). Strategies for solving problems include either horizontal or vertical modes of organizing.

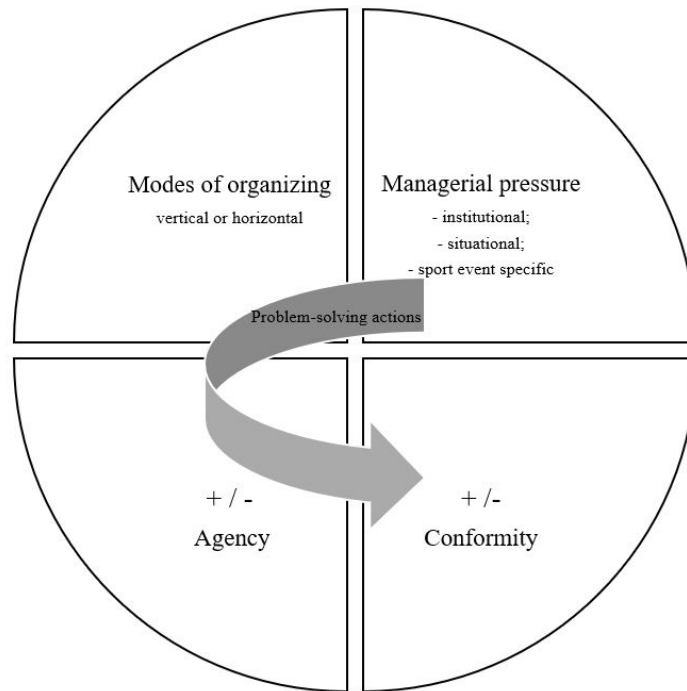


Figure 1. How solving problems is influenced by managerial pressure affecting vertical and horizontal modes of organizing and the outcome of agency and conformity.

Which strategies are chosen depends upon the source from which the managerial pressure is derived? As illustrated at the top right of Figure 1, the sport event setting provides a context for *managerial pressure* (Parent, 2010). Managerial pressure can derive from the organizational environment, for example, by influencing structure and norms, shared values and beliefs, and rules. It can further be institutionally driven, leading to uncertainty (as existing literature on the leadership of sport has proven) regarding the nature of sport events itself where OCs are bound to respond to pluralistic and sometimes conflicting demands within and outside the organization (see, e.g., Hanstad et al., 2013).

Events often look the same on the surface; however, there are different forms, cultures, and approaches for the job. The OC for an event is often comprises owners from various organizations; thus, it is a hybrid and can experience pressure from various stakeholders. Therefore, OCs operate

within certain (and different) organizational environments and their corresponding social and cultural pressures. I applied neo-institutionalism as a kind of framework in the sub-studies to explain the organizational elements that exert pressure on aspiring leaders in two different sport event contexts.

Applying the concepts of the six modes of organizing within reflexive leadership helps differentiate between the two strategies for solving problems: horizontal and vertical. Whereas the vertical modes of an organization include formal hierarchies, interpersonal influencing processes, and the exercise of power, the horizontal strategies include network (peer) influence, group work, and autonomy or self-management (Alvesson & Blom, 2019; Alvesson et al., 2017). Which strategies leaders in sport events apply is influenced by the source from where the managerial pressure derives: either the organizational environment (such as in the case of the YOG; see Article 1) or uncertainty (such as in the case of the WSC; see Article 2).

The strategies for problem solving and the different modes of organizing might enable or restrict the aspiring leaders' agency and conformity. Young people act authentically mainly when coming into a leadership role. On the contrary, organizations often appear conservative and resistant to change. As I show, the result can include tension between the desires of enacting leadership and the pressure for conformity in and around an organization. Functional stupidity is used to explain how and why leaders make events function, especially in the appearance of uncertainty that fosters conformity (Article 3). Finally, the combination of these theories helped me explain how and why leadership disappears in sport event settings (Article 4).

## 4. CONTEXT

The context of sport events with youth elements generates interesting possibilities for exploring how young people perceptions and enact leadership at various types of sport events. The chosen events were the YOG and the WSC. Table 1 provides an overview of these two events' key parameters.

### Presumptions about studying aspiring leaders at sport events

The rationale for operationalising my research aim through the formulation of research questions was based on presumptions about the research field under investigation. More specifically, I considered the two events under inquiry and made assumptions regarding the events' characteristics in terms of their level of institutionalization (Battilana, 2007) and hence young people's opportunities to exert agency in middle-level positions within the OCs. Figure 2 illustrates the study's three presumptions and their manifestations in the contexts of the two sport events. These presumptions were (a) leadership experience within the OCs of the respective events, (b) the institutional contexts, and (c) the presumed potential for aspiring leaders to exert agency.

|     | Leadership experience    | Institutional context         | Potential for agency |
|-----|--------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------|
| WSC | Less experienced leaders | Innovative Youth-driven       | High                 |
| YOG | Experienced leaders      | Traditional Institution-based | Limited              |

Figure 2. Presumptions about studying aspiring leaders in various institutional settings of the YOG and WSC.

In both events,<sup>2</sup> several young people were employed in middle-level positions. Even though both events were aimed at youth, they differed in their degrees of institutionalization. The YOG was categorized as an institution-based youth event (according to Strittmatter & Parent, 2019, p. 236) because the IOC created it as a supplement to its senior events, the Olympic Games (OG). Therefore, the IOC applied a similar and traditional set of organizational structures and practices. In contrast, the WSC was categorized as a youth-driven event with a looser institutional setting (Strittmatter & Parent, 2019, p. 236). Such events often have an innovative focus in which the concept is not decided upon beforehand and can be adapted by the OC. I assumed that, at such events, the possibility and motivation existed for aspiring leaders to express opinions and influence the event concept to a greater extent than at institution-based events.

### **2012 Innsbruck Winter Youth Olympic Games—A highly institutionalized context**

Innsbruck, Austria, organized the first Winter YOG, which took place from January 13 to 22, 2012. At this 10-day multisport event, 1,020 athletes competed for medals in 15 disciplines. The event was broadcast online—though not via live stream—and was watched by 110,000 spectators.

To ensure that the event was “for young people and driven by young people” (International Olympic Committee, 2008, p. 4), one aim was to create “a modern youth-oriented sport event” (IYOGOC, 2012, p. 16). To make sure the organization appeared authentic and credible and demonstrated an understanding of young peoples’ behaviour and thinking, the CEO had a clear, outspoken goal of engaging young people in middle and lower managerial positions “because to do an event like this, I think it needs to be authentic. I think it needs to have certain credibility.” Therefore, “you need ... to have an understanding of how young people are thinking and acting and behaving” (P. Bayer, personal communication, June 19, 2012). The average age of the 109 full-time IYOGOC staff during the games was 31 years. Approximately 1,300 volunteers represented 59 countries and gave the organization an international touch. The YOG’s vision is “to inspire young people around the world to participate in sports and encourage them to adopt

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<sup>2</sup> A more detailed explanation of the inclusion criteria of the sport events under study is provided in the Research Approach, Design, and Methods section.



and live by the Olympic values and become ambassadors of Olympism” (IOC, 2019). In addition to the competitive element, the athletes were engaged in culture and education (i.e., learning and sharing) activities aimed at educating young people about the Olympic values and inspiring them to adopt a healthy lifestyle.

Following an ambitious set of objectives, the YOG was intended to serve as an Olympic laboratory for testing new ideas (e.g., new competition formats) to decrease risks associated with potential future inclusion in the OG. This purpose gives the YOG its own identity and characteristics while connecting it to the OG. Moreover, the YOG resembles the OGs because it follows similar comprehensive guidelines (e.g., the Olympic Charter, YOG Candidature Procedures and Questionnaire, Host City Contract, YOG Event Manual). The local OC was divided into 38 functional areas with certain responsibilities, each of which had a counterpart in the IOC. To comply with the IOC, the IYOGOC had to report on approximately 800 milestones. The IYOGOC’s organization, monitoring, and compliance with the IOC makes the YOG a highly institutionalized event.

*Table 1.* Comparisons of parameters in the 2012 World Snowboarding Championships OC and the 2012 Innsbruck Youth Olympic Games OC

|                             | <b>2012 World Snowboarding Championships</b>   | <b>2012 Innsbruck Youth Olympic Games</b>   |
|-----------------------------|--|---|
| Duration                    | February 10–19   | January 13–22   |
| Vision                      | To create the best snowboarding event to date and demonstrate the potential of independent snowboarding to the world <sup>a</sup>  | To inspire young people worldwide to participate in sports and live by the Olympic values <sup>b</sup>  |
| Sport disciplines           | 4 <sup>c</sup>   | 15 <sup>d</sup>   |
| Athletes                    | 240 <sup>c</sup>   | 1,022 <sup>d</sup>  |
| Number of employees at peak | 100 <sup>c</sup>   | 109   |
| Number of volunteers        | 600 <sup>c</sup>   | 1,440 (from 50 countries) <sup>e</sup>  |
| National ownership          | A local organizing company (Snowboard VM 2012 AS) with 3 shareholders:<br>The Arctic Challenge (TAC; a private event organizer; 33%)<br>The Norwegian Snowboard Association (33%)<br>Oslo Vinterpark (a ski resort; 33%) | A local organizing public-owned company (GmbH) with 3 shareholders:<br>The City of Innsbruck (45%)<br>The State of Tyrol (45%)<br>The Austrian National Olympic Committee (10%) |
| Concept owners              | World Snowboard Federation (WSF)<br>Ticket to Ride (TTR) <sup>a</sup>  | International Olympic Committee (IOC) <sup>b</sup>  |

## **2012 Oslo World Snowboard Championships—A loosely institutionalized context**

Shortly after the first winter YOG, another inaugural event took place in Oslo, Norway, on February 10–19, 2012. At the event, 25,000 spectators watched 240 elite athletes compete for four world championship titles (men and women’s halfpipe and slopestyle). The competitions were broadcast live and distributed to 101 countries.

The WSC was the first world championship organized by snowboarders since 1999.<sup>3</sup> The CEO and the event manager explicitly aimed to contract young middle managers from the snowboarding scene. However, such individuals were difficult to recruit because they wanted to enjoy the event rather than work. Most managers of departments and functional areas were instead recruited from the music event industry (e.g., festivals and concerts) in areas such as ticketing, accreditation, and food and beverage.

The WSC’s vision was “to create the best snowboarding event to date and demonstrate the potential of independent snowboarding to the world” (field notes, 4 May 2012; World Snowboarding Championships, 2012). Although snowboarding has become more mainstream since its induction into the OG in 1998, the sport has less standardized competition formats than other Olympic sports. For example, to make judging and scoring easier to understand, the Snowboarding Live Scoring System<sup>4</sup> was adopted at the WSC.

During the event, approximately 100 full-time staff were contracted. More than 600 volunteers representing 45 countries with an average age of 25 years worked approximately 25,000 hours (World Snowboarding Championships, 2012). The WSC is owned by the WSF, which represents national federations, and Ticket to Ride (TTR), which represents the private event owners organizing the World Snowboard Tour. Hereafter, these entities are referred to as “event owners.” The WSC was introduced at the two organizations’ joint general assembly in 2009. In May 2010, Oslo was unanimously elected to host the first WSC (WSF, 2010). The city of Oslo supported the event from the start with a guarantee of USD 2.8 million. The main initiator of the event concept was the CEO of the WSC. The local organizing company, Snowboard VM 2012,

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<sup>3</sup> The International Ski Federation (FIS) has organized snowboarding world championships every second year since 1996, but the last such championship run by independent snowboarders occurred in 1999.

<sup>4</sup> The Snowboarding Live Scoring System was integrated into the WSC’s livestream platform, presenting the judges’ trick-by-trick evaluation together with an overall score.

was established with three shareholders: the Arctic Challenge (TAC), a private event organizer; the Norwegian Snowboard Association; and Oslo Vinterpark, a ski resort. In that respect, the WSC is a hybrid organization, with volunteer and private event organizers, as is often the case in international snowboarding events (Strittmatter et al., 2019).

Given how these events/cases represent various institutional contexts, in this dissertation, I explore how context affects aspiring leaders' perceptions and enactments of leadership. A more detailed comparison of the two events appears in the Discussion chapter. In the next section, I present my methods.

## **5. RESEARCH APPROACH, DESIGN, AND METHODS**

In this section, I first discuss my role as a researcher and my scientific point of view. Afterward, I describe the research design, data collection process, analyses, quality assessments, and ethical considerations.

### **My role as a researcher**

This research is based on and developed from my understanding of knowledge creation. I identify myself as a researcher following an interpretative approach to leadership and other social phenomena (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). In this approach, one asks questions such as, “What do people really think they are doing?” and “What is going on here?” It focuses on exploring issues within organizations and revealing the dynamics of change and nonchange by trying to unfold the meanings, thoughts, values, and actions that are dominant in an organization as well as the groups and individuals within it (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009).

Within the interpretive perspective, my background in earlier professions and experiences is relevant (Malterud, 2001). My preconceptions of the context stem from my involvement in organized sports as a youth elite football player and many years working in leadership positions in various sport organizations. Generally, my experience working in sport organizations and with aspiring leaders sparked my interest to engage in this research.

My experience as an event manager mainly stems from my work introducing a new national floorball cup in the Norwegian Federation of Company Sports. Experience with hosting events gave me an understanding of middle managers’ diverse roles and responsibilities and sport events’ velocity resulting in fast decision-making processes. In addition, I was familiar with concepts and abbreviations such as TD (technical delegate) and other event-related roles. Therefore, in the interview situation, we did not need to spend time explaining this.

I have also held various positions in the Norwegian Snowboard Association. First, I was employed as a middle manager responsible for the association’s clubs and member management. At the same time, the association had just become a member of the Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports. One of my tasks was encouraging young people to start up local clubs, which entailed guiding young people through the necessary steps and helping them make sense of the regulations and requirements in practice. Such structures and

practices were taken for granted and institutionalized in the Norwegian Federation of Company Sports but not in the snowboarding environment. In several cases, young snowboard club leaders started this process with a lot of energy. The young club leaders were eager to understand the new culture and context of organized sports. For example, one young club leader refused to sign the forms because he disagreed that only members 15 years or older had voting rights at the annual assembly. This is an example of how young people's understanding clashed with organizational requirements, which I later also experienced in WSC and YOG.

For seven years, I served as CEO in the Norwegian Snowboard Association. This role provided me with the experience of being an aspiring leader and holding a leadership position in a young workforce. The employees' responsibilities were clearly defined and delegated. Based on my experience of working with aspiring leaders, I understood that they are capable of leading and can exert leadership if given the opportunity. In the snowboard culture, athletes and national riders were closely involved in decision-making processes and were accustomed to having a say. In the former International Snowboard Federation, the first and independent governing body of international snowboarding, the top athletes held 50% of the voting rights. Furthermore, snowboarding is an action sport that stems from an unorganized lifestyle activity. Strittmatter et al. (2019) described the conflict in the snowboarding culture and scepticism towards the establishment in more detail. In this article, which I co-authored, we examined how the involvement of various stakeholders, such as the IOC and FIS (Fédération Internationale de Ski), in international competitive snowboarding resulted in different logics and a fragmented governance structure. In short, my origins in organized sports and later involvement in snowboarding sharpened my critical view of international sport organizations, particularly the FIS<sup>5</sup> and IOC.

The snowboard culture was different from earlier environments in various ways. The organizational structures and practices were characterized by more self-organization and anti-institutional ideology as well as a drive for innovation. Examples of this included a preference for innovation instead of standardization of event concepts and courses, the involvement of youth and riders in democratic processes, and riders' reflexive involvement in and responsibility for their

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<sup>5</sup> The approach to the athletes in the FIS has been widely criticized and has reached other subcultures within the FIS sphere, such as freeski. The following film clip visualizes and exemplifies the FIS leadership from a top-down perspective: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1461678397209890>.

own sports careers. Competitions organized by the independent snowboard organizations sought innovative developments that involved the riders actively, but events organized under the umbrella of the Norwegian Federation of Company Sports sought standardization related to meeting the same standards at all competitions and events.

I can see strengths and weaknesses in strong versus loose institutional contexts and how they affect democratic processes and innovations as well as leadership and management. In the interview situation and the analyses, I understood the frustration over perceived chaos that could have been avoided if more defined frames were in place. However, I could also relate to how time-consuming bureaucratic processes can erode patience among leaders and managers. In sum, earlier experience and contextual preunderstanding for the event context in various institutional contexts were valuable.

Although I entered the sport of snowboarding as an outsider, several years of involvement in the sport made me an insider, especially in the case of WSC, which I need to reflect upon in my role as a researcher, especially relating to what I took for granted. My previous insights into the snowboard sport may have affected how I dismissed or confirmed facts claimed during the interviews. For example, I have always been aware that the sport of snowboarding is characterized by a desire for innovation and creative elements. Snowboarders are strongly connected to the industry and private event players such as board manufacturers and film producers (see Strittmatter et al., 2018). To build an image, each individual event must stand out. Therefore, new competition formats are constantly being developed. YOG, for example, was the first IOC-governed event, where slopestyle as a format was implemented. The aspiring leaders in my study emphasized this as an innovative aspect of the event. However, due to my background, I was aware that X-Games, an event format created in the snowboard industry, has included it in its program since 1987. My previous experience can also contribute to pitfalls in my role as a researcher, implying that “I see something” and might “overlook something else.”

As a researcher, my personal and professional background may also mean that I have more nuanced attitudes towards sports policy than other researchers. This attitude may, for example, have helped strengthen young leaders’ voices in the material. However, I have tried to be careful and not be more critical than my respondents.

I have experienced some more general paradoxes in the organizational environment of sports. Sport should be based on democracy, be noble, and represent fine values. At the same time,

I have experienced political games with hidden agendas, which have contributed to the adoption of a less naive view of sports. I have experienced how new sports (e.g., snowboarding) appeal to young people and how youth events are used to show that one can think new and “young,” but in practice, some structures are difficult to change. These experiences were mostly gained from being involved and employed in the snowboard sport.

Before I began my PhD studies, my main research experience stemmed from a paradigm that fosters quantitative methodological approaches (Jensen et al., 1991; Johnsson, 2001). In my thesis leading to the cand. scient. grade, I explored the perceptions of youth football players’ (aged 13–15 years) perceived and preferred leadership (i.e., coaching) behaviour and its relationship to satisfaction and performance (Johnsson, 2001). Although the Leadership Scale for Sport (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1978, 1980) has been shown to have factorial validity, during the research process, I challenged the survey’s validity because of the potential ambiguity relating to how young players interpreted the questions.

When I decided to apply a qualitative approach in my PhD project, the experienced ambiguity made me initially sceptical regarding my research outcomes and its contributions if it is based on small sample sizes. However, during my fieldwork and while conducting interviews, I experienced how the interview setting revealed information unlikely to be captured in a survey. The interview subjects shared honest and personal stories such as having lied, being unfaithful, having a sense of being used in a political game, feelings about their own shortcomings, and criticism of their organizations and top managers. In the interview setting, I also found it easier to grasp what people meant, ask for examples, and seek justification. In addition, aspiring leaders and volunteers expressed criticism and dissatisfaction along with pride and satisfaction. This also influenced the dissertation’s orientation towards reflexive research (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009).

Because I encountered divergent perceptions of leadership within organizations, such as between coaches and athletes (c.f. Multidimensional Model of Sport Leadership, Chelladurai, 1993), a multilayer data collection method was necessary. My educational background in sports psychology also informed the interview guide’s design and construction. For example, based on my professional experience working with young adults, I deemed concepts such as self-regulation and motivational aspects relevant. Therefore, my professional experience and former education

influenced my theoretical orientation, and I employed them when defining the research aim and planning the research design and methods.

In the field of sports management, a wider range of approaches is embraced. I wrote this dissertation in the field of sports management and, more specifically, leadership within the context of sport events. There is an ongoing debate in the sport management research field that calls for a shift to “embrace an expansion of knowledge, of ways of seeing and interpreting through engagement with alternative ontological, epistemological, ideological, political, and methodological approaches to the study of sport management” (Amis & Silk, 2005, p. 361). In this dissertation, I echo this shift, but it also came with some hardships. During my methodological journey, I have tried and sometimes struggled to move from an evidence-based research orientation (positivist or postpositivist orientation) towards an interpretative research orientation (where there is no absolute truth; Amis & Silk, 2007). The methodological journey is visible in the first article. I used phrases such as “to what extent” (c.f. article 1, p. 948) to present the article’s aim, which is commonly used in quantitative research. Often, one will associate these words and concepts with a postpositivist scientific theoretical standpoint (Amis & Silk, 2007). My experience from the field is more complex than a quantitative framework will embrace, and I change position to examine the individual aspiring leader’s experiences more closely. At the same time, this approach has led to challenges in writing myself into an interpretive paradigm. Still, in a reflective process, I have tried to develop my understanding along the way.

In the interpretative approach to organization studies, the research participants’ and the researcher’s preconceptions are important (Alvesson & Sköldbörg, 2009). Therefore, rhetoric in narratives, such as interviews, represents the subjective understanding of respondents’ reality. I draw on perceptions and experiences of acts where I assume that leadership, management, and conformity processes exist as an underlying reality interpreted through relationships that influence respondents’ experience (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). Respondents’ experiences are the unit of my analyses. I argue that the meaning making of organizational modes of organizing, leadership, and agency is dependent on the respondents’ (and employees’ in general) experiences of their acts in the spectrum between influential and constrained. Perceptions of leadership, agency, and conformity are embedded in rhetoric. Therefore, rhetoric is used as a key to perceptions of the social role in everyday life (here as aspiring leaders in sport events; Alvesson & Sköldbörg, 2009). Perceptions and experiences are interpreted theoretically. Therefore, it makes no sense just to



interpret based on acts or narratives alone. Awareness of preconceptions facilitates reflection on the ambiguity of the empirical material and the complexity of its interpretation as well as the opposite (i.e., the complex nature of reality and the ambiguity of its interpretations; Malterud, 2001). I brought with me preconceptions that I used, qualified, and challenged during the research (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009).

### **Qualitative multiple-case study**

The research design is a multiple-case study (Yin, 2009) drawing on qualitative data gathered at two large-scale sport events. This study was aimed at examining how aspiring leaders perceive and enact leadership in various sport event contexts. Eisenhardt (1989) stated that “the goal of theoretical sampling is to choose cases which are likely to replicate or extend the emergent theory” (p. 537). In practice, she urged case selections of extreme situations and polar types. The specific short period of a single sport event can be seen as a hyper-accelerated organizational life cycle. In a period of four years or less, the organization is built up, the event is completed, and the organization is wound up. The two selected cases can also be viewed as extreme types in terms of multiple characteristics (see Table 4 in the Discussion chapter). According to Eisenhardt (1989), such cases are suitable for theory building. Eisenhardt (1989) suggested first analysing one case by itself (within-case analyses) before searching for cross-case patterns in which one examines within-group similarities coupled with intergroup differences. I followed this strategy in my dissertation, in which Articles 1 and 2 are within-case analyses and Articles 3 and 4 are cross-case analyses.

#### *Inclusion of cases*

I included the selected cases based on four main criteria. The first criterion related to the leaders’ age and experience. The goal was to identify events with young people in middle-level positions entering an event organization in which the young people had more responsibility than in previous positions. The managers were 24–34<sup>6</sup> years old and had 4–10 years of previous event experience.<sup>7</sup> They were contracted or hired for middle-level paid positions. Therefore, they were entering a new type of institutional context compared to their previous experience. The second

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<sup>6</sup> The upper age was based on the International Olympic Academy (n.d.) definition.

<sup>7</sup> The exception was one team manager at the WSC who had less experience. However, I included this person because they had several years of experience in organized sports as a coach and team manager.

criterion was the innovative focus of the event itself, for which the concept was not set or needed to be adapted. It was assumed that inaugural youth events allow aspiring leaders to express their opinions and influence the event concept. The third criterion was based on the assumption that the degree of institutionalization affects the managers' acting space. Consequently, events with multiple levels of institutionalization needed to be identified. The fourth criterion was pragmatic and related to finding events that were temporally and spatially accessible. The YOG and the WSC fulfilled the inclusion criteria. Although I conducted fieldwork at six events, the other four did not fulfil the selection criteria and were therefore not appropriate for the comparative analyses.

### Data collection

Because I aimed to obtain multiple perspectives of the selected events and facilitate triangulation of data collection methods (Eisenhardt, 1989), the data collection took multiple forms (see Figures 2 and 3 as well as Table 3). In sum, this study is built on 47 semistructured interviews with staff representing various organizational levels, supported by observations with field notes and documents. Figures 2 and 3 visually represent the data collection processes at the two events.

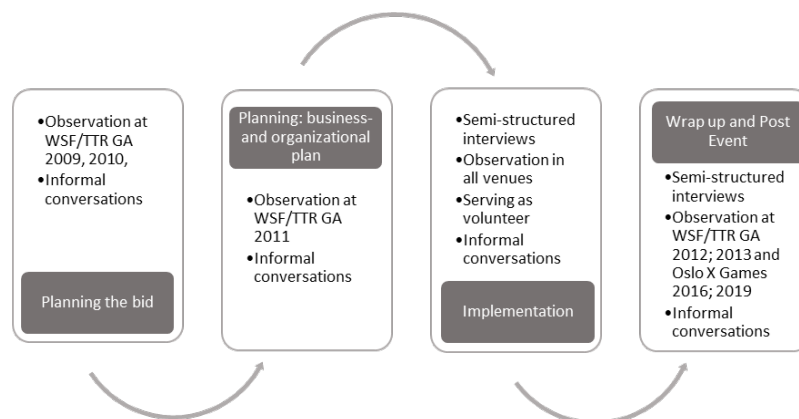
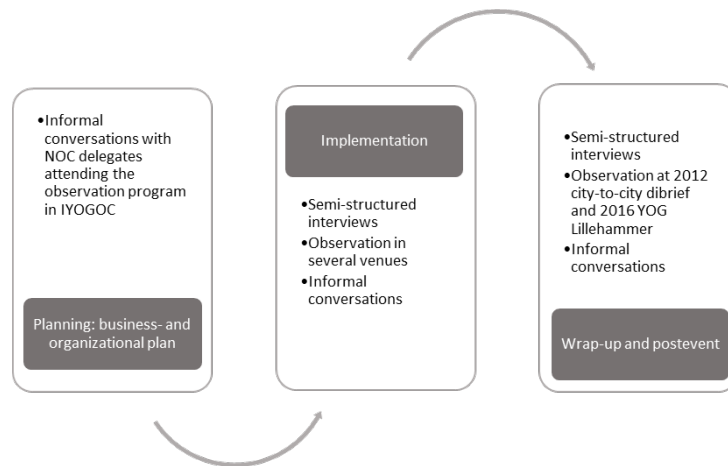


Figure 3. Overview of WSC data collection in the event modes (modification of Parent, 2008): Planning the bid, designing the business and organizational plans, implementing the plans, and wrapping up.



*Figure 4.* Overview of YOG data collection in the event modes (modification of Parent, 2008): Designing the business and organizational plans, implementing the plans, and wrapping up.

In both events, aspiring leaders were contracted and paid for a limited period. I mainly recruited them as participants using snowball sampling. For the YOG, I recruited the first interviewees based on suggestions of top managers who received contact information of potential interviewees from the Youth Olympic Games Laboratory for Youth and Innovation. One interview led to the next, and the last interview was agreed upon at the city-to-city debriefing in Norway after the event. At the WSC, my previous network and service as a volunteer helped me find the first interviewees; afterward, I employed snowball sampling. The aspiring leaders included in the study represented various management levels: event managers (part of the top management at the WSC), department managers, functional area managers, and volunteer team leaders. Here, volunteers are defined as unpaid workers. I recruited volunteers mostly on-site in the areas where they worked or spent their leisure time. Four of the interviewed YOG volunteers can be defined as team leaders, including one technical delegate. They obtained their positions due to their long-term involvement or explicit knowledge (i.e., they were mainly hired through their sport clubs). It was assumed that because of their close relationship with middle managers, they would be able to provide particularly qualified and relevant information.

### *Interviews*

The interviews with aspiring leaders represent the main data collection method of this dissertation. To capture the perspectives of leaders in various organizational levels, I

complemented the collected data with interviews with the CEOs of the events and volunteers reporting to the interviewed aspiring leaders. In total, I conducted 47 interviews with 49 interviewees. Table 2 provides an overview of the sample.

*Table 2.* Interviewees by event, level, position, sex, and age at the time of the interview

| Event | Level                       | Position                      | Sex    | Age |
|-------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|--------|-----|
| WSC   | Top level <sup>a, b</sup>   | CEO                           | Male   | 42  |
| WSC   | Top level <sup>a, b</sup>   | Event manager                 | Female | 29  |
| WSC   | Middle level                | Department head               | Male   | 29  |
| WSC   | Middle level <sup>c</sup>   | Department head               | Male   | 28  |
| WSC   | Middle level <sup>b</sup>   | Department head               | Female | 27  |
| WSC   | Middle level <sup>b</sup>   | Department head               | Female | 28  |
| WSC   | Lower level                 | Intern volunteer leader       | Male   | 24  |
| WSC   | Lower level                 | Intern volunteer leader       | Female | 25  |
| WSC   | Volunteer                   | 1 Shaping                     | Male   | 20  |
| WSC   | Volunteer <sup>e</sup>      | 2 Security                    | Female | 20  |
| WSC   | Volunteer <sup>e</sup>      | 3 Renovation                  | Male   | 21  |
| WSC   | Volunteer <sup>e</sup>      | 4 Accreditation               | Female | 22  |
| WSC   | Volunteer <sup>e</sup>      | 5 Rigging and catering        | Female | 18  |
| WSC   | Volunteer <sup>e</sup>      | 6 Catering                    | Female | 18  |
| WSC   | Volunteer                   | 7 Service and security        | Male   | 54  |
| WSC   | Volunteer                   | 8 Shaping                     | Male   | 22  |
| WSC   | Volunteer                   | 9 Renovation                  | Female | 13  |
| WSC   | Volunteer <sup>e</sup>      | 10 Shaping                    | Female | 22  |
| WSC   | Volunteer <sup>e</sup>      | 11 Shaping                    | Male   | 22  |
| YOG   | Top level <sup>b</sup>      | CEO                           | Male   | 42  |
| YOG   | Middle level <sup>a</sup>   | Department head               | Female | 27  |
| YOG   | Middle level                | Department head               | Female | 29  |
| YOG   | Middle level <sup>b d</sup> | Department head               | Male   | 27  |
| YOG   | Middle level                | Department head               | Male   | 34  |
| YOG   | Lower level <sup>a</sup>    | Functional area leader        | Female | 24  |
| YOG   | Lower level                 | Functional area leader        | Female | 28  |
| YOG   | Lower level                 | Functional area leader        | Female | 34  |
| YOG   | Lower level                 | Intern volunteer leader       | Female | 26  |
| YOG   | Lower level <sup>b</sup>    | Intern volunteer leader       | Female | 28  |
| YOG   | Volunteer                   | 1 IT and technical support    | Male   | 22  |
| YOG   | Volunteer                   | 2 Side events                 | Male   | 23  |
| YOG   | Volunteer                   | 3 Volunteer centre            | Female | 21  |
| YOG   | Volunteer                   | 4 Volunteer centre            | Female | 21  |
| YOG   | Volunteer                   | 6 Side events                 | Female | 23  |
| YOG   | Volunteer                   | 7 Communication               | Male   | 19  |
| YOG   | Volunteer <sup>e</sup>      | 8 Side events <sup>f</sup>    | Female | 22  |
| YOG   | Volunteer <sup>e</sup>      | 9 Sport arena and side events | Female | 20  |
| YOG   | Volunteer <sup>e</sup>      | 10 Sport arena biathlon       | Male   | 50  |

|     |                           |                                      |        |    |
|-----|---------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------|----|
| YOG | Volunteer <sup>c</sup>    | 11 Communication <sup>f</sup>        | Male   | 48 |
| YOG | Volunteer <sup>a, c</sup> | 12 Brand protection                  | Female | 19 |
| YOG | Volunteer <sup>a, c</sup> | 12 Brand protection                  | Female | 22 |
| YOG | Volunteer <sup>c</sup>    | 13 Side events                       | Male   | 22 |
| YOG | Volunteer <sup>c</sup>    | 14 Communication                     | Female | 26 |
| YOG | Volunteer <sup>c</sup>    | 15 Sport and production services     | Male   | 21 |
| YOG | Volunteer                 | 16 Side events                       | Female | 22 |
| YOG | Volunteer                 | 17 Side events                       | Male   | 24 |
| YOG | Volunteer                 | 18 Shaping crew                      | Female | 25 |
| YOG | Volunteer                 | 19 safety <sup>f</sup>               | Male   | 47 |
| YOG | Volunteer                 | 20 Competition managers <sup>f</sup> | Male   | 41 |

<sup>a</sup> Conducted as a group interview

<sup>b</sup> Interviewed after the event

<sup>c</sup> Interviewed twice (i.e., during and after the event)

<sup>d</sup> Interviewed virtually on Skype

<sup>e</sup> Interviewed by a research assistant

<sup>f</sup> Volunteer team leader

As Table 2 shows, I interviewed the CEOs of both events, nine aspiring leaders from the YOG, and seven aspiring leaders from the WSC. Except for one interview on Skype, all interviews were conducted in person. To ensure I covered important themes, the interview guide was comprehensive and structured. However, in practice, I conducted the interviews in a flexible manner, allowing for follow-up reflections on situations that the interviewees considered problematic, such as occasions when the aspiring leaders' suggestions for alternative decisions were ignored. The interviews with the CEOs and aspiring leaders ranged from 24 minutes to two hours and 13 minutes in length ( $M = 58$  minutes). Six interviews were conducted after the event.

The interviews with the aspiring leaders focused on their perceptions of their own leadership, relationship with volunteers, and the event's top-level management and concept owners. The opening of the interviews focused on relevant background information, such as roles and responsibilities, as well as relationships with superiors, peers, and volunteers. Afterward, I asked questions about recruitment, motivation, support for, and perceptions of managers' impacts (e.g., "How were you recruited?" "What motivated you to be a part of the event?" "How would you describe the relationship between yourself and the volunteers?" "What are the general perceptions of young leaders in the organization?"). These were followed by questions focusing on the aspiring leaders' perceptions of themselves as leaders (e.g., "Can you briefly describe yourself as a leader?" "What values are most important to you?") and of their agency. These questions were intended to capture the phenomena from various angles. However, I formulated the

questions using a vocabulary that does not favour the interpretations promoted by the theories. Accordingly, it was important to be open to assumptions other than those included in the interview guide. For example, aspiring leaders were asked, “Can you tell me about when you started at WSC?” followed by “What were and have been your biggest challenges?” Answers to these questions evoked general concerns regarding perceptions of the cooperation in the OC and organizational pressure (for more examples, see Appendix 4). I formulated questions at the organizational level based on neo-institutionalism (translation, entrepreneurship, and pluralization; e.g., “Can you tell me about the cooperation between IYOGOC and IOC?” “What kinds of conditions were given by the IOC to the YOG?” “Can you provide examples of new ideas that have been created in the YOG but never previously implemented in the OG?” “How have these new ideas been received by the IOC?” “Do you think that the YOG will influence the OG? If so, how and in which way?”). In sum, this interview strategy (Yin, 2009) shed light on pressures and managers’ ability to implement their own ideas and exert their agency.

Due to the short time available for the interviews, research assistants conducted approximately half of the interviews with the volunteers. These interviews focused on how the volunteers perceived their work environment and their managers (i.e., the aspiring leaders). To shed light also on the aspiring leaders and capture a top-down perspective, interviews with the CEOs were conducted, focusing on their experiences with their own role and responsibilities as well as their perceptions of the aspiring leaders. These interviews included questions about recruitment procedures, how the aspiring leaders were supported and followed up with, and their perceptions of differences in the workforce related to age and experience.

#### *Participatory observations, field notes, and collection of documentation*

With access to arenas, I conducted participant and nonparticipant observations. During the observations, I searched for arenas with interactions between aspiring leaders and volunteers. Based on former attendance levels at several major and minor sport events, I also looked for newly developed concepts of sport events. During the observations, several informal conversations occurred. I recorded observations and informal conversations in field notes, which included general impressions and were not exclusively related to the research questions. For example, they also included personal reflections and feelings, anecdotes, informal observations, and cross-case comparisons, which were primarily used as a sounding board.

At the WSC, I had full access to all areas and engaged in approximately 100 informal conversations with athletes, national snowboard association CEOs, TTR and WSF board members, medical crew members, judges, coaches, journalists, volunteers, and spectators. I also served as a volunteer at the event for three days and conducted observations at all of its venues. These observations resulted in 26 pages of field notes. Furthermore, I attended four general assemblies of the WSF (2009–2012), and I analysed 11 reports from those events and a 79-page internal evaluation report of the OC (World Snowboarding Championships, 2012). In addition, a report on a quantitative survey of 254 event volunteers served as a basis for reflections on the volunteers' overall experiences with the event and its leadership (Hanstad, 2012). In this survey, I included three open-ended items to capture a deeper understanding of volunteers' perceptions ("If you wish, please write a short comment about your experience at the WSC," "If you were in a leadership position, what would you have done differently?" "If you have any final comments, please write here"). I used these comments (8,781 words) to acquire an overview of the various perceptions and experiences.

At the YOG, I conducted a 10-day field study. I conducted observations in the same manner as at the WSC. In total, I visited six sports arenas, and I spent time in the same areas as officials, athletes, and volunteers (e.g., bus transport, dining areas, side events, ceremonies). This effort included spending time in the arena for the culture and education program, to which athletes, officials, media, volunteers, and school classes had access. I also took 16 pages of field notes at the IOC city-to-city meeting in Lillehammer on June 20, 2012. The next edition of the Winter YOG took place in Lillehammer in 2016. Therefore, I also visited this event and had the opportunity to talk to students at the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences and other young people working in the OC, such as officials and volunteers.

## **Data analysis**

The articles mainly address the aspiring leaders' perspectives because they are the focus of my research. However, besides the data directly generated from the aspiring leaders, interviews with top management and volunteers helped me gain a more general understanding and provided the context for data analysis.

To acquire a comprehensive overview of the cases, I reviewed the interviews, and I reviewed the raw transcribed texts and field notes before writing each article. To compare the

cases, I organized and open coded the themes from the interview guides in the two cases, first separately and then together. Initially (Article 1), I analysed and coded the interviews following Kvale and Brinkmann's (2010) guidelines. This effort involved open coding, in which I categorized data and codes into major topics (e.g., personal experience, relationship to volunteers, perceptions of and cooperation with the IOC/WSC top management). The next step involved theoretical analyses. I grouped codes based on the theoretical framework's neo-institutionalism (e.g. coercive isomorphism, translation).

As the research process developed (Articles 2–4), I conducted data analysis using a reflexive approach to research (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, 2011), which implies a research process that alternates between the part and the whole and in which the researchers' preconceptions are qualified and challenged (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). Comparing cases (cf. Eisenhardt, 1989, pp. 540–541) involved moving back and forth between details about how managers related to the institutional context and paying attention to differences, similarities, fragmentations, and discrepancies. This process helped refine my understanding of the themes that emerged and provided insightful examples rather than statistical presentations. In reflexive research, the researcher's dialogue with the empirical material is essential to answering the question "What is really going on here?" and moving beyond the surface (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009).

In the outset of the research, I found it fascinating how the aspiring leaders had coped in an organizational context they perceived as contradictory and uncertain. They even stated that they had no regrets and felt proud of what they had accomplished. When applying neo-institutional theory or functionalistic leadership theory, this phenomenon could not be explained. However, when I applied reflexive research and critical perspectives to leadership, I was able to reveal why the aspiring leaders had managed to cope in their organizational context. In both cases, the aspiring leaders were mainly concerned about the coercive pressure they perceived, which hindered them in decision making and implementing their ideas. The aspiring leaders also seemed to cope with the pressure in similar ways. At first sight, this fact seems primarily to indicate similarities in both cases. Therefore, I engaged in reflexive research and applied critical perspectives to leadership to understand the drivers of the perceived pressure and how they coped. When employing the mystery of construction (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, 2011) I started looking for contradictions between the literature and the data material. In the case of the WSC, analysing aspiring leaders revealed certain organizational setbacks, a negative leadership climate, and authoritarian behaviour towards



the young managers from the top management. Through the lens of critical leadership perspectives, I simply asked why the aspiring leaders accepted this treatment.

The application of reflexive research can further be exemplified by looking into the data analysis and interpretation processes applied for Articles 2 and 3. In the case of the WSC and Article 2, I first engaged in sport event literature on a stakeholders' view on key leadership qualities influencing sport events' success and failure. Here, I found contradictions between the literature and the empirical analyses, which made me ask questions such as "How did they manage?" and "Why did they stay?" The six modes of organizing Alvesson and Blom (2019) presented helped define the organizational processes at play, and the close relationship with loyalty helped me uncover these questions. In Article 3, I turned the focus from agency to look at the outcome of the perceived pressure and asked further questions related to the results. On the surface, the response to organizational pressure looked similar. Functional stupidity (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012b) made me pay attention to the aspiring leaders' reflective thoughts. As I plotted, dramatized, and grouped reflections against one another, the interpretation expanded to identify various modes of conformity with underlying key organizational drivers. Article 4 builds on the analyses in Articles 2 and 3.

### **Quality assessment**

In this section, I will discuss the quality of the dissertation's qualitative research methods and practices. Criteria for good quality in qualitative research include several aspects, such as (a) a relevant and timely research topic; (b) appropriate, sufficient, and complex data collection and analysis processes; (c) self-reflexivity and transparency about the methods and trustworthiness; (d) the contribution's generalization, transferability, and significance; and (e) ethical considerations (inspired by Tracy, 2010). Therefore, the study achieves what it purports to be about and uses methods that fit the research aim (Malterud, 2001; Tracy, 2010).

#### *Relevant and timely research topic*

As presented in the introduction, the topic of studying aspiring leadership is timely and relevant in the sports sector, but leadership and multilevel theory framing is also a much-needed research area in organization literature in general.

*Appropriate, sufficient, and complex data collection and analysis processes*

In my Theory and Methods sections, I have presented the various steps I have taken, from the beginning of the research process until the finalization of the data analysis. Table 3 shows an overview of the various types of data used in the four articles.

*Table 3.* Types of data used in Articles 1–4 from interviews, documents, and field notes

| Method                   |                        | Article 1      | Article 2      | Article 3      | Article 4 |
|--------------------------|------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|-----------|
| Interviews <sup>a</sup>  | WSC top level          |                | 5              | 2              | 5         |
|                          | WSC middle level       |                | 12             | 13             | 16        |
|                          | WSC volunteers         |                | Sounding board | Sounding board | 5         |
|                          | YOG top level          | 5              |                | 1              | 7         |
|                          | YOG middle level       | 16             |                | 11             | 22        |
|                          | YOG volunteers         | Sounding board |                | Sounding board | 4         |
|                          | Documents <sup>b</sup> | WSC            |                | 4              | 2         |
|                          | YOG                    | 8              |                | 4              | 5         |
| Field notes <sup>c</sup> | WSC                    |                | 8              | 7              | 1         |
|                          | YOG                    | 4              |                | 1              | 2         |

<sup>a</sup> Number of quotes

<sup>b</sup> Number of references to documents

<sup>c</sup> Number of field notes (observations and narratives)

In preparation for the interviews and during the data collection, I used my experience from working in highly and loosely structured institutional contexts in the field of sports as an event manager and leader for a young workforce. During the interviews, I was careful not to use terms stemming from the theory that the interviewees could view as smarter as their own practice (Alvesson, 2011, p. 31). The interviews in the WSC were conducted in Norwegian, where the tradition of separating leadership and management is not present in the everyday language. As all aspiring leaders were aware of their organization’s goal to contract and educate young leaders through the event, I did not ask how or if they distinguish between leadership and management or how much of a leader they perceived themselves to be. Instead, I asked the respondents about their opportunities to make changes, how they felt constrained and supported in their role, which people

they worked closest with, and whether someone had facilitated their development in their role. These matters relate to Blumer's (1954) sensitizing rather than defining concepts. In addition, I asked how they perceived various behaviours, especially the event owners' and top managers', and asked how they differed from their earlier experiences.

I formulated questions to catch phenomena from multiple angles, and I asked for justification by exemplifications. For example, I first asked how the aspiring leaders perceived themselves as leaders and then asked for examples that have triggered their leadership development, followed by strengths and leadership qualities they liked to develop. During one of the interviews, one aspiring leader claimed that honesty was the most important value they based their leadership on. However, when asked about situations in which her values were tested, she recalled a situation when she lied: "I blamed somebody of being not perfect and making mistakes and being not productive, and yeah ... that was probably not an honest way" (Aspiring Leader YOG 3). This interview strategy enabled me to analyse and interpret statements in the interviews that seemed contradictory.

Even though my data analyses included managerial and volunteer levels, the articles mainly address the aspiring leaders' perspectives of the analysed interviews. However, field notes, documents, and interviews with top managers and volunteers helped me gain an understanding of perceptions (e.g., conformity modes) on various organizational levels and in various institutional contexts. During the articles' review processes, I tried to include the volunteers' voices several times. However, the space limitations applied to journal articles and specific requests from reviewers led to the removal of the specific passages reporting the findings from this data material from the original manuscripts. Therefore, even though a multiple hierarchical level and multitheoretical approach provides a more in-depth understanding, prioritisations were necessary and led to the removal of some voices. For example, in the publishing process for Article 2, the reviewers requested that I cut some interview quotes. As a result, responding to a reviewer request from *Sport and Society*, "I took out the previous foci on the top management and volunteers" (response letter to *Sport in Society*). In another review process, "direct quotes have been shortened by 265 words" (response letter to *IJSM*) in response to a reviewer request. However, observations, documents, and interviews with top managers and volunteers helped me understand the perceptions of people at various hierarchical levels, thereby increasing my understanding of

the institutional contexts and conformity processes. Thus, I was able to cross-check respondents' statements at various hierarchical levels (Schaefer & Alvesson, 2020).

*Self-reflexivity and transparency about the methods, challenges, and trustworthiness*

Having applied reflexive strategies throughout the process, I believe I have carefully presented the various steps in the data collection. I have also ensured my study's trustworthiness by discussing my analysis and findings with various experts. First, I consulted other researchers, particularly scholars who are well established in the field of sport management and organizational research. Furthermore, a research colleague with experience with both event concepts (who conducted research on the YOG and served as a volunteer at the WSC) functioned as a reader and a sounding board for critical questions. Discussions with three external researchers who have special interests in major sport events and knowledge of sport governance, policy, volunteer management, and leadership resulted in joint explanations of the phenomena. Finally, as I searched for alternative explanations in Article 3, I shared reflections with a professor and leading expert in critical leadership studies and reflexive methodology. In particular, these discussions helped me pay attention to various conformity modes and key drivers of the leadership process.

Second, I discussed the data, analysis, and findings with various practitioners in relation to the context of the two events or with general expertise in sport events. For example, I discussed my analysis and findings with volunteers and attendees of the WSF general assembly. In this stage, I started to look for complementary theories and engaged in the literature on reflexive methodology and critical perspectives on leadership. I further discussed drafts of article manuscripts with two independent individuals closely involved with the YOG and WSC for feedback. For example, in the case of the WSC, this process inspired me to pay attention to various perceptions of the work in the board of directors, where the CEO and the aspiring leaders represented a more critical view of their cooperation. In the YOG, it led me to apply a more critical view to group working processes at the same managerial level. In the beginning, I was concerned about analysing qualitative data and reporting about this iterative and complex process in a condensed format, as it is required for manuscripts submitted to scientific journals. After several conversations with scholars with expertise in qualitative research, I still felt insecure because they suggested several approaches and practices from each approach. However, I took the advice to focus on forming an overview of my data and applying reflexivity in its interpretation.

Third, my fieldwork in three other youth events served as a basis for reflection. During one of these interviews, the respondents told me about how they had become a part of a political game. I also interviewed two young snowboard event owners, who elaborated on their work with volunteers to educate them to become event managers for their own future events. These interviews are not part of the data material. However, they helped me sharpen my view of political processes and how young event owners strive to develop their own events. In sum, this material taught me about the work situation and gave me an understanding of various contexts.

The interview material from volunteers may have been affected by the fact that half of the interviews in the YOG were conducted by my supervisor and in the WSC by a research assistant, both of whom had experience in qualitative interviews. To counteract this weakness to the greatest extent possible, the first two to three interviews in both cases were conducted together with me. In the WSC, but also occasionally in the YOG, the interviews with volunteers were conducted in the same arena, giving me the opportunity to greet most of the respondents. Furthermore, my research colleagues and I had daily conversations in which we discussed the various interviews. Afterwards, I have on several occasions also listened to the audio files so that I could capture nuances, such as pauses and voice changes, that are not always captured in text.

#### *Generalization, transferability, and significant contribution*

When interpreting the data material and the discussion of the cases, I have sought to balance the material without drawing hasty conclusions while at the same time showing respect for the complexity of the various sport event contexts. Main concerns with case studies are generalizability and transferability (associated with external validity; Malterud, 2001). In general, case studies do not aim for scientific generalization to populations or universes but theoretical propositions (Yin, 2009). The goal of my dissertation was not to provide statistical generalizations. Instead, the aim was to amplify the understanding of young aspiring leaders in a sport event setting that is little explored and to expand theories.

#### *Ethical considerations*

The study was approved by Norwegian social science data services, the CEO of the WSC, and the Youth Olympic Games Laboratory for Youth and Innovation. All interviewees signed written consent forms. Researchers have an ethical and moral responsibility to represent the research subject's experiences in a credible and reliable way. Therefore, I undertook member checking (Seale, 1999). I sent a draft of the manuscripts to interviewees for feedback. Although

most interviews were conducted in a hectic and intensive environment during the games, I deemed it important to provide the interviewees with a chance to read the draft and comment on their quotes. In general, aspiring leaders could recognize themselves in the analysis; they only requested some minor changes (e.g., replacing “old men” with “senior managers”), and some supplementary information was added.

As discussed previously, I used my prior knowledge to define the research aim and plan the research design and methods. I have reflected on my preconceptions throughout the process. Due to my former involvement in snowboarding at national (employed at Norwegian Snowboard Federation from 1999 to 2008, CEO 2001–2008) and international (involved in World Snowboard Federation as a board member and committee leader from its start in 2001 to 2018) levels, the perspectives of involvement and detachment are relevant to consider (Elias, 1987). Involvement in the field under study is an advantage and disadvantage. The researcher’s personal preconceptions must be considered and reflected on when establishing a role as a researcher, allowing presumptions to be challenged (and potentially be neglected or corrected) and opens up the possibility of explanations to phenomena other than those initially established in an insider’s mind. Although I knew some people in the OC of the WSC, I had not previously worked closely with any of them. Instead, I would like to emphasize that my former positions helped me break barriers and gain access to information from persons and documents (e.g., the WSC evaluation report mentioned above). The advantage lies in one’s network (access to respondents and information) and the insider perspective on a specific sport culture, which in snowboarding is distinct from other sports (see also Strittmatter et al., 2019).

## 6. RESULTS

This chapter presents a summary of the main results of the four articles. For a more thorough description of all details, the readers are referred to the individual articles in this dissertation.

### Article 1

Bodemar, A., & Skille, E. (2016). “Stuck in structure”: How young leaders experienced the institutional frames at the Youth Olympic Games in Innsbruck, 2012. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 51(8), 940–956. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690214563198>

This article aimed to explore how the institutional context of the YOG enabled and constrained aspiring leaders’ perceived agency. In this article, the neo-institutional concept of translation provided a framework for analysing the institutional change in organizations, in which new ideas are combined with existing institutional practices and translated into new practices to varying degrees. Mechanisms of institutional isomorphism were used to analyse the extent to which the aspiring leaders felt bound to the institutional system of the IOC. The IYOGOC consisted of young people with experience in the event industry, which resulted in greater pressure to introduce new institutional solutions in the field. When the aspiring leaders of the IYOGOC came up with new ideas—or more frequently, ideas imported from other contexts—to improve the youthful concept of the YOG, they felt the IOC’s institutional context partly limited their expressions. Although they stated that they worked well with the IOC, they experienced this as a time-consuming and complicated collaboration, resulting in desired changes failing to be implemented, and the external pressure limited the aspiring leaders’ influence. However, at the same time, our findings indicated that the aspiring leaders were able to translate some elements into the IOC. Through the development of new cost-effective concepts, the event affected certain people in the IOC. Despite being constrained by coercive pressure from the IOC, the aspiring IYOGOC leaders translated new innovative elements into the IOC event. However, the innovations were restricted to areas that the IOC defined as less important, such as sustainability projects or cost-saving concepts, as opposed to important areas such as marketing.

## Article 2

Bodemar, A., Strittmatter, A.-M., & Fahlen, J. (2021). Doomed to fail? A study of how junior managers at a major sport event cope with leadership issues. *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*, 20(3–4), 271–288. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJSMM.2020.110845>

The purpose of this article was to examine how the aspiring leaders' perception of uncertainty, determined by the internal and external organizational environment, influenced aspiring leaders' application of modes of organizing to ensure an external perception of success. The article drew on data collected from the WSC and examined aspiring leaders' enactment of leadership within the WSC. We used a framework with six modes of organizing (Alvesson et al., 2017) to explore how aspiring leaders coped by applying horizontal modes of organizing. Due to the loosely institutionalized context, the OC at the WSC experienced major problems, causing uncertainty among the aspiring leaders and general chaos. The CEO responded to these problems by applying authoritarian behaviour, thereby restraining the aspiring leaders' enactment of leadership. However, the event was declared a success in external communications. This article drew on works about leadership and sport events by Parent and Seguin (2007) and Parent, Beaupre, and Seguin (2009) to examine the key leadership and organizational factors that contributed to these problems. The authors investigated how the aspiring leaders coped with uncertainty and solved problems. Our findings showed that a variety of mechanisms caused uncertainty, including some factors that predicted the event's failure. The existing literature uses leadership to explain why events succeed or fail, but this case provided an opportunity to understand how an event can succeed despite displaying factors allegedly leading to event failure. In addition to the findings of Parent and Seguin (2007) and Parent, Beaupre, & Seguin (2009), who showed that coping with leadership issues at the middle-management level is important, the findings from Article 2 revealed new mechanisms contributing to success: group work within the OC, personal networking, and autonomy.

## Article 3

Bodemar, A. (resubmitted to *Sport in Society*). The balancing act of conformity: aspiring leaders' response to managerial pressure.



In this article, I explored how various institutional contexts of sport events influenced aspiring leaders' conformity processes. While the first two articles explored how institutional settings restrained aspiring leaders, Article 3 explained how various event contexts pushed aspiring leaders towards conformity in their enactment of leadership. In the article, case analyses drew on the concept of functional stupidity and showed how such behaviour leads to conformity. The article presents a cross-case analysis of the WSC and YOG and explores aspiring leaders' reflections about and the interaction between conformity and the event context. The analysis reveals three types of responses to conformity: straight, reflexive, and cynical. My results show that conformity modes depend significantly on the degree of institutionalization of practices, rules, and power structures in an event's organization. Strong institutional frameworks (in the YOG) and expediency (in the WSC) were identified as key drivers of conformity processes. I found that both identified conformity modes restrict managers' learning. Article 3 contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the significance of the institutional context and the consequences of control regimes in event management. The article further showed that pressure towards conformity seems to be a fast-paced process.

#### **Article 4**

Bodemar, A. & Skille, E. Å. (submitted to *Sport Management Review*). The disappearance of leadership? Aspiring leaders' agency and conformity in various sport event contexts.

In this article, we explored the two research questions: How is leadership often replaced by conformity in the context of sport events? and Why does leadership fade? The study contributes to a better understanding of the relationship between leadership and conformity in the context of sport events. The article considered the structural environment and aspiring leaders' individual agency at the WSC and YOG. We presented two relatively new perspectives in sport management, six modes of organizing (reflexive leadership), and functional stupidity. Article 4 exemplifies how these concepts can be utilized to analyse leadership by exploring aspiring leaders' perceived agency in institutional contexts of various sport events. Agency—and consequently, leadership—were limited in highly and loosely restricted institutional contexts; top leaders and external pressure restricted, controlled, and disciplined agency. With a multilevel hierarchical level of analysis and a critical approach to leadership, we show how leadership fades as a mode of

organizing on three hierarchal levels in the context of sport events. Leadership is replaced by horizontal modes of organizing between aspiring leaders at the same level and by management between aspiring leaders and volunteers. The concept of modes of organizing offers a reflexive alternative to the leadership-centred focus in contemporary research. We observed that the CEO and event owners exert power over the aspiring leaders. In the YOG, institutional processes that the IOC imposed limit the aspiring leaders' ability to enact leadership. In the WSC, authoritarian behaviour and expediency restrict leadership.

The functional-stupidity framework enabled us to explain the pressure of conformity shaping leadership. The results show that in an event context, striving for functionality makes the idea of providing aspiring leaders the opportunity to perform leadership an impossible undertaking from the very beginning. In the analysed contexts, functional stupidity worked because it involves paying attention to reflexivity irrespective of objective behaviour.

In combination, the two frameworks helped scrutinize the organizational processes at play as well as managers' perceptions of limited agency and explain why leadership fades as an organizational mode of organizing.

## 7. DISCUSSION

In this discussion chapter, I begin by answering the four research questions and thus explain how aspiring leaders perceive and enact leadership in various types of sport events. Afterwards, I will move on to a more general analysis and discuss the dilemma that arises from blurred definitions and undefined leadership duties.

### **Aspiring leaders in a highly institutionalized context**

In RQ 1, I sought to answer *How does the institutional context of YOG enable and constrain aspiring leaders' perceived agency?*

As presented in Article 1, aspiring leaders in the YOG perceived themselves as highly regulated by the institutional environment the IOC constructed. Aspiring leaders experienced the IOC as regulating the YOG's work through rules and control procedures—for example, the event's manual. The IOC's regulations constituted coercive pressure (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), which was also found to regulate other international sports organizations (Batuev & Robinson, 2019; Strittmatter et al., 2019). Coercive pressure can be seen as a building block of rationalized myths in the institutionalized context derived to obtain centralized control (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Although coercive pressure and rationalized myths are (important) analytical concepts primarily referring to the resemblance of organizations in an institutional field, we sought to understand how individuals and their actions in an event organization contribute to what is happening on an overarching field level. It has been shown that individuals who enter a new organization often experience coercive pressure, where regulations and following institutional rules define the way of operating needed to reach organizational goals (Reay et al. 2017; Scott, 2014). There are norms, regulations, and expectations of how to do things (Kunda, 2009), in this case derived from the IOC, that YOG depends on (Lesjø et al., 2017). My findings regarding the coercive pressure the aspiring leaders experience in the YOG are therefore in line with previous research. Later, I will discuss how the YOG's institutional setting affected the aspiring leaders' perceived agency in the inner working climate of the OC.

Focusing on individuals in an event organization and their perceptions of institutional context and constraints, the aspiring leaders in the YOG reported that the IOC's structure was new to them and difficult to understand. Furthermore, they found the IYOGOC's structure complex

due to its multiple functional areas, in which each leader had their counterpart in the IOC who supervised and controlled the work. Lesjø et al. (2017) found similar perceptions of the working environment in the OC of the second winter edition of the YOG in 2016. Although all aspiring leaders had experience with organizing events, they had to learn how to work in a new institutional environment, and they found it difficult to implement changes to this environment. However, the aspiring leaders tried to read between the lines, looked for gaps in the event manual, and tried to find alternative interpretations of the manual to increase flexibility. Due to a lack of experience with multisport events, for some aspiring leaders, the emergence and magnitude of unplanned and ad hoc tasks was a new experience. They found it challenging to solve problems ad hoc but coped with it by being flexible and solution-oriented.

In addition to the complex institutional context, the aspiring leaders found the limited financial and administrative resources challenging. Although they perceived themselves as capable leaders, they found the great responsibility associated with their positions burdensome. In their new positions as leaders in the YOG, they experienced tension between their normative potential to implement ideas stemming from experiences in previous events on one hand and coercive pressure due to the IOC's rigid structures and regulations on the other hand, which restricted them in using their competencies.

The application of neo-institutional theory to understand individuals in an institutional context revealed that the aspiring leaders' experience and education formed their normative expectations regarding the event's institutional context (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). However, the aspiring leaders experienced the culture of the organizations they had previously worked in as different from the culture of the IOC, which was represented by senior managers and IOC members. The leaders of functional areas especially experienced this difference in their interactions with their counterparts in the IOC. However, the dimensions of culture and structure are difficult to distinguish in an institutional analysis, as the taken-for-granted and hidden power define acceptable behaviour (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Although the IOC provides an institutional environment that exerts coercive pressure on aspiring YOG leaders, the data also contain examples that imply that the aspiring leaders challenged the institutional context of the IOC. As previously mentioned, the IOC and IYOGOC members had different opinions on occasion. Such disagreements can be understood by turning to the translation perspective, which shows how institutional entities from external contexts can be

placed into new contexts and made to fit with old institutional elements in that receiving context (Campbell, 2004). New ideas are imitated from former events, and some of these ideas stem from other institutional contexts (e.g., the music and private event industries, which operate in diverse fields). These ideas are actively imported and edited—in short, translated as this branch of institutional theory denominates it (Campbell, 2004)—to fit a new context.

Despite some variations, most data point in the direction of a perception of a coercive institutional environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) created by the IOC, which understands itself as having a monopolistic position in relation to Olympic events. Despite the IOC's dominance in this regard, my study revealed an institutional contradiction between the IOC and the aspiring leaders regarding solving tasks within the framework the IOC provided. In some instances, cooperation became intractable and the aspiring leaders experienced difficulties arguing for and implementing new solutions the way they wanted. Nevertheless, some ideas were incorporated within the YOG, resulting in a new practice that had not previously been intended or implemented in an IOC event. At the same time, the aspiring leaders reported that structures in the IOC limited their opportunities to perform leadership. These perceptions of the aspiring leaders are in line with the OC's perceptions in the second winter edition of the YOG in Lillehammer (Lesjø et al., 2017). Members of the 2016 Lillehammer YOG organizing committee reported that coercive pressure hindered their focus on creating an event in a youthful way and claimed that the IOC's governance model fits better for major events, such as the OG (Lesjø et al., 2017).

The IOC is the most powerful actor, and as it is the event's concept owner, this is difficult to even question. The IOC regulated the event via comprehensive guidelines, required reports, and final approval of all changes. The IOC wanted the aspiring leaders to think creatively and downsize mega-event solutions to a large-scale sport event that attracts younger generations. The aspiring leaders had valuable knowledge, but their counterparts in the IOC had more know-how from mega-events. Educating aspiring leaders requires commitment, and trust must include degrees of freedom for the aspiring leaders to act as leaders. However, instead of using the aspiring leaders' input as valuable feedback, it seems that the IOC treated them as a resistance that needed to be overcome (Tourish & Robson, 2006). Aspiring leaders focus on change rather than what is essential to conserve. This focus is usual for people in leadership positions (Heifetz, 2011). Consequently, the IYOGOC missed opportunities for the YOG to function as an Olympic laboratory, mainly because of the dominant bureaucratic system within the IOC.

Although the aspiring leaders reported that they enjoyed their collaboration with the IOC, their opportunities for agency were restricted in the command-and-control-characterized organization. These are well-known problems in larger contemporary organizations (c.f. Kunda, 2009). On one hand, bureaucracy with standardized tasks, report systems, and clear lines of authority facilitates efficiency in the implementation of a successful event. On the other hand, taking previous events' performance as a starting point encourages the survival of old-fashioned assumptions and practices. If the YOG aims to educate aspiring leaders and implement competitive new event concepts, the IOC needs to allow for more flexibility in their institutional setting and see aspiring leaders not as a means to an end but an end in themselves.

### **Aspiring leaders in a loosely institutionalized context**

I posed RQ 2 to examine *how aspiring leaders' perceptions of uncertainty, determined by the internal and external organizational environment, influences aspiring leaders' application of modes of organizing to ensure an external perception of success.*

The loosely institutionalized context of the WSC challenged aspiring leaders' enactment of leadership (see Article 2). Missing clarity and continuity in organizational practices and structures as well as disruptive requirements from one of the event owners and authoritarian behaviour from the CEO created uncertainty and perceptions of chaos among the aspiring leaders. The aspiring leaders also mentioned lack of continuity in their perceptions of the WSC's OC, and it shaped the aspiring leaders' perception of the WSC itself.

Most aspiring leaders working in the WSC were recruited from the music event industry. From the expressions of the aspiring leaders, music events can be viewed as highly institutionalized compared to the WSC. Over time, they have developed practices as a central part of their organizational structure. The relatively newly formed WSC has not yet established practices or an organizational structure. Instead, manuals or guidelines were missing, and responsibility was assigned orally. Hanlon and Cuskelly (2002) stressed the importance of information that can help clarify responsibilities for major sport events to contribute to an effective process of introducing staff to their tasks (denoted as the induction process)—something that the WSC was missing. As most aspiring leaders were experienced in music festivals rather than competitive snowboarding events, their perception of the WSC's organizational context was characterized by the differences between these two types of events. More specifically, the aspiring

leaders faced a lack of clarity, disruptive requirements, and authoritarian behaviour in the organization. These perceptions caused frustration among them and a negative attitude towards future job engagements. Such issues can create problems for retention in future events.

The CEO's leadership style was perceived and described—in his own words—as authoritarian. His ideas met the reality of a first-time event, and in his role, he had to mediate the environmental pressure from the owners (TTR and WSC) and the aspiring leaders. Although the OC faced significant challenges related to economy, politics, and media and although the aspiring leaders perceived its organizational environment as chaotic and lacking structure, they were able to apply coping strategies that prevented the event's failure. The leaders' primary strategy was applying so-called horizontal modes of organizing (Alvesson & Blom, 2019). That is, when vertical modes of organizing (formal hierarchies, decision making, division of labour, standardized procedures, etc.) failed, aspiring leaders turned to their already established yet informal, horizontal networks for assistance, guidance, support, and resources. Due to their ability to fall back on horizontal modes of informal organizing, aspiring leaders were able to act more autonomously and independently of bureaucratic flaws, poor communication, and haphazard leadership. In doing so, they achieved greater flexibility in the organizational structure, task flow, and other bureaucratic processes; they were better equipped to handle unforeseen events that demanded quick and flexible solutions. That is, instead of being at the mercy of failing structures, aspiring leaders formed an informal organization within the OC in which they created their own due diligence and human resource management procedures and communication strategies.

The theoretical approach of modes of organizing offered an alternative approach to analyse leadership and organization rather than classic leadership theories. Although the approach proved fruitful, especially in the analysis of horizontal modes, the concept does not clarify how the framework can explore flaws in the vertical organization. Although leadership may constitute the most efficient mode of organizing, the institutional environment may constrain leadership, and organizational aspects, such as formal hierarchies, decision making, division of labour, and standardized procedures, may be missing. This can be caused, for example, by insufficient planning or bad decision making in a new context, such as an inaugural sport event. It could also be a result of institutional pressures from the environment (cf. neo-institutional analysis, per Article 1). Inaugural sport events are demanding because they are new and short-termed, qualities that can lead to a gap between the real and ideal situations, for example in terms of organizational

structure, responsibilities, and internal communication. Leadership could have helped solve problems, but horizontal modes of organizing provide a way of surviving, for example when leadership fails. If, for example, middle managers face bureaucratic flaws—such as poor communication and haphazard leadership—horizontal coping strategies can serve as (informal) networks for assistance, guidance, support, and resources.

In line with previous research that identified access to solid external networks as a key quality for event leadership (Alvesson & Blom, 2019; Parent, Beaupre, & Séguin, 2009; Parent, Olver, & Séguin, 2009), the WSC's success (or nonfailure) can be largely attributed to the strong external networks of many aspiring leaders. Their common background in the music festival industry made it possible for them to draw on experiences from previous events collectively, which allowed for the use of their personal yet common external network and promoted a sense of loyalty among the aspiring leaders. As Alvesson and Blom (2019) argued, being supported by peers through horizontal modes of organizing helps a manager to—at least partly—substitute for a lack of or poor vertical modes of organizing and hence fulfil their responsibilities despite a relatively weak organizational environment. The findings show that loyalty to the event, the overall event organization, or even the OC was given less importance than loyalty to the task at hand and to peers.

### **The institutional setting and its influence on aspiring leaders**

RQ3 aimed at investigating *how various institutional contexts of sport events influence aspiring leaders' conformity processes*. First, I outline the aspiring leaders' perception of institutional differences between the two event contexts by drawing on articles 1–4; then I discuss how these institutional settings influenced the aspiring leaders in performing leadership.

#### *The characteristics of the YOG's and WSC's institutional contexts*

The WSC and the YOG had commonalities and differences; however, they represented two distinct institutional contexts. Table 4 provides an overview of the two events' essential characteristics relating to their institutional settings. I derived the information in the table from the data collected for this study and additional literature (see table notes). In the following, I focus on important characteristics for comparative analysis and further discussion (workforce, target group, institutionalized practices, organizational structure, and ownership).



the YOG and WSC had young workforces and applied a strategy of contracting several young managers in middle and lower managerial positions. Both events were elite sport events with youth attraction and a goal to create a festival atmosphere with music concerts and side events presented by sponsors. Although both events had similar themes and goals and aimed to reach a young target group, there were considerable differences between the WSC's and YOG's institutional practices and structures.

Table 4. Comparison of Quantifiable and Institutional Setting Characteristics of the YOG and WSC

| Characteristic                             | YOG   | WSC  |
|--|---|--|
| Employees in OC                            | 109 <sup>a</sup>                            | 100 <sup>b</sup>                           |
| Volunteers                                 | 1,357 <sup>a</sup>                          | 600 <sup>b</sup>                           |
| Suppliers                                  | Over 1,025 <sup>a</sup>                     | Over 100 <sup>b</sup>                      |
| Venues                                     | 6 <sup>a</sup>                              | 4 <sup>b</sup>                             |
| Sports                                     | Multisport <sup>a</sup>                     | Single sport <sup>b</sup>                  |
| Disciplines                                | 15 <sup>a</sup>                             | 4 <sup>b</sup>                             |
| Streaming/broadcasting                     | No live stream <sup>a</sup>                 | Live stream <sup>b</sup>                   |
| Operational budget                         | €23.7 million <sup>a</sup>                  | €3 million <sup>b</sup>                    |
| Event type                                 | Institution-driven <sup>c</sup>             | Youth-driven <sup>c,d</sup>                |
| Sport culture                              | Organized <sup>c</sup>                      | Self-organized <sup>c,d</sup>              |
| Key creator and driven by                  | Institutions <sup>c</sup>                   | Athletes, industry, culture <sup>c,d</sup> |
| Governance approach                        | Top-down <sup>c,e</sup>                     | Bottom-up <sup>c,d</sup>                   |
| Target group                               | Youth elite athletes <sup>c,e</sup>         | Mass of young people <sup>c</sup>          |
| Concept owner structure                    | Institutional <sup>d,e,g</sup>              | Hybrid <sup>b,d,f</sup>                    |
| Concept's creator                          | Former IOC president <sup>g</sup>           | CEO <sup>b</sup>                           |
| Heaviest ruler shaping the event identity  | Centralized (IOC) <sup>d,e</sup>            | Key individuals (CEO) <sup>d</sup>         |
| Owners' influence                          | High <sup>d,e</sup>                         | Low <sup>d,f</sup>                         |
| International governing system's influence | High <sup>d,e</sup>                         | Low <sup>b,d,f</sup>                       |
| Event values                               | Printed in strategy platform <sup>a,g</sup> | Not explicitly communicated <sup>f</sup>   |
| Organizational structure                   | Formal <sup>c,d,e</sup>                     | Informal <sup>c,d,f</sup>                  |
| Institutionalized practice                 | Strong <sup>d,g</sup>                       | Loose <sup>c,d,f</sup>                     |
| Velocity in decision-making processes      | Slow <sup>d</sup>                           | Fast <sup>c,d</sup>                        |
| Risk tolerance                             | Low <sup>d</sup>                            | High <sup>c,d</sup>                        |

Note. YOG = Youth Olympic Games; WSC = World Snowboarding Championships; OC = organizing committee.

<sup>a</sup> Adapted from *Be part of it! Official report of the Innsbruck 2012 Winter Youth Olympic games*, by Innsbruck Youth Olympic Games Organizing Committee, 2012, ([https://library.olympic.org/Default/doc/SYRACUSE/77715/be-part-of-it-official-report-of-the-innsbruck-2012-winteryouth-olympic-games-innsbruck-2012?\\_lg=en-GB](https://library.olympic.org/Default/doc/SYRACUSE/77715/be-part-of-it-official-report-of-the-innsbruck-2012-winteryouth-olympic-games-innsbruck-2012?_lg=en-GB)); <sup>b</sup> Adapted from *Minutes from WSF General Assembly 2010*, by World Snowboard Federation, 2010 (<http://www.worldsnowboardfederation.org/2010/06/09/minutes-from-wsf-general-assembly2010>); <sup>c</sup> Adapted from "Youth Sports events and Festivals," by A.-M. Strittmatter & M. M. Parent, 2019, in E. MacIntosh, G. Bravo, & M. Li (Eds.),

*International sport management* (2nd ed.), pp. 236–237, Human Kinetics; <sup>d</sup> Adapted from A. Bodemar (n.d.) and A. Bodemar & E. Å. Skille (n.d.)  
<sup>e</sup> Adapted from “The Youth Olympic Games: The Best of the Olympics or a Poor Copy?” by D. V. Hanstad, M. M. Parent, & E. Kristiansen, 2013, *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 13(3), p. 326 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2013.782559>); <sup>f</sup> Adapted from *Evaluation Report: Evaluating World Snowboarding Championships 2012*, by World Snowboarding Championships, 2012, Unpublished; and <sup>g</sup> Adapted from *Factsheet: The YOG—Vision, Birth and Principles*, by International Olympic Committee, 2015, (<https://stillmed.olympic.org/media/Document%20Library/OlympicOrg/Factsheets-Reference-Documents/Games/YOG/Factsheet-The-YOG-Vision-Birth-and-Principles-December-2015.pdf>).

Overall, there was a considerable difference between the two events regarding their level of bureaucracy. As the WSC operated with a minimum of written documents and manuals, aspiring leaders had no management practices to refer to. No guidelines were available, and written agreements and instructions were generally lacking. The aspiring leaders in charge of departments and functional areas were simply delegated responsibilities without written instructions or control routines. Furthermore, the ownership structure of the WSC, with volunteer organizations and private event organizers as owners, created tensions between professionalism/commercialism and volunteerism.

On paper, the WSC’s organizational chart had a similar hierarchal structure to that of the YOG: a top management layer and a middle management layer with heads of departments and managers in charge of various functional areas. In addition, the middle layer consisted of team managers of volunteers, contracted above the lowest level with frontline workers and volunteers. In practice, the WSC’s organizational structure can be viewed as informal because of its small number of bureaucratic elements, such as reporting procedures and control instances. The WSC event owners’ impact on daily activity was restricted: the WSC’s CEO mediated the pressure by simply ignoring event owners’ input and comments, especially from the TTR.

Sport events can look the same on the surface, but they come in different forms and are linked to diverse cultures with different organizing approaches and, as shown, different levels of institutionalisation. The OC for events is often an organization that various organizations jointly own. For the YOG, it was partly the National Olympic Committee and governmental institutions, but the IOC is the owner of the event concept. In the WSC, two international snowboard organizations (one international sports association and one private event organizer) own the event. The OCs therefore operate in mixed organizational environments, in which social and cultural pressures exist and influence workflow and practices and therefore agency. Even though expiring leaders in both cases tried to understand the context of the event and how the system works, they struggled to understand the nature of and rationale behind pressures and how to operate with them.

As I showed in Article 4, young leaders in both events were conscious of their tasks that were agreed upon when they were employed in the OCs. They were also aware that the event owners had publicly committed to developing and educating them as aspiring leaders. As a consequence, the aspiring leaders wanted to believe that they had agency. Therefore, they were eager to manage their tasks but realised they faced some barriers. For example, the aspiring leaders struggled to understand the professional hierarchy, decision-making processes, and rules and regulations. They questioned routines and challenged decision-making procedures and functional approaches in the event organization, illustrating that they were not yet familiar with and institutionalized into taken-for-granted and common practices (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

*Aspiring leaders' perceptions of agency*

The YOG had several bureaucratic procedures to follow, and the aspiring leaders had to deal with pressure from the IOC, which wanted to control the event and protect their brand. At the same time, there was an explicit and publicly expressed aim to involve and educate aspiring leaders and give them influence. The aim of educating young leaders should be achieved by providing aspiring leaders the opportunity to influence a new event concept with a youthful and innovative image and using the event as an Olympic laboratory. However, the reality revealed a divergence between the expressed aim of involving and educating aspiring leaders and the leaders' perception of bureaucratic hurdles. Bureaucratic processes can provide order and make it easier to follow every step to ensure efficient event implementation. However, the perception of a need to tick boxes by reporting on IOC milestones made the aspiring leaders focus on the procedures and made them feel that bureaucratic hurdles hindered their agency. Alvesson and Spicer (2012a) claimed that extensive bureaucracy with comprehensive guidelines and monitoring leaves little room for leadership. In such environments, agency is restricted in favour of the desire to control; therefore, leadership remains mostly symbolic (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). The YOGs' aspiring leaders had to conform to a strict bureaucratic structure. Nonetheless, they were motivated to implement new ideas and create a youthful event. To do so, they were forced to read between the lines and identify gaps in the manuals that gave them the possibility to exercise agency. However, comprehensive guidelines and manuals can also stop people from thinking outside the box and generate thoughtfulness, especially in the long run (Eisenhardt & Sull, 2001).

The WSC also expressed the aim to educate aspiring leaders. In contrast to the YOG, the aspiring leaders in the WSC initially perceived that they were given full agency to build up their

departments with no existing management practices and guidelines to refer to. They experienced a different reality in which no bureaucratic structure had been established at all. Consequently, they had to shape bureaucratic processes, such as establishing daily routines for transferring knowledge between work teams. Although these aspiring leaders were raised in a time in which organizations are increasingly governed by visions and in which leadership creates the organizational culture, bureaucracy is still strong (McSweeney, 2006). The aspiring leaders in the WSC were used to a more institutionalized practice in music events. In the beginning, the aspiring leaders in the WSC liked their jobs and the freedom to implement their ideas (Article 3, p. 281). However, closer to the event's implementation, the top managers created pressure to conform and follow orders through their authoritarian leadership style. The aspiring leaders felt increasingly overwhelmed and therefore chose to conform and simply follow orders.

Despite the different empirical realities in terms of the level of institutionalization, my results revealed coercive pressure in both cases. However, coercive pressure took different forms in the two events. For the aspiring leaders in the YOG, coercive pressure was related to institutional expectations to conform to norms and regulations (Article 1). Aspiring leaders in the YOG experienced tensions among the coercive frameworks the IOC provided and their interpretations of institutional elements based on their former event experience. In the WSC, coercive pressure stemmed from a lack of orientation due to very loose structures and authoritarian top management behaviour (Article 2). Despite the distinct reasons for aspiring leaders' perception of pressure in both cases, the perceived pressure resulted in perceptions of being constrained in agency (Articles 1 and 2) and a need to conform.

#### *Conformity modes and their key drivers*

In Article 3, I identified three modes of conformity in the two institutional sport event contexts. Reflexive conformity was dominant in the YOG, and cynical conformity was common in the WSC. These conformity modes were highly dependent on the degree of institutionalization in the two contexts. I identified a strong institutional context as a key driver behind straight and reflexive conformity in the YOG and expediency as a key driver for cynical conformity in the WSC.

For an inaugural sport event, promoting the event's image is essential to attract sponsors, the best athletes, and consumers—as live spectators and media viewers. This effort can be considered differently depending on the theoretical lenses one applies. Being attractive secures the

event's legitimacy and survival, as defined in neo-institutional theory (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). At the same time, the demand to be attractive and stage an event on schedule led to symbolic manipulation of the aspiring leaders (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012b). Therefore, I complement the perspective of neo-institutional theory with a critical perspective on leadership and management (more specifically functional stupidity) to provide an understanding of both processes at play. Although the two events represented various institutional settings and exercises of power, aspiring leaders reported similar leadership experiences. In both cases, aspiring leaders expressed challenges in balancing doing what was formally correct (i.e., adhering to the norms) and what they thought was factually correct (i.e., what actually should be done). The aspiring leaders faced expectations of how to do things but found that these expectations were not always reasonable, factually correct, or easy to adapt to. As a solution to this dilemma, the aspiring leaders in both cases showed confirmative behaviour. According to Alvesson and Spicer (2012b), this behaviour can be designated as functionally stupid because the aspiring leaders' reflections had suggested acting differently. As Alvesson and Spicer (2012b) claimed, conformity and functional stupidity are rather common when individuals enter an institutionalized environment. However, the balancing act was salient in the YOG because there was a strong normative force of institutional learning about how the IOC functions. Although this force was also relevant in the WSC, in this case, the balancing act was a reaction against the focus on entrepreneurship and expediency, as the aspiring leaders were explicitly critical of the CEO's frequent changes of direction and interruptive behaviour.

There is a hugely compelling goal to complete the event in the sport event context. Challenges are time, development, and conceptual change (Parent, 2010). There are rules and regulations, expectations, and economic issues, which put pressure on the focal organization towards conformity and limit individual leaders' agency (Campbell, 2004; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Agency is dominated by functionality due to the significant pressure to achieve the event's aim and stick to the schedule. Due to a strong focus on implementing the event, leaders have few or no alternatives to decide between, and the room to discuss better solutions is limited. Hence, leaders have to conform and "stupidly" follow. Although this approach is functional (especially in the short run) because it ensures that the sport event is implemented, a drawback is that it restricts learning.

Although the aspiring leaders in the YOG tried to introduce youthful thinking into the event's OC, they had to learn about the IOC's traditional system and adapt to it. This adaptation is functional for aspiring leaders who want to continue working in IOC-regulated events, as those events will have similar institutional contexts. Nevertheless, learning in the context of the YOG was limited to acquiring knowledge about the IOC's institutional context. As a result, it was meaningless for the aspiring leaders who planned to work in other events in the future. Learning in the context of the WSC was limited differently. The aspiring leaders in the WSC tried to introduce more professionalism to the event by transferring their knowledge from earlier experiences of music festivals to the organization. However, the CEO stopped them, which explains why the WSC's aspiring leaders turned to cynical conformity. Cynical conformity is functional because it makes aspiring leaders reflect on conformism. In addition, aspiring leaders who respond to managerial pressure with functional stupidity have a good chance of obtaining new management assignments in events.

### **In search of leadership**

RQ 4 explores *how conformity often replaces leadership in the context of sport events and why leadership fades*.

Leadership refers to “interpersonal influencing processes in an asymmetrical relationship, targeting meaning, feeling and values” (Alvesson et al., 2017, p. 18). As I showed in Article 4, the aspiring leaders' opportunities to enact leadership were limited in the WSC and YOG. In the case of the YOG, comprehensive rules and regulations in the IOC's frameworks restrained the aspiring leaders from implementing their ideas, such as adding youthful thinking to the IOC concept. At the WSC, the CEO's authoritarian behaviour limited the aspiring leaders' opportunities to enact leadership and implement new practices.

When comparing the two cases, as I did in Articles 3 and 4, I discovered relatively similar processes of conformity in highly and loosely institutionalized settings: aspiring leaders first tried to interfere but eventually responded to coercive pressure with conformity. Neo-institutional theory cannot sufficiently explain this empirical observation. Therefore, I applied additional theoretical perspectives, more specifically modes of organizing (Alvesson & Blom, 2019) and functional stupidity (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012b), to understand how and why conformity occurred. Applying the lens of modes of organizing allowed me to analyse aspiring leaders' coping processes

and revealed that they applied horizontal modes of organizing. I used functional stupidity to understand the mechanisms of how coercive pressure leads to conformity. In the following, I explain how these theories helped answer the research questions. However, first, I will take a step back to understand how perceptions of problems explain a call for leadership from the aspiring leaders.

To begin with, I considered how the same problems were perceived differently by individuals on different hierarchal levels by taking a social constructivist stance (Grint, 2005). I use the case of WSC to exemplify this further (see Article 2). According to Grint's (2005) designation, a high level of uncertainty as described and perceived by WSC's aspiring leaders would indicate the need for leadership from top management. However, this did not happen in WSC. Instead, the CEO exerted pressure on the aspiring leaders by commanding, and they had to follow orders. Hence, the CEO applied authoritarian behaviour (Grint, 2005). The choice of this top-down approach indicates that the top managers perceived problems as crises, which was also confirmed in the interviews. As mentioned earlier, and following Grint (2005), the appropriate response to crisis is command, which is what the top manager in WSC applied. Hence, the WSC served as an example showing how different perceptions of the same problems between the hierarchal levels lead to disagreement on their solutions. Whereas the aspiring leaders expected leadership from the top management, the top managers' solution was authoritarian behaviour.

To explain this, I need to turn to the evolution of sport events—more specifically, the transition phase when an event organization moves from the planning to the implementation phase. In this transition phase, the number of organizational tasks and the workforce (volunteers) increase rapidly, requiring substantial coordination. In the implementation phase, one should not expect much leadership, but rather a focus on following institutionalized practice. Too much risk would be involved in allowing for a lot of leadership, because one problem easily trickles down and causes new problems. In this phase, if the aspiring leaders perceive that uncertainty could have led to the wrong decisions, the institution could break down. The data showed that the top managers in WSC were busy solving perceived crises, and the aspiring leaders perceived their orders as coming from all over. Therefore, the aspiring leaders just followed orders and forwarded the commands to assistants and volunteers to ensure task fulfilment and save the event. At the same time, hardly any institutional practice was available to rely on to help the aspiring leaders when the CEO's leadership was absent. Therefore, they turned to other organizational processes.



This inspired me to question how the aspiring leaders, who were promised they would have influence and “be in charge,” reflected upon their working environments and how obedience affected their work. In the WSC, the influencing processes were mostly horizontal. The aspiring leaders coped with the absence of leadership from the top management by applying horizontal modes of organization involving group work within the OC and with members of preexisting external networks (Article 2). As Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) suggested, I took a reflexive stance when carrying out subsequent analyses. *Reflexivity* is defined as “the ambition to carefully and systematically take a critical view of one’s own assumptions, ideas and favoured vocabulary and to consider if alternative ones make sense (Alvesson et al., 2017, p. 14).

In the WSC, the CEO and aspiring leaders perceived the same problems differently. Whereas the CEO perceived problems as crises and responded to problems with authoritarian behaviour, the aspiring leaders perceived problems as high levels of uncertainty, which according to Grint (2005), results in a call for leadership from the CEO. Hence, the CEO’s exertion of power was not the kind of problem-solving behaviour that many of the aspiring leaders expected or wanted. With a critical approach to leadership (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012a, p. 373), I interpreted these different perceptions as a misfit, which I designated as the “construction divergence” (Alvesson, 2017, p. 10). The situations in which the CEO chose a commanding style and the aspiring leaders called for leadership were what Alvesson (2017) designated as “multiple breakdowns” (p. 10)—situations of strong divergence in perceptions of reality. The misfit of the CEO’s commands with the aspiring leaders’ expectations can be described as a “no leadership relation” (Alvesson, 2017, p. 11). While the aspiring leaders expected a leadership relation; in which the CEO would exert a behavioural response by influencing aspiring leaders’ meanings, values, and beliefs; the CEO applied management and power as mechanisms to influence the aspiring leaders, who were the target of the CEO’s demands.

Further on, I employed modes of organizing (Alvesson & Blom, 2019; Alvesson et al., 2017). Whereas the literature is mainly focused on vertical modes of organizing in the form of top-down leadership to explain event success (e.g., Parent, Beaupre, et al., 2009; Parent & Séguin, 2007), my cases revealed that this perspective is too restrictive. By opening the perspective to alternative modes of organizing, my study provides more nuanced and complex insights. The WSC case especially demonstrates how an event can externally succeed and meet its targets despite the presence of various factors of failure as identified by Parent and Séguin (2007): lack of vision,

mission, and goals; poor due diligence procedures; missing financial commitments; issues with human resources, power, and politics; and poor communication. In my cases, such challenges led to perceptions of chaos and uncertainty. This resulted in calls for leadership from the top management (Grint, 2005) and in internal initiatives originating from the organic development of professional know-how from the music industry, in which the aspiring leaders had gained experience. Hence, it was possible for them to overcome the CEO's leadership shortcomings by applying horizontal modes of organizing. Neglecting to do so could have resulted in failure to accomplish the event. Whereas Grint's (2005) leadership model helped reveal different perceptions of problems and divergent expectations regarding their solutions, horizontal modes of organizing were useful in explaining the aspiring leaders' coping processes.

Investigating the organizational modes between the aspiring leaders and volunteers revealed management processes targeting the volunteers' behaviour more directly via task assignments and resource allocation. Volunteers mainly reported a positive relationship with the aspiring leaders. Most commonly, YOG and WSC volunteers perceived a friendship relationship with their aspiring leaders rather than a follower-leader relationship. It must be remembered that volunteering is a short-term relationship (in most cases only a few days), and some volunteers even moved between work tasks and thereby worked with more than one aspiring leader. Therefore, the time for seductive talk and building up leadership relationships was restricted.

One main finding was that the aspiring leaders felt restricted in their agency. In both events, young people were contracted to act as leaders; hence, they expected to have influence and the power to take action (agency). Despite being promised they would have influence, the aspiring leaders felt pushed towards coercion (or rather conformity, as I interpreted it) by having to comply with rules and regulations in the YOG and follow the CEO's commands in the WSC. Again, I took a reflexive stance. Aiming to understand the young managers' agency, I turned the question to explore modes and key drivers behind the pressure to conform. Instead of continuing to differentiate between agency and institution, as the originally applied institutional theory suggested, I applied an analytic approach that would allow me to capture the aspiring leaders' reflections on conformity. Following Parent (2015), who suggested analysing inner working conditions through critical management studies, I aimed to identify critical approaches questioning the dominant ideology of leadership. Such critical approaches are based on an assumption of

inappropriateness (Spicer et al., 2009): here, interpreting the event owners as dominant and the aspiring leaders as weaker.

Paradoxically, several examples in the empirical material could not be associated solely with problems regarding leadership. Several positive elements occurred, leading to greater complexity. First, from an external point of view, both events can be considered successful and innovative (and hence new and “youthful”). Second, one of my most important findings was the paradoxical observation that the aspiring leaders liked their jobs, felt proud of being part of a successful event, and expressed no regrets even though they disliked the pressure and the necessity to follow the rules and commands. Third, the interviews with the CEOs provided explanations of demanding circumstances—for example, a lack of resources—that described the conformity pressures as situational aspects. Influence processes were carried out in the context and due to the nature of the sport events, and despite anyone’s experiences and professionalism, unforeseen circumstances, including those stemming from mistakes and wrong decisions, could not be avoided. The restricted agency can be explained by the ultimate compelling goal to stage the event on schedule.

To reveal the multilevel challenges to agency and further explore the aspiring leaders’ perceptions of managerial pressure to conform, I implemented the newly developed approach of functional stupidity (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012b). This enabled me to reveal the multilevel challenges to agency the aspiring leaders faced. Functional stupidity (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012b) facilitated my analysis of the balancing act between agency and structure by illuminating what the aspiring leaders perceived as functional. As presented in Article 3, I identified functionally stupid behaviour among the aspiring leaders and volunteers in both contexts. The functional stupidity framework extended my interpretation repertoire and enabled me to explain the paradox I had observed: the events aimed to create a youthful and innovative image, while members of the event organization (the aspiring leaders and volunteers) perceived discipline (i.e., the contrary) as dominant. Functional stupidity revealed that this observation was, in fact, not a paradox because the employees needed to behave objectively and functionally to achieve the goal of staging the event and creating the desired image, while at the same time being able to reflect on the organization and their own behaviour. Hence, the restricted agency made empirical sense due to the ultimate compelling goal of staging the event on schedule combined with unforeseen circumstances, including mistakes and flawed decisions.

Various demands coming from the top management resulted in aspiring leaders' conformity. In the event context, this works. Young people are expected to adapt. There is an imitation process that leads to conformity (and in these cases, it cannot be called obedience, a term which Paulsen [2017] uses). By analysing the reflections behind conformity, I found three different modes of conformity: straight, reflexive, and cynical. In YOG, aspiring leaders developed straight conformity as obedience, and reflexive conformity (Müller, 2013) as a deliberation to persuade themselves. The aspiring leaders were institutionalized into the IOC's way of thinking. In WSC, the aspiring leaders applied cynical conformity as resistance (in line with Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009) to master the suppression techniques that they perceived.

Conformity can be triggered in different ways; that is, it can be a response to diverse underlying factors or conditions. In my study, I identified two key drivers of conformity: first, the degree of institutionalization; and second, perceptions of uncertainty combined with the wish to deliver a successful event. My analyses further revealed that different modes of conformity were applied depending on the key drivers behind conformity. A strong institutional context was identified as a key driver of conformity in YOG and led to the application of straight and reflexive conformity (Müller, 2013). In WSC, expedience was the main driver, leading to the application of cynical conformity. An institutionalization process took place here. The aspiring leaders had to adapt to the institutional context of the IOC in YOG and to the demands of the top manager in WSC. This eliminated learning and reflection. It is an issue that learning took place in the abuse of other institutions or leaders. Functional stupidity applies that idea.

Article 4 shows how leadership fades as an organizational mode of organizing. This happened on three different levels. Leadership was fading at the top management level, middle management level, and the lowest hierarchal level (volunteers). As previously discussed, the aspiring leaders applied horizontal modes of organizing at their own level (the middle level). The aspiring leaders understood leadership as including agency and perceived themselves as leaders (exercising leadership). However, the organizational mode they applied towards the volunteers was management. The organizational mode applied by the top level towards the aspiring leaders was mainly power. From an organizational perspective, the top management's behaviour was rather smart. The aspiring leaders conformed to the organization and its leader in doing their job, which implies they responded to managerial pressure.

Functional stupidity contributes to an understanding of the relationship between leadership and conformism. In my cases, leadership transformed into conformity, here interpreted as an outcome of functional stupidity. Functional stupidity explains why leadership diminishes. My comparative analyses revealed diverse dominating responses towards conformity, specifically reflexive thinking (YOG) versus cynical action (WSC). Different institutional contexts contribute to different forms of conformity, and functional stupidity explains why this worked in the sport event context. The aspiring leaders tried to understand the core aspects and values of the sport event contexts. They also tried but failed to use their competence from previous events in the new event context. The divergence between preferred and perceived agency resulted in conformity, which cannot be labelled as leadership. The aspiring leaders were promised they could act as leaders, but in fact contributed as managers. From the perspective of the aspiring leaders, this must be interpreted as a kind of loss. The aspiring leaders wanted to have agency, but there was a divergence between what they wanted and what they got. They perceived restricted agency, and this can generate resistance.

One paradox in my findings is that the aspiring leaders perceived considerably less agency than they expected when hired for “youthful” organizational environments. Nevertheless, they were happy and proud to have been part of the events and to have represented the YOG and WSC. The aspiring leaders who grew up in a leader-centric society thought they were exercising leadership, but it seems that perceiving agency was more important to the aspiring leaders than exercising leadership.

Pursuing the idea of educating aspiring leaders in an event context, characterized by far too many goals that the event must live up to, is an impossible undertaking from the beginning and hence, rather represents an example of window dressing. Critical perspectives on leadership contribute to understanding the aspiring leaders’ experience of working at major sporting events. First, there is a conflict between the frameworks and reality. Functional stupidity also contributes to a notion of different power structures. In my cases, a multiple hierarchical level research approach also detected different perceptions between perceived and preferred solutions to problems on different hierarchical levels. My analyses reveal how leadership diminishes as a mode of organizing. Instead of leadership, the aspiring leaders applied management towards volunteers (based on friendship and division of tasks) and horizontal processes among themselves at the same hierarchical level. Critical multiple hierarchical level analysis of leadership, therefore, asks

questions about how much leadership is enacted. I further argue that there may be no need to develop new explicit sport theories to study leaders, as urged by Chalip (2006). Instead, it is more relevant which theories researchers apply and how they use those theories to contribute to a better understanding of phenomena, such as leadership in sport. As this dissertation shows, applying a different theoretical lens—in this case a critical leadership perspective—allows us to understand that aspects other than leadership are important. It thereby shows that researchers should not limit their perspectives to mainstream thoughts and trends, as for example a leadership-centred society. My fourth research question was thereby indirectly connected to the discussion on how leadership could (or should) be studied in sport management.

### **Concerns about leadership research and limitations**

Among the concerns about leadership research in sport management (Ferkins, Skinner, et al., 2018; Welty Peachey et al., 2015), a main critique is that the leadership concept often remains unclear: Managers believe that they practice leadership, and scholars tend to use the term “leadership” inconsistently (Grint, 2010). Leadership is often framed as the solution to all sorts of problems and, in that sense, can be viewed as a maddening concept. Leadership thereby becomes broad and vague. This is even more critical because researchers perceive leadership to be of importance.

When defining leadership, it is important to pay attention to the aspect of inequality, that is, the difference between leaders and followers. Variations occur in the relationship between leaders and followers, but most commonly, the relationship is hierarchal. Furthermore, there is a tendency to denominate all activities a leader is involved in as leadership. However, from a more nuanced perspective, the activities of leaders include management, leadership, and power. In other words, leadership is not a matter of everything or anything. In vertical modes of organizing, management—including scheduling; working with structures, procedures, and control; and performing follow-up—is often dominant. Leadership, however, includes influencing meanings, ideas, understanding, beliefs, identity issues, and emotions; that is, influencing how people see things and define their reality (Alvesson et al., 2017). It is a particular type of relationship involving a specific type of behaviour. Applying a focus on perceived agency (i.e., the aspiring leaders’ sense of having the power to take action) allowed me to reveal the organizational

processes at play and, hence, identify whether aspiring leaders' as well as top management's and volunteers' behaviour could be characterized as leadership, management, or something else.

Scholars have used various metaphors to describe how middle managers talk about themselves as leaders. Expressions such as those referring to the position as a "sandwich between" (Bryman & Lilley, 2009) or an "umbrella carrier" (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020) symbolize how middle managers (such as aspiring leaders) have to protect subordinates from harmful initiatives and the demands of top management. Expressions from aspiring leaders in middle managerial positions in the YOG and WSC confirmed metaphors of "sandwiched between." The different key drivers behind conformity in the two cases can add an explanation to the feeling. In the case of WSC, quotes revealed aspiring leaders acting as "umbrella carriers" to protect subordinates by trying to filter and even block contradictory messages. However, the velocity in sport event contexts implies that the possibilities to act as an "umbrella carrier" are often limited due to time constraints. One simply needs to act and pass the message on to one's subordinates.

The specific position of middle managers in an organization requires that they relate to three groups: they must relate to their superordinate managers, to managers on the same level, and to subordinates or followers. In the case of the sport events included in my study, these were the CEOs, the aspiring leaders at the same level, and the volunteers. These three audiences assess middle managers' enactments, which is problematic because they have diverse and potentially conflicting expectations. A typical challenge for middle managers is the expectation of double loyalty—they should be loyal to their boss and, at the same time, protect those they lead from pressures coming from higher hierarchical levels (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). In the case of WSC, by adopting a cynical mode of conformity, the aspiring leaders felt more loyalty and responsibility towards their peers than towards the event or the CEO.

Furthermore, middle managers have a collegial and a competitive situation vis-à-vis those on the same level. It is collegial because they share the same experiences, and it is competitive because everyone on that level aspires to become the next leader. In addition, the short-term character of middle managers' contracts in sport events creates a relatively complicated dynamic. For an aspiring leader, looking for the next job is a natural necessity, but at the same time, it is unpalatable and therefore must be done in a careful way.

In sum, leadership is difficult to study. A common way to study leadership is through questionnaires applying established measurement scales. However, when studying leadership,

merely talking about leadership is not enough: One must dig deeper and apply a broader perspective to include similar yet distinct concepts within organizational behaviour, such as influencing, controlling, or managing. For example, this includes posing questions such as “Who is important for you at the workplace?” or “Who has an influence on what you are doing?” My dissertation also entailed paying attention to how the CEO and aspiring leaders perceived problems differently and had divergent expectations regarding solutions to problems. It further included understanding the divergence between aspiring leaders’ perceived and preferred agency. Methodologically, field observations of what is happening can provide insights in addition to quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews.

Rich descriptions applying a multiple hierarchical level approach to leadership research are rare. Therefore, I propose that studying the intention, the act (behaviour), the interaction, and the response to or consumption of processes should be combined in leadership research. Leadership is a process, not a static relation. Leadership research should uncover whether the leader or manager actually has made some imprints that changed the follower’s mindset. This can be done through observations followed by interviews. Furthermore, the followers must be included. Another opportunity could be to observe the manager and describe acts of attempts to influence or control subordinates. In addition, one could ask questions such as “How do you see this meeting?” or “What are you trying to accomplish?” and follow the interactions to see what is happening close to them.

As I discovered in my dissertation, the same statement from informants can indicate leadership *or* management *or* power/control. Therefore, the researcher needs to pay attention to how a respondent states things and at the same time stay reflexive of themselves as researcher. In my dissertation, I applied various approaches to determine the organizational mode at play, including applying the definitions of different modes of organizing and paying attention to problems to be solved, which served as additional indicators for the diverse modes of organizing. A multiple hierarchical level research approach helped me to understand divergence and convergence of individuals’ perceptions on different hierarchical levels. It also enabled me to cross-check the statements of individuals on different hierarchical levels. During observations, especially participant observations, I could check statements from interviews and also get a hands-on experience of the problems to be solved and how the problems were solved. Further, I could observe the other managers and volunteers. Is someone raising their voice to make a point? Does the manager look



a bit threatening? Is there an undertone or element of power? Are the others listening? What is their reaction? However, such observations alone would not be sufficient, either, because it can also be fake leadership if subordinates symbolically play that they are following and pretend to have respect, behaviour that lets the leader think that they are exercising leadership when they actually are not. Hence, a follow-up observation of the process is important. Such studies can be facilitated through ethnographic studies or, as in this dissertation, a multiple hierarchical-level data collection method as well as triangulation of data collection methods. My observations were also used as a sounding board to uncover the statements given in and information derived from the interviews. Thus, a multilayer analysis supported with documents and reports provided me with a rich database for comparing statements and perceptions between different hierarchical levels.

## 8. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The aim of this dissertation was to explore how aspiring leaders perceive and enact leadership in different sport event contexts. I pursued this aim by investigating four specific research questions regarding aspiring leaders' enactment of leadership within the highly institutionalized setting of the YOG and the loosely institutionalized setting of the WSC. First, I studied how the institutional context of YOG enabled and constrained aspiring leaders' agency (RQ 1). Second, I investigated how the aspiring leaders coped with uncertainty and solved problems in WSC, contributing to an external impression of a successful event (RQ 2). Third, I examined how the institutional setting influenced the aspiring leaders' conformity processes (RQ 3). Fourth, I studied how and why leadership may fade and be replaced by conformity in the context of sport events (RQ 4).

The aspiring leaders' agency, and hence their leadership enactment, was restricted in both events. Despite a sense of not being assigned the responsibility and influence that they had envisioned, they did not regret participating, instead feeling proud about what they achieved and about contributing to an event that was externally declared a success. Despite differences regarding the institutional setting and organizational values, the common narrative of the aspiring leaders was one of balancing conformity and agency in both sport events. In addition, my results revealed that the aspiring leaders' perceived institutional pressures took different forms in the two empirical contexts. In YOG, it was related to institutional expectations to adapt to norms and regulations (Article 1). The aspiring leaders experienced tensions between the IOC-provided frameworks, their interpretations of institutional elements based on their former event experiences, and their perceptions of themselves, especially regarding their constrained agency (Articles 1, 3, and 4). In WSC, the aspiring leaders' agency was constrained by coercive pressure derived from the CEO (Articles 2, 3, and 4). This was caused by the WSC CEO's authoritarian behaviour focused on entrepreneurship and expediency (Article 3).

My dissertation showed that highly institutionalized settings such as the YOG, but also loosely institutionalized settings such as the WSC, restrict the agency of aspiring leaders' in middle management positions and, consequently, their leadership. Top leaders and external pressure seemed to constrain, control, and discipline agency. Cross-comparative analyses of the cases revealed two main types of conformity responses to these pressures: reflexive and cynical. The

results showed that conformity modes are highly dependent upon the degree of institutionalization of practices, rules, and power structures within an event's organization. Furthermore, pressure towards conformity seems to be a fast-paced process, at least in the context of sport events, because it is developed and sped up by the relatively short time frame of a sport event. The idea of educating young leaders in the WSC and YOG can be critically interpreted as suggesting to the aspiring leaders that they could act as leaders. Because the aspiring leaders perceived their agency as being restricted, it can be argued that leadership in the middle level of a sport event setting was a mission-impossible and flawed idea, especially during the implementation phase of the event. Nevertheless, capturing young people's reflections is important because sport organizations will benefit from reflexive leaders and managers who can contribute to solving current and future challenges faced by (sport event) organizations.

One impetus of this dissertation was to answer calls for broader perspectives on leadership research (Welty Peachey et al., 2015; Yammarino, 2013; Yukl, 2012). The dominant approach is often positivistic, single-level, and gendered, with a heroic leadership-centred focus. I contended that this apparent consensus must be challenged, for example, by research into new contexts with aspiring leaders. I have applied a research approach that studies leadership on multiple hierarchical levels to develop this challenge. Furthermore, I created an interview guide with the aim of studying aspiring leaders' agency within institutional contexts. Because my analyses revealed that the aspiring leaders' agency was restricted, I further implemented two critical leadership perspectives. Modes of organizing were applied as a taxonomy for organizational processes, and functional stupidity was used as a framework for studying their hindsight reflections and understanding the modes of conformity the aspiring leaders applied.

My understanding is that a multiple hierarchical level approach combined with comparable cases provides rich data and generates possibilities for alternative interpretations. A multiple hierarchical level research approach offers an opportunity to cross-check statements in different hierarchical levels and ask questions or use data from observations for justification. Thus, a multiple hierarchical level approach adds to the trustworthiness of the research.

Through combining theories with a critical approach, leadership can be more thoroughly examined. However, studying leadership processes is complex. When examining leadership, one must pay attention to several aspects, such as the convergent or divergent perceptions of leadership by individuals on different hierarchical levels, the problems to be solved through leadership, and the

initiation of actions. Therefore, to provide a sound conceptual basis for research, Alvesson and Blom's (2019) definition of leadership should be complemented with an action-oriented perspective.

In sum, this dissertation makes several contributions. First, my dissertation is the first to examine young aspiring leaders' agency and perceptions of the inner working climate in sport events by applying a multiple hierarchical level research approach. It thereby evaluates organizational processes on the micro level of the social contexts in which leadership and management are enacted and contributes to clarifying what characterizes aspiring leaders (i.e., managers) at sport events. Second, it demonstrates how the institutional context affects aspiring leaders in enacting leadership. Third, it reveals that diverse institutional contexts can lead to similar outcomes regarding the perception and enactment of leadership (here, conformity). It is not the institutional context per se, but institutional pressure created through context (or key drivers), that restrict aspiring leaders' agency—and hence, their perception and enactment of leadership. Fourth, it contributes to the emergent focus on the critical approach to sport management and sport event management by introducing a critical approach to study leadership with a more reflexive account in sport event management research. It thereby demonstrates that relevant theoretical contributions can be made through meaningful adaptation of existing general theories to a specific context. Fifth, by applying a multiple hierarchical level research approach and a theoretical framework that integrates critical leadership perspectives, this dissertation contributes to a better understanding of observable phenomena in the context of sport events, such as fading leadership and quickly changing modes of organizing due to institutional pressure.

From this dissertation, I highlight the following implications for sport management practice. First, leadership is complex, contradictory, iterative, and not the only solution to solve problems. Sport organizations (and young people) need to develop an understanding of the importance of organizational processes other than leadership. Group work and networking are alternative aspects to leadership and are important for aspiring leaders' perceived and performed agency. Second, for aspiring leaders, the institutional setting is crucial. Therefore, sport organizations should develop their institutional environment to facilitate young peoples' development as leaders. Third, involving young people in leadership dynamics needs to be situated in an inner wish and trust in young people's abilities and self-reflective capabilities. Agency is crucial, and senior leaders should acknowledge that younger people need to have agency as

aspiring leaders. There is little point in offering young people leadership positions if top leaders and managers fail to recognize them and provide them with a certain level of agency. Fourth, conformity seems to be a fast-paced process. Hence, the native thoughts from young people entering a new organization must be captured early on, because they can be crucial resources for implementing changes in organizational practices that are attractive to young people.

Like every academic work, this dissertation was subject to various limitations. First, on-site observations during the events as well as at preparation and conclusion meetings could have been extended and been executed in more systematic and focused ways. To do so, observations could have been structured based on the literature on similarities and differences between professionals and volunteers. Second, this dissertation's focus could have been broadened by taking into account perspectives such as identity, risk, impression management, and psychological factors. Third, the number and selection of cases that represent two extreme institutional contexts and one-time events characterized by relatively short organizational life cycles is a main limitation. Fourth, while I briefly investigated the interviewed aspiring leaders' current LinkedIn profiles, this dissertation has primarily been based upon cross-sectional data. However, inspecting the respondents' LinkedIn profiles several years after the events shows that the majority of the aspiring leaders in YOG now either work in organizations or events regulated by or in close cooperation with the IOC. Furthermore, none of the aspiring leaders in WSC have been involved in events organized by the same CEO as in the WSC. These findings point to a need for more longitudinal studies on aspiring leaders' agency and conformity and the impact on their career development. Furthermore, future research should study a broader variety of institutional contexts and their influence on aspiring leaders' agency and conformity. I further recommend that sport management researchers conducting multiple hierarchical level research carefully define leadership or simply consider alternatives to the distinct leadership focus. One suggestion is to implement different modes of organization and investigate which types of practices are dominant (Alvesson & Blom, 2019). Aspiring leaders' perception and enactment of leadership should be studied further in different organizational contexts, especially in established organizations that do not cease to exist after an event takes place.

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## **ARTICLES**





## Article 1

Bodemar, A., & Skille, E. (2016). 'Stuck in structure': How young leaders experienced the institutional frames at the Youth Olympic Games in Innsbruck, 2012. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 51(8), 940-956. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690214563198>

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# 'Stuck in structure': How young leaders experienced the institutional frames at the Youth Olympic Games in Innsbruck, 2012

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore how young leaders within the Innsbruck Youth Olympic Games Organising Committee experienced the degree of freedom within the institutionalized structure of the International Olympic Committee. Employing a theoretical framework of new institutionalism, a qualitative case study including observations and interviews was conducted. The concept of translation provides a framework for analysing institutional change in organizations, where new ideas are combined with existing institutional practices and translated into new practices to varying degrees. The Innsbruck Youth Olympic Games Organising Committee consisted of young people with experiences from the event industry. This resulted in greater pressure to introduce new institutional solutions to the field. Despite being constrained by coercive pressure from the International Olympic Committee, new innovative elements were translated by the young leaders in the Innsbruck Youth Olympic Games Organising Committee into the International Olympic Committee event. However, the innovations were restricted to areas that the International Olympic Committee defined as less important such as sustainability projects as opposed to important areas like marketing.

## Keywords

new institutionalism, qualitative case study, sport events, young leadership, Youth Olympic Games

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## Introduction

Caused by the concerns about the lack of youth attention regarding the Olympic Games, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) introduced the concept of the Youth Olympic Games (YOG)<sup>1</sup> in 2007 (IOC, 2007a). Although, the YOG is justified by the concerns of youth inactivity and increase in obesity, its foundation as expressed by Rogge is to 'adapt to meet the taste of today's young generation' (IOC, 2007a: 2). In order to be an event attractive to young people, the influence made by youth is important in the organization and implementation of the games. The YOG therefore was used as a platform for young leaders to take responsibility in realizing the event. Young leader is defined by age (between 24 and 34) and leadership is operationalized as leaders at the operational level (defined as leaders on middle level and volunteer team leaders). It is stated that the YOG shall not be a mini-format of the Olympic Games (Hanstad et al., 2013; IOC, 2010).

Nevertheless, it is performed with the same structure as the Olympic Games and shares some of the same routines, as for example procedures for application, similar legal sources and contracts (e.g. The Olympic Charter, YOG – Candidature Procedures and Questionnaire, Host City Contract, YOG Event Manual) (IOC, 2007b, 2008, 2011). Working with the IOC requires following the strict rules and structures of the institution itself. It thus raises the question of how young people are able to get themselves into a position where they are able to implement their own ideas. The aim of this paper is to explore to what extent the young leaders in the YOG were able to exercise influence and to what extent they were bound to an institutionalized system such as the IOC structure. In order to shed light on these aspects of young leadership, young leaders' perceived degree of freedom and the possibilities to influence the decision-making of the event are examined.

Based on interviews of young leaders in the Innsbruck Youth Olympic Games Organising Committee (IYOGOC), the young leaders' degrees of influence to change are discussed applying the new-institutional theory focusing upon processes of bricolage and translation (Campbell, 2004) as well as innovation and entrepreneurship (Hardy and Maguire, 2008). This theoretical perspective helps to explain the degree to which new ideas combined with existing institutional practices are translated into new practices. This paper is a contribution to the little-explored field of young leadership. It addresses aspects of young leadership and the organization of a very new concept of event organization which hardly exists in the current literature. Due to the young working force in the YOG 2012, the study provides the opportunity to understand the possibilities and restrictions of how young people take responsibility in a new event.

## Isomorphism and institutional change in the sport literature

Institutional theory is predominant in the social sciences, including sport social science. Within the sport social science literature there are numerous examples of how different versions or directions within institutional theory are applied, in analysing reproduction and resemblance within an institutional field as well as change and pluralization within an institutional field (Fahlen et al., 2008; Leopkey and Parent, 2012; Skille, 2008, 2009,

2010, 2011). For example, the concept of isomorphism was previously applied in studies into national sport policy and local sport clubs (Skille, 2009). However, with very few exceptions (Bodemar and Skille, 2014; Parent et al., 2013), there is hardly any research into sport events utilizing the concept of isomorphism even though it is considered as relevant to the study of all kinds of organization.

By way of example, Parent et al. (2013) used old and new institutional theory combined with stakeholder network theory to explore potential sustainability (survival and success). In the network analysis, the IOC, media and parents of the athletes appeared as central stakeholders. The institutional analyses revealed the IOC as the most institutionalized stakeholder using pressure of coercive, normative and mimetic characters. That means that the IOC is the most influential stakeholder of the IYOGOC (Parent et al., 2013). This finding is used as point of departure for analysing how the young leaders, who are part of the IYOGOC, perceive this influence. As claimed by several authors, there is also a lack of research into sport using concepts of institutional change (Kikulis, 2000; Washington and Patterson, 2011). Again, almost without exception (e.g. Bodemar and Skille, 2014), institutional change has not been employed in the study of sport events.

By combing neo-institutional theory and authentic leadership theory, Bodemar and Skille (2014) examined young people's possibilities to gain leadership skills in the IYOGOC. Due to their experience as young leaders at the YOG 2012, young leaders learned to negotiate with representatives following institutionalized structures and behaviour as well as how to learn from mistakes. Furthermore, by taking responsibility, young leaders used the opportunity to implement their own ideas within the institutionalized system (Bodemar and Skille, 2014).

Here, we extend this point by examining how they perceived their possibilities to exert influence when attempting to implement their ideas. Most of the literature in institutional entrepreneurship has focused on how the individual player is capable of changing the institutional field. This is solved by considerations of power and interest in the analysis of the institutional field (Hardy and Maguire, 2008), although there is disagreement in the literature about the power the individual entrepreneur may have to implement institutional changes. The point is that the perspective can assist in the analysis of young leaders at sporting events because it focuses on the individual's strategic will and capacity to act and change (often referred to as 'agency').

### **Theoretical framework: Neo-institutionalism**

Institutional theory enables us to scrutinize how the organizational setting affects leadership within sporting events because of its focus upon individual's relations with organizations, and organizations' relationship to a larger organizational field (Greenwood, 2008). Neo-institutionalism focuses on how organizations within a field increasingly resemble each other through becoming increasingly similar in their behaviour and structure (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer and Rowan, 1977). In classic neo-institutionalism, external pressure is prioritized at the expense of internal strategies, the result being that legitimacy prevails over efficiency. Although sport activities have different characteristics, organizations are exposed to pressure in the organizational field forcing them to become increasingly similar. DiMaggio and Powell (1991) call such processes

'decoupling', i.e. the organization adapts to the framework and develops visions and guidelines that may not be followed in practice. This can, for example, be expected to occur within the YOG when the IOC reporting guidelines shall be complied with. However these are time-consuming and conflict with other management tasks.

The mechanisms of institutional isomorphism described by DiMaggio and Powell (1991) show how organizational solutions and decision-making processes affect the organizations. In this case, international trends will also affect the local decision-making processes and influence how the event will be transformed. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) identify three mechanisms for institutional isomorphic change: coercive, mimetic and normative. Coercive isomorphism means that the organization is exposed to pressure, persuasion or being affected by the environment in the direction of introducing specific organizational solutions (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). In this case the IOC required the IYOGOC to report according to procedures developed and established by the IOC.

Mimetic processes concern the organization's activities to mimic the environment. This is a strategy chosen to handle uncertainty and ambiguity related to the organization's understanding of its own technologies, goals and environmental aspects (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991). The IOC has long experience in organizing major sporting events. Since this was the first time that the winter YOG was carried out, the IYOGOC was confronted with situations where there were uncertainties associated with the decision-making process. Although the YOG and the Olympic Games are different, the IOC could use arguments based upon their long experience in order to influence the IYOGOC in the desired direction of enforcing mimetic processes. Normative isomorphism is particularly associated with professional norms which are acquired through professional networks (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991). The YOG is a youth event and this is a new setting for the IOC. In the IYOGOC there were highly-educated, relatively young persons with experience, and possibly the power to influence the outcome of the decision-making process.

A major criticism of neo-institutionalism is that it gives priority to reproduction rather than change (Campbell, 2004). Within the sport social science literature there are several examples of a new approach to neo-institutionalism focusing more on change (Fahlen et al., 2008; Leopkey and Parent, 2012; Skille, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011). Innovations within institutional theory are considered to be possible fruitful methods applicable in the analysis of young leadership at major sporting events (Bodemar and Skille, 2014).

Translation is a new neo-institutionalism approach which focuses upon institutional change in organizations (Campbell, 2004). Campbell defines translation as the process of combining new ideas with existing institutional practices, and refers to how these new ideas are imported and implemented in the local agency. The point of using translation is that the IOC policy is dealt with by the IYOGOC before any outcome or impact of the policy is observable. Campbell (2004) identifies two such mechanisms: either to combine existing institutional practices in new ways in varying degrees (bricolage), or to combine external elements which existed previously (translation). It is assumed that young leadership at sports events depends on the central sport policy (e.g. the IOC policy). For example, the YOG had to follow the rules of logo profiling (Rule 50), and to enforce this on managers and a younger target group who did not have experience with

such rules. Thus it could be questioned how young leaders solve different tasks in order to comply with the IOC requirements, and how new proposals from young leaders were received by the IOC.

Entrepreneurship is another example of development within neo-institutional theory; it deals with how individual actors are able to change the institutional field through innovation of new-institutional elements (Hardy and Maguire, 2008). Much of the literature on institutional entrepreneurship has focused on how the individual player is capable of changing the institutional field and how this is solved by considerations of power. However, there are disagreements in the literature about how much power the individual entrepreneur actually has to possess in order to implement institutional change (Hardy and Maguire, 2008).

Adding the classic reproductive and resemblance perspective to the new change-oriented perspective of institutional theory, we end up in a situation of institutional contradictions (Washington and Ventresca, 2008). These contradictions are results from the meeting of actors stemming from different belief systems or cultures. For example, it could be hypothesized that young leaders with experience from other backgrounds than the IOC may 'represent coherent alternatives to both the dominant status ordering and the current legitimate activity in the field' (Washington and Ventresca, 2008: 33).

The result of the above processes, irrespective of whether this is translation or entrepreneurship, is the pluralization of the institutional field (Kraatz and Block, 2008). Pluralization refers to how new-institutional elements are distributed (after new elements are created). If many people are supporters of new approaches or viewpoints, this will have a different impact or focus opposed to the situation where there was no majority for new solutions. A decoupling will occur which in turn creates new institutions (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). In the YOG 2012, many of the young leaders were recruited from the event industry and had different backgrounds to those of the managers at other events organized by the IOC. All in all, neo-institutionalism is considered as an appropriate framework for studying sports organizations and sports events because it involves the study of how the leader influences her/his surroundings, and is influenced by the organization and its environment.

## **Methodology, research design and data analysis**

In order to gain insight into a topic that has been little explored, an explanatory case study was chosen as the design (Yin, 2009). Since the aim was to study young leaders, in-depth interviews with young leaders were chosen as the main method for data collection. In addition, observation at the YOG 2012 and document analysis were used for complementary data collection. The rationale behind the choice to operationalize leaders as managers at the operational level was to increase the probability of finding young people in leadership positions. The interviewee sample was made primarily on the basis of age, but there were also other inclusion criteria. The sampling criteria were age, experience in responsibility for sport competitions, working with side events (i.e. non-sport activities for athletes or audience), and having responsibility for volunteers. The rationale behind the criteria was twofold: in sports and side events we expected to find tasks



**Table 1.** Overview of interviewees.

| Nr               | Level        | Position               | Staff/intern | Sex    | Age |
|------------------|--------------|------------------------|--------------|--------|-----|
|                  | Top level    | CEO                    | Staff        | Male   | 42  |
| 1                | Middle level | Head of department     | Staff        | Female | <30 |
| 2                | Middle level | Head of department     | Staff        | Male   | >30 |
| 3 <sup>a,b</sup> | Middle level | Head of department     | Staff        | Male   | <30 |
| 4                | Middle level | Leader functional area | Staff        | Female | <30 |
| 5                | Middle level | Leader functional area | Staff        | Female | <30 |
| 6                | Middle level | Leader functional area | Staff        | Female | <30 |
| 7                | Middle level | Leader functional area | Staff        | Female | >30 |
| 8                | Lower level  | Volunteer leader       | Intern       | Female | <30 |
| 9 <sup>a</sup>   | Lower level  | Volunteer leader       | Intern       | Female | <30 |

<sup>a</sup>Interviewed post-games.

<sup>b</sup>Interviewed by Skype.

and activities for which the assumed boundary conditions had been modified; and/or innovations which had already been implemented.

In the end, nine leaders between the ages of 24 and 34 (mean 29) were interviewed. In addition, the CEO of the IYOGOC was interviewed about experiences of his own leadership as well as reflections about the leadership of the young leaders who were our target group. In Table 1, 'Middle level' is defined as either department leader or leader of functional areas.

### *Data collection and interviews*

At the first Winter YOG in Innsbruck, Austria, 13–22 January 2012, a 10-day field study was conducted. Field notes were also taken at the IOC city-to-city meeting in Lillehammer on 20 June 2012. The primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews using an interview guide covering themes based on the research questions and the theoretical framework. Questions at the organizational level were formulated based on neo-institutionalism (translation, entrepreneurship and pluralization): (e.g. 'Can you tell me about the cooperation between IYOGOC and IOC? What kinds of conditions were given by the IOC to the YOG? Can you provide examples of new ideas that have been created in the YOG but never previously implemented in the Olympic Games? How have these new ideas been received by the IOC? Do you think that the YOG will influence the Olympic Games? If "yes", how and in which way?'). In addition, questions were asked about the interviewee's general background, leadership motivation, support of young leaders, subjective perception of young leaders' impact, and relationship to volunteers (e.g. 'Tell me about when you started to work in the IYOGOC. What motivated you to be a part of the YOG? How will you describe the relationship between yourself and the volunteers?'). The interviews were conducted during the event and lasted between 40 and 110 minutes. The study was approved by Norwegian social science data services and the Youth Olympic Games Laboratory for Youth & Innovation. Written consent was given by all interviewees.

### **Data analysis**

The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and resulted in 200 pages (one-and-a-half line-spacing) of raw text. MaxQda (version 10) was used for the data analysis. Protocols about how the data has been systematized have been created. To obtain a general overview of the collected data, all transcripts of interviews and field notes were read several times and by both authors. The text was coded and examined to discover patterns. The interviews were thematically broadly coded into three topics: leader's general background, experiences with the leadership, and institutional frame. The coding was conducted in two major stages following Kvale and Brinkmann's (2010) guidelines.

The first step included open coding looking into the major topics that can be read out of the data themselves. This step is described as inductive coding (Charmaz, 2006). The major topics within the data in this first cycle coding were: personal experience as leader, the young leaders' relationship to volunteers, perception of and cooperation with the IOC, and leadership development. The second step of the coding procedure was based on theoretical analysis. The so-called deductive coding (Charmaz, 2006) was undertaken by grouping the first cycle codes based on the theoretical framework. Hence, the interviews were analysed by looking for the new-institutional hints such as pressure from the leadership and the IOC (coercive isomorphism), perception of uncertainties (mimetic isomorphism), experience of norms and structures (normative isomorphism) and the possibility of implementing new ideas (translation) as well as inventing ideas (entrepreneurship).

The authors conducted the analysis first separately and then together in order to enhance credibility and synergy. One validating procedure undertaken was member-checking (Seale, 1999), i.e. sending a draft paper to the interviewees for feedback. While most interviews were conducted in a hectic and intensive environment during the games, it was regarded as important to provide the interviewees with the possibility of reading the draft and to comment on their quotations. In general, young leaders could recognize themselves in the analysis; only some minor changes (e.g. replacing 'old men' with 'senior managers') were made, and some supplementary information added.

### **Results and discussion**

The leaders in the IYOGOC were young and apparently resourceful and talented people. All the interviewees had higher education. Six of the nine leaders had a master's degree. Moreover, the average age of the 109 full-time staff during games period was 31 years, and included 11 nationalities (IYOGOC, 2012). The workforce could be described as young, well-educated and international. Despite the young age, all the interviewees could refer to long merit lists with different degrees of events experience, which made them eligible for bigger challenges. All of the interviewees had previous experience with leadership from events whereof most had experience from the commercial event industry. However, experience with multi-sport events was limited. One person reported multi-events leadership experience but not at the same level as the YOG. The lack of experience with multi-sport events resulted in unplanned, ad hoc tasks. This was coped with by being flexible and solution-oriented. Openness, kindness and honesty were characteristics that the interviewed young leaders valued and sought in their interactions with volunteers. 'Be open, be friendly, talk with everybody' (Male >30).

Some leaders had gained event experience by participating in trainee programmes or internships. 'Having always worked, even during my high school studies, was advantageous because I was not only studying but also gaining valuable work experience concurrently' (Female <30). Others had gained experience early with sporting events through their family, by helping a sport-dedicated father (Female <30 and Male <30). The interviewees from Innsbruck had all been involved in different levels of major events hosted in Innsbruck e.g. the Winter Universiade Innsbruck, 2005, and the UEFA European Football Championship, 2008. Three of the nine leaders had experience with the Olympic Games through observation programmes or other IOC related activities.

Although the interviewees perceived themselves as capable leaders, the present position at the YOG was a major challenge. Challenges that were mentioned were closely related to limited financial and work resources. The high responsibility was mentioned as burdensome. Hence, their positions at the YOG were a new challenge which created tensions between normative and coercive isomorphic potential. In a preliminary analysis, referring to the new institutionalism, the interviewees' experience and education provided some normative expectations (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). We elaborate by first presenting data showing how leaders in IYOGOC felt regulated by the institutional environment made by the IOC, then by giving examples of how IYOGOC actually made some changes before ending this section with a discussion about the tensions between institutional regulation and possibilities for change.

### *Regulation and conservation*

For all the young leaders, direct cooperation with the IOC was a new experience. One leader gave the following description of the first meeting with the IOC: 'I was participating at a major IOC conference in Lausanne and was definitely impressed for two weeks. It was kind of a big meeting with lots of IOC senior managers and members and somewhere in between *me*' (Female <30). In other words, the young leader's culture was perceived as being different to the culture of the IOC, literally represented only by senior managers and members. Moreover, culture and structure are dimensions that are difficult to distinguish between in an institutional analysis (Meyer and Rowan, 1977).

The work in the IYOGOC started with the IOC framework of the events manual. This was the starting point for the adaptation needed in Innsbruck. As explained by a young male leader:

When you are organizing the YOG, the IOC will provide you with an events manual. And this is the bible where everything is written down what you have to organize. But in between, you have to read between the lines, there is a little bit of flexibility. And the IOC are very flexible in understanding what you can do and what is the thinking of Innsbruck (Male >30).

The events manual regulates the work and constitutes coercive pressure (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) regarding how the event should be organized. As the quotation indicates, the young leaders tried to read between the lines and looked for gaps in the document to make interpretations of the manual in order to increase the possibility of flexibility.

The IYOGOC was divided into 39 different functional areas (e.g. culture and education, food and beverage, accreditation, etc.). Each functional area had its counterpart in the IOC. Regular conference calls were conducted with elements of both control and cooperation. This was a totally new way of organizing the work for most of the young leaders who were interviewed, as expressed by one interviewee:

The IOC works so differently compared to other events organizers because they have more rules, and sometimes different rules. They have a certain protocol and for someone who has never been in contact with that, it's difficult to understand why they demand the things they do (Female >30).

Another interviewee experienced the regulations stating: 'If there aren't any rules for it, so you can do it. Is there a rule, then it should be done in that way: "Bang, bang, bang!"' (Female <30).

The above is an example of how the IOC regulates the work of the IYOGOC through rules and procedures: in other words, by use of coercive pressure. The structure of the IOC was something new and reported as being difficult to understand. Also the structure within the IYOGOC became complex due to the many different functional areas. Although all the leaders had previous experience with organizing events, they had to learn how to work in the new-institutional environment, and they perceived it as difficult to implement changes. One interviewee commented:

From where I came from before starting at YOG, we had a quite small organization. When we wanted to change something, we could just do it. We didn't have to ask 100 different parties. I started here and I thought it's the same. Then I learned it's not. We cannot just decide something, and just do it like that. First we have to discuss it with the International Federations, with the IOC, with everybody. We just try to accept that and live with that (Female <30).

In some functional areas the leaders faced even more challenges with restrictions from other Olympic Movement stakeholders such as the International Federation and Olympic Broadcasting Services (field-of-play, mascot ceremony, etc.), 'that had to agree on operational aspects and decisions' (Male <30). In total it was time-consuming due to the many organizations and people who needed to give their approval. The result was that sometimes, when they finally received feedback from the IOC, it was too late. According to new-institutionalism, we can predict that it will be this way (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer and Rowan, 1977). This young leader (Male <30) has experience and education that could lead to normative impacts, and if many of the young leaders have the same experience it could lead to tension between the IOC and IYOGOC.

It was not only the cumbersome system that the young leaders perceived as difficult; they also referred to examples where ideas went 'in a totally different direction from the IOC rules' (Female <30). However, the respondents also described cooperation with the IOC as good. The leaders felt that the IOC appreciated what they had done within 'a small Organising Committee' (Female <30). In the middle of the games, one interviewee described how the relationship with the IOC had developed:

So we had a lot of sessions consulting each other and working together. Well, I really like the close work with IOC, too. It is something you usually don't do. [...] and it's not the 'all mighty' IOC anymore (Female >30).

The above statement is not representative for the other interviewees, and appeared as the most IOC friendly. This person had previously worked in an organization with a similar protocol to the IOC and desired a future post in the IOC. She had been exposed to the entire institutional isomorphic mechanisms (coercive, mimetic and normative; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). This interviewee stands out from the others since there is less tension between the IOC coerciveness and normative experience.

All in all, the above statements show a general perception among the young leaders interviewed that there are strong coercive forces in an institutional environment first and foremost regulated by the IOC. Despite this impression, there are – as will be seen in the following – a number of examples of situations where the IYOGOC actually challenged or contradicted (Washington and Ventresca, 2008) the IOC and was able to induce change.

### *Innovation and change*

According to the young leaders, there was a general atmosphere of coercive and mimetic expectations (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) from the IOC to adopt the IOC systems in specific areas. Simultaneously, there was a common understanding between the IYOGOC and the IOC that there was also a need to adapt new elements into the YOG, and even inventions of completely new elements: in other words, translation (Campbell, 2004) and/or entrepreneurship (Hardy and Maguire, 2008). The CEO gave the following explanation:

So within the framework, I think what we did was that we really injected a lot youthful dynamism into the whole movement. We kind of new reunited many of the traditional approaches. You know that goes from graphics design to how we did our mascot.

The IYOGOC was challenged to suggest solutions to problems that could not be solved by using ideas or systems from the Olympic Games. For example, since the YOG is a much smaller event than the Olympic Games, the ordinary IOC-owned systems for hotel booking and databases for handling volunteers were not considered to be appropriate. Thus, the organizing staff had to find new solutions and ended up by cooperating with the local tourist office regarding hotel bookings and changes (IYOGOC, 2012).

Due to limited resources, the IYOGOC had to adapt requirements to fit the budget and the city regulations. The limited budget also triggered the creative process, encouraged by the CEO: 'If you have a restricted budget, as I said before, you have to be creative. You find new solutions' (CEO). Moreover, the IYOGOC had to do similar things to what had been done in the former YOG (in Singapore, 2010) but at a quarter of the price. 'If you look at Singapore YOG they had the same budget for the opening ceremony that we had for the entire Games' (CEO). All in all, the CEO conceived it as 'a positive challenge to try to stay within the budget'. For example a car pool was required. At the Olympic

Games, the IOC members could just call the car pool service and request a car to drive them wherever they wanted. Due to the challenge of finding a car sponsor within the timeframe requested, they had to find another solution. The CEO explained how they came up with a solution that satisfied the IOC while simultaneously conforming with the environmentally friendly idea of YOG Innsbruck:

They (the IOC) have an idea. They have an event manual. To give you an example from the event manual, we have to take care of the transport from morning until evening, to the sport venues and so on and so forth. But in between that framework, you do have flexibility and we came up with this shuttle service which is regularly running. With a certain hubs where you could switch and change and had this little amount of cars to really cover emergencies. If you compare. Anyhow, you cannot compare the operation, but it is an interesting comparison of figures. London I think has 5000 BMWs. We had 129. So yes, you cannot compare, but it shows you that there is flexibility.

Hence, they created a common shuttle service system with environmentally-friendly buses, 'taking athletes, trainers, volunteers and IOC members, all together, to the venues' (Male >30, Interview with the CEO, field notes 14 January 2012). Then they just had a very small car pool service. This has never been done before and matches the idea of the YOG having a lower service level.

Discussing the lower service level, one of the interviewees provided an example of the difference between the Olympic Games and the YOG as follows:

This is totally different from Singapore and from other Olympic Games. And the IOC likes the idea. And also what we provided for the food and beverage. There's not a range of food as there normally is at the Olympic Games. Everybody is treated equally. So when we have the snacks and refreshment it's the same what you can see here at our work force area and in the guest area. There's no difference. Everybody is treated the same. Also the IOC is treated the same. They have 25 cars for operational needs, but they have no car pool services. The guests cannot call and say 'I need a car I have to go there and there' (Male >30).

These examples resulted in large savings. One of the respondents thought that the cost savings made by Innsbruck would affect the Olympic Games: 'Instead of using millions of euros on a Games management system, you can get a YOG one for thousands' (Male >30).

Two other examples of change – or rather, local adaptations to global problems/phenomena – are related to sustainability. First, the IYOGOC received ideas from a vocational school regarding what to do with the 13,000 m<sup>2</sup> of fleece material and 6500 m<sup>2</sup> of PVC banners. This resulted in three non-profit organizations for long-term unemployed persons producing bags, mobile-phone cases, pencil cases and other YOG souvenirs out of fleece and banners (IYOGOC, 2012). Another sustainability project was the furniture used in the Youth Olympic village. All furniture was made by a local furniture-maker, which focused on helping the long-term unemployed back into the job market. After the games most of the furniture was given to a local charity (IYOGOC, 2012). All these examples can be considered as innovative (Hardy and Maguire, 2008) or at least as efforts to create new solutions through re-combinations and import of solutions based on

the experience of previous projects (see Campbell, 2004). In any respect, the IOC aims at transferring the knowledge developed in Innsbruck to later use.

During the city-to-city meeting in Lillehammer involving the IYOGOC and the next organizer of the Lillehammer Winter Games 2016 (Lillehammer Youth Olympic Games Organising Committee (LYOGOC)), Gilbert Felli, the IOC Olympic Games Executive Director, gave advice to Lillehammer. Felli encouraged the next organizer to continue in the footsteps of Innsbruck, i.e. with cost-effective creative solutions which have previously not been conducted within the IOC. Furthermore, he encouraged the next organizing committee to be creative and to contribute new ideas regarding legacy and sustainability, and at the same time to save money. He claimed that the main reason why Innsbruck managed to come up with so many new ideas was that they were good at listening to people (field notes, 20 June 2012). In this subsection we have presented several examples of change which seemed to have been successful. That is not, however, to say they were conducted without disagreement. All the implemented new concepts had to go through the formal approval process in the IOC. At the same time this form of collaboration and monitoring seems new to the IOC. After the event one of the interviewees gave the following comments about this:

Although being restricted by IOC policies and procedures I knew that the close collaboration we experienced was kind of unique and not common compared to the Olympic Games. This is something – if you ask me – the IOC should keep alive when working with YOG OCs, because it'll help to grow closer, to establish an understanding and it shows respect towards the Young Leaders, if they're included in the working progress, which might also lead to creating/discover[ing] more 'holes' or ways to work around strict policies and procedures (Female >30).

The strict policies and procedures can be interpreted by the IYOGOC leaders, since the IOC's internal strategies strive for legitimacy ahead of effectiveness and because the institutional framework of the IOC is not adapted to this kind of event.

### *Institutional contradictions*

The above discussion illustrates that first of all the YOG is an arena for the regulation of institutional rules, leading to preservation of the dominant order in the field. The IOC largely influences the governance of the YOG, and as such protects and sustains the YOG as an Olympic entity. Secondly, the YOG is an arena for innovation and adaptation leading to change in the institutional field. Although the IOC provides an institutional environment which includes coercive pressure on the young leaders of the YOG, there are also examples in the data which imply that the young leaders challenged the institutional framework of the IOC. As previously mentioned, there were occasions when the IOC and the members of the IYOGOC had different opinions.

Let us give some examples. First, the IYOGOC wanted to invite the local youth to the Culture and Education Program (CEP). The IOC, however, wanted the CEP to be something exclusively for the athletes. This was something that the IOC at first did not agree with, but which it accepted following discussion. Referring to this episode as an institutional contradiction makes sense, as institutional contradictions are based on conflicts

between actors stemming from different belief systems or cultures, who meet in a (new in this case: YOG) institutional field (Washington and Ventresca, 2008). The representatives of the IYOGOC were young and felt they represented youth more generally, including the local youth of Innsbruck, while the IOC was mainly concerned about its own athletes. The other example of different opinions between the IYOGOC and the IOC was related to rules for smoking. The IYOGOC demanded that a smoking area should not be constructed in the Youth Olympic village. This discussion was a comprehensible requirement from the IYOGOC, but the discussion between the IOC and the IYOGOC about this issue lasted for three months. In any case, it seems as if the parties represented conflicting belief systems, one based on ideas of youth needs and one based on IOC customs.

The already-exemplified contradiction between the IYOGOC and the IOC can be elaborated by turning to the translation perspective on how to put institutional entities from external contexts into new contexts and to make them fit with old institutional elements in that receiving context (Campbell, 2004). Despite some variations, most data point in the direction of a perception of an institutional coercive environment (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) in which the IOC is used to having a monopolistic position in relation to Olympic events. Nevertheless, this study shows that there was an institutional contradiction between the IOC and the young leaders' ways with regard to solving tasks in the IOC given framework. There were examples of when cooperation became intractable and the young leaders experienced difficulties in arguing for and implementing new solutions the way they wanted. Nevertheless, some ideas were translated and interpreted within the YOG resulting in a new practice that had not been intended and implemented in an IOC event previously. At the same time the young leaders reported that structure in the IOC limited the possibilities. One interviewee gave the following explanation:

On the one hand, the IOC organizes Youth Olympic Games and encourages young participants (athletes, local youth, etc.) to use new media tools. On the other hand, the young participants are not allowed to post their videos and contents because of the Olympic Broadcasting rights. The IOC wants to make the Youth Games [a success], but with some topics they are 'stuck' in their strict regulations and structures. I think they have to rethink their strategies (Female <30).

The use of modern media technology and knowledge is an example of how relatively young, yet educated, people in leader or managerial positions in the IYOGOC bring into the new YOG context, elements from their former experiences and everyday lives. When new elements are brought in, they have to be adapted to the new use. Thus we talk about translation as defined by Campbell (2004).

Since the YOG and the Olympic Games have similar legal sources and contracts this is not unexpected. As described by the CEO: 'There were a lot of constraints and rules and regulations ... [but] I think the IOC has been as flexible in Innsbruck as no one could even imagine before' (CEO). The CEO sees both sides: regulations to preserve on the one hand, and flexibility or space for change on the other. According to the CEO the young leaders have experienced the system as cumbersome and at the same time the IOC has been relatively flexible. No other interviewee appeared to disagree with this point.



While this study indicates that the institutional boundary conditions limit the capabilities for young leaders to implement a youth event within the current IOC structure, it also indicates that change can occur. The power structure designates the IOC as the heaviest ruler, but the young leaders have made a difference because they know the youth culture and the city better. Hence, the IOC executes cohesive isomorphic pressure upon young leaders (see DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) as the leadership conducted is constrained by the IOC framework. However, despite the coercive limitations given by the IOC, the IYOGOC was built up by individuals with experience and knowledge. In that respect, the IYOGOC represents another normative power source as they have been trained outside the IOC system and have experience from other events from which they can copy ideas which are then brought into the YOG. In sum, the three isomorphic elements sketched by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) can work for both conservation and change. And they are all at play to various degrees at the same time.

As a final note on the point of institutional contradiction, it should be mentioned how Gilbert Felli of the IOC encouraged close interaction between the organizing committee and the IOC, substantiated by the competences and experience within the IOC. This took place at the city-to-city meeting in Lillehammer where representatives of the IYOGOC transferred experience and knowledge to the organizing committee for YOG, 2016. Felli stated that the IOC was willing to discuss new ideas, with the exception of marketing issues (field notes, 20 June 2012). Drawing on Campbell (2004), who distinguishes between substantive and symbolic change, one could suspect that the IOC allowed the YOG leaders to make changes that appeared to be of good rhetoric, while substantive changes that really challenged the YOG and hence the IOC, could not occur. Nevertheless, the IOC could be applauded for opening up to new ideas (that in consequence could lead to criticism of itself). This situation can be conceived as an institutional contradiction on two levels: first, on an empirical organizational level between the IOC and the future YOGOCs, and secondly on a theoretical level as a conflict between classic neo-institutionalism and newer trends in neo-institutionalism.

## Conclusion

When the young leaders of the IYOGOC came up with new – or more frequently imported from other contexts – ideas to improve the youthful concept of the YOG, they felt partly limited in their expressions by the institutional framework of the IOC. At the same time as they stated that they worked well together with the IOC, they experienced this as a time-consuming and complicated collaboration. This resulted in desired changes failing to be implemented, and the young leaders' influence was limited by the external pressure and decoupling (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer and Rowan, 1977). However, at the same our findings indicate that the young leaders were able to translate some elements into the IOC in areas that were not related to marketing issues. Through the development of new cost-effective concepts, the event affected certain people within the IOC. However, whether this results in a pluralization is too early to say. The following statement by Rogge, concerning the introduction of the CEP concept in the YOG, can be considered as an appraisal thereof: 'This is what I want to introduce progressively [at the traditional Games]. For London 2012, it was too late,

but I'd love to see a Culture and Education Programme in Rio 2016' (Youth Olympic Games Innsbruck 2012, 2012).

In research terms, this study has contributed to the relatively small stock of literature into young leadership in sport. In that respect, it adds to a much broader field of sport sociological research into youth sport more generally, and youth co-determination or youth governance more specifically. Moreover, and closely related to the research point, the findings in this study can draw some practical implications. Considering the statement by the IOC that the YOG should be a 'laboratory', there is the potential to implement new elements and create entrepreneurship within the Olympic Movement. However, to utilize the potential of young leadership and reduce the isomorphic forces, it may be necessary for the IOC to disassociate itself from some of the institutional elements that have their origin in the Olympic Games. More particularly, the IOC needs to adapt the legal sources and downscale and reduce bureaucratic demands on young people who have grown up in a commercial and digital world. Since rule changes take time, this should be a priority for the IOC – if change is wanted – and for future organizers of the YOG. Future research is needed to follow the development of the YOG and the YOG's impact on the next generation of sport leaders.

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### Note

1. The YOG is a sporting event for young people aged 15–18 years (except in the bobsleigh, where the age limit is 18–19) (IOC, 2012). The YOG was formally introduced by IOC President Jacques Rogge during the 119th IOC session in Guatemala City in 2007 (IOC, 2007a). The first YOG was held in Singapore 2010. The first Winter YOG was held in Innsbruck in January 2012. The YOG vision is to inspire young people around the world to participate in sport, and to adopt and live by the Olympic values (IOC, 2012).

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## Article 2

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## **Doomed to fail? A study of how junior managers at a major sport event cope with leadership issues**

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**Abstract:** The organising committee at the 2012 World Snowboarding Championships in Oslo experienced major problems such as uncertainty among the junior managers and general chaos. Despite this, in external communications, the event was declared to be a success. This article draws on the works of Parent and Seguin (2007) and Parent et al. (2009) to examine the key leadership and organisational factors that contributed to these problems. The purpose of this study is to investigate how the junior managers coped with uncertainty and solved problems. This study is based on semi-structured interviews, documents, and participant observations. The findings show that a variety of mechanisms caused uncertainty, including some factors that predicted the event's failure. Although the existing literature is focused on explaining events' success or lack thereof via leadership, this case provides an opportunity to understand how an event can succeed despite the presence of factors that typically lead to failure.

**Keywords:** event management; networking; group work; autonomy; loyalty; sport management; junior managers.

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Josef Fahlén is an Associate Professor at the Department of Education, Umeå University, Sweden and a Visiting Professor at the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences in Oslo. He focuses on the intersection between sport policy and sport organisations, asking questions related to, on the one hand, how policies for sport-related activities are formed, implemented, and evaluated, and on the other hand, how such processes and other societal influences affect the organisation of sport activities in club-, association-, and self-organised forms.

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## 1 Introduction

Even though event-management practices have become more professional, some sport events still fail (Emery, 2010). Some of the issues that cause event failure can be labelled complex, or, as designated here, 'wicked' problems (Grint, 2005). According to Grint (2005), solving wicked problems requires leadership. Parent et al. (2009, p.369) ascertained that "no academic studies which explicitly examined leadership in major sport events" existed at that time. In the years since that study, however, the literature on major sport events has rapidly expanded (e.g., Dickson et al., 2017; Golubchikov, 2017; Hayday et al., 2017; Lesjø et al., 2017; Parent et al., 2017a; Prüschenk and Kurscheidt, 2017; Sand et al., 2017; Taks et al., 2018), and leaders of sport events have attracted much attention in such research. Leaders' capacity for exercising leadership is an important factor in the delivery of successful events. This feature is particularly prominent in the project-management literature, as researchers in that area consider leadership to be an important factor in efficient project implementation (e.g., Aga et al., 2016; Cserhati and Szabo, 2014; Getz and Page, 2016; Keegan and Den Hartog, 2004; Müller et al., 2018). Likewise, researchers on sport events claim that leadership aspects are key for a range of management processes. This includes recruiting, engaging, and retaining personnel (Hanlon and Cuskelly, 2002; Hanlon and Jago, 2004; Hanlon and Stewart, 2006; Sand et al., 2017) – including volunteers (Rogalsky et al., 2016; Sheptak and Menaker, 2016) – as well as creating brands (Parent and Seguin, 2008; Parent et al., 2012), ensuring sustainability (Pernecky, 2015), transferring knowledge (Parent et al., 2017a), and managing risk (Andersen et al., 2015; Hanstad, 2012a). These contributions

have furthered the understanding of not only sport-event management but also leadership processes more broadly. However, as argued below, a one-sided focus on leaders and leadership has hampered the pursuit of alternative explanations.

This research is based on a case study of the 2012 World Snowboarding Championships (WSC) in Oslo, which the media declared successful and which external stakeholders praised (Method Magazine, 2012; Promax, 2013; WSC, 2012). However, this study's results indicate that the event was characterised by a lack of leadership and by occasional haphazardness from top management. The interviewed managers were between 24 and 29 years old and were designated as junior managers due to their young age. The research examines how the event's junior managers dealt with the wicked problems (Grint, 2005) that led to uncertainty and chaos within the organising committee (OC). Parent and Seguin (2007) and Parent et al. (2009) studied the organisational and stakeholder-related factors that led to the cancellation of the 2005 Aquatics Worlds Championships in Montreal; they identified the organisational shortcomings that resulted in this failure. This article's results show how similar organisational shortcomings can nonetheless produce an external impression of a successful event. This study's structure is loosely built on the model presented by Parent and Seguin (2007, p.204), and its purpose is to examine how junior managers cope with uncertainty and solve problems, thus possibly contributing to an external impression of a successful event. In doing so, this article is meant to contribute to an understanding of the factors that lead to the success or failure of sport events. Moreover, this study's results broadly indicate a need to discuss the outcomes that constitute success.

The article is structured as follows. First, the literature on the factors that predict failure and success in sport events is presented, followed by a description of the model that guided the analysis, which is based on the "factors leading to an organizing committee's failure" [Parent and Seguin, (2007), p.204]. Then, the case of the WSC is outlined, followed by a description of the methods that were employed in the inquiry. The final sections comprise a discussion of the results and a presentation of the conclusions.

## **2 Factors that predict failure and success in sport events**

The factors that contribute to the failure or success of large-scale sport events should interest both event organisers and various other stakeholders, yet surprisingly few studies have been conducted on the subject. Two prominent exceptions are the studies of Parent and Seguin (2007) and Parent et al. (2009), each of which is a study of a large-scale sport event's OC: the former for an event that failed and the latter for an event that was defined as successful. Parent and Seguin (2007) also analysed critical issues from both the OC's and the other stakeholders' perspectives and suggested six factors that led to the downfall of the target event. The first four factors relate to problems in strategic planning, which is important in the bidding phase:

- 1 vision, mission and goals
- 2 due diligence procedures
- 3 financial commitments
- 4 human resource management (HRM).

The last two factors had an impact throughout the event cycle:

- 5 power and politics
- 6 communication.

The lack of any of these identified factors, or other problems with them, can lead to uncertainty and even the cancellation of an event (Parent and Seguin, 2007).

The first factor (vision, mission, and goals) refers to outputs that are typically included in a business plan. Parent and Seguin (2007) identified a need for formal commitments such as signed contracts in financial management.

The second factor (due diligence procedures) refers to the organisation's needs to understand who it is partnering with and to perform an examination of its goal congruence with those partners. Parent and Seguin (2007) found that conflicting interests or a lack of such congruence was harmful and argued that the motives of all involved should be complementary and should be agreed upon during strategic planning.

The third factor (financial commitments) refers to sponsorship revenues, formal financial guarantees, budgetary appropriateness, and rights' fees. For example, most major sport events require formal financial guarantees to ensure that the event will still occur, even if the sponsorship program fails.

The fourth factor (HRM) refers to personnel changes within the OC and formalised human resource procedures. Parent and Seguin (2007) emphasised that it is important to provide formal job descriptions and to include formalised HRM procedures (e.g., contracting people with the required knowledge and experience) early in the bidding stage.

The fifth factor (power and politics) refers to political connections, decision-making power, and the involvement of the sport community.

The sixth factor (communication) refers to transparency in OC operations, as well as to proper communication and information exchange more broadly. Parent and Seguin (2007) highlighted how a consistent communication flow between all partners is vital and noted that a lack of communication or transparency increases mistrust and uncertainty, which can give rise to conflicts.

Turning the focus towards success criteria, Parent et al. (2009, p.384) found that the "proper presence and use of networks was a deciding factor for successful leadership." Parent et al. also found networking to be the most significant leadership quality; the other identified leadership qualities are either antecedents or consequences of networking. Networking has also been shown to be important when decision-making processes change during the life cycle of a major sport event (Parent, 2010). Decisions are more frequently based on information in the planning mode than in the implementation phase, where time pressure means that decisions must be made with only readily available information. Parent (2010, p.302) found that, due to an event's increased velocity, "decision making was pushed down the hierarchy." These results imply that the middle and lower managerial levels become more autonomous and take more responsibility for the decision-making processes during implementation. Consequently, managers' individual skills, experiences, and networks are important factors in efficient decision-making, especially when an event is at its highest velocity.

Parent et al. (2009) identified HRM as an important leadership quality throughout the evolution of an event; many other researchers have supported this finding. For example, Parent and Smith-Swan (2013) outlined the key HRM processes for management and

highlighted that, for both efficiency and knowledge transfer, it is important to hire the right people, offer them supervision and feedback, and establish teamwork between new and existing workers. Similarly, Hanlon and Stewart (2006) defined key stages and specified tailored practices for managing personnel, with an emphasis on the need for detailed documentation and guidance in organisational charts, job descriptions, induction guides, and event manuals in efficient personnel management. Hanlon and Stewart (2006, p.85) further claimed that “lack of guidance and information resulted in ambiguity”, which implies that bureaucracy can decrease both managers’ and work units’ uncertainty.

Summing up, it is evident that the required leadership skills and decision-making processes depend on (and vary between) the event modes. In addition, networking and HRM are important antecedents of effective event implementation. Both implicitly and explicitly, good leadership reduces uncertainty and increases preparedness regarding critical issues that can cause event failure. Previous researchers have improved the understanding of efficient event implementation and of methods for failure avoidance. However, as shown below, the case event in this study was declared a success despite displaying most of the failure factors (and lacking most of the success factors) from the previous research.

### **3 Case and methodological considerations**

To examine how junior managers cope with uncertainty and other problems that can contribute to external impressions that an event is successful, a single-case study was conducted (Yin, 2009). A single-case study “exploits opportunities to explore a significant phenomenon under rare or extreme circumstances” [Eisenhardt and Graebner, (2007), p.27]. The chosen case presents such an opportunity; the managers were young and had limited experience, and they were placed within a new and challenging event setting, where uncertainty and unexpected problems were likely to arise. The qualitative data were collected from all levels of the OC at the 2012 WSC. This study’s conclusions are based on

- 1 19 interviews
- 2 notes from informal conversations
- 3 six days of participant observations from throughout the entire event cycle
- 4 document analyses.

#### *3.1 Setting*

The WSC took place in Oslo, Norway, 10–19 February 2012; it was the first world championship in snowboarding to be organised outside of the Olympic system since 1999 (Strittmatter et al., 2019). The vision for the WSC was “to create the best snowboarding event to date and demonstrate the potential of independent snowboarding to the world” (field notes, 4 May 2012; WSC, 2012). At the event, 25,000 spectators and 240 athletes competed for four world-championship titles (halfpipe and slopestyle events for both men and women). The media declared the event successful, and both external stakeholders and the athletes praised the event [field note quotes presented at the World Snowboard

Federation (WSF) general assembly, 5 May 2012]. Besides the competitions, the WSC hosted side events such as concerts and sponsored activities; these had approximately 46,000 attendees. The competitions were also broadcast live and distributed to 101 countries. The TV production received an international award for its program branding design and a national award for its graphics (Promax, 2013). Christian Glück, a TV commentator for German Sport1, added, “It was a new standard concerning the mixture of graphics and live feed, the perfect scoring system and breath-taking high-speed ‘slo-mos’. This standard was even better than ever seen at the Olympics and Football World Championships” (field notes, WSF general assembly, 5 May 2012).

The WSC’s joint owners are the WSF (representing national federations) and ticket to ride (TTR, representing the private event owners who organised the World Snowboard Tour) – henceforth referred to as the ‘event owners’. The two organisations introduced the WSC at a joint general assembly in 2009. In May 2010, representatives from the WSF and TTR unanimously selected Oslo as the host of the first WSC (WSF, 2010). The City of Oslo supported the event from the start, with a guarantee of USD2.8 million. The main initiator of the event was the CEO of the WSC. A local organising company was established with three shareholders: the arctic challenge (a private event organiser), the Norwegian Snowboard Association, and Oslo Vinterpark (a ski resort). The WSC was a hybrid organisation, with both volunteer and private event organisers, as often occurs in international snowboarding events (Strittmatter et al., 2019). The OC workforce was young and international. During the event, the WSC employed some 100 full-time staff members and 600 volunteers (representing 45 countries). Top managers had the outspoken aim of contracting young middle managers from the snowboard scene. However, these individuals were hard to recruit because they wanted to enjoy the event rather than work during it. Thus, most of the department and functional-area managers were instead recruited from the music-event industry (e.g., firms that hold festivals and concerts); this included ticketing, accreditation, and food and beverage managers.

### 3.2 *Data collection*

Both during and after the WSC, 19 interviews were conducted with individuals from various hierarchical levels in the OC (see Table 1). The interviews’ open-ended questions were aimed at gathering insights into the OC’s internal working conditions. Six junior managers (department managers and team managers focused on volunteers), all of whom the WSC had recruited from the music-event industry, answered questions about their work experience, motivation, support from other junior managers, perceptions of the managers’ impact on (and relationships with) volunteers, and perceptions of both the work environment and the top managers. To shed light on the managers’ experiences as leading managers, the CEO and the event manager were also interviewed. These leaders are referred to as the ‘top managers’ in this article. Furthermore, interviews with 11 volunteers focused on their general experiences and their perceptions of management.

Taking advantage of having full access to all areas, the authors engaged in approximately 100 informal conversations with athletes, national snowboard association CEOs, TTR and WSF board members, medical crew members, judges, coaches, reporters, volunteers, and spectators. Two of the authors also served as volunteers (three days each) at the event and conducted observations at all of its venues. These observations resulted in 26 pages of field notes. Furthermore, two of the authors attended four general assemblies (for the years 2009 through 2012) and assessed 11 reports from

those events, as well as a 79-page internal evaluation report written by department managers. In addition, a report on a quantitative survey of 254 event volunteers was used as a source of data on the volunteers' overall experiences of the event and its leadership (Hanstad, 2012b).

**Table 1** Interviewees by level, position, gender, and age

| <i>Level</i> | <i>Position</i>                 | <i>Sex</i> | <i>Age</i> |
|--------------|---------------------------------|------------|------------|
| Top          | CEO <sup>ab</sup>               | Male       | 42         |
| Top          | Event manager <sup>ab</sup>     | Female     | 29         |
| Middle       | Head of department <sup>b</sup> | Female     | 27         |
| Middle       | Head of department <sup>b</sup> | Female     | 28         |
| Middle       | Head of department <sup>c</sup> | Male       | 28         |
| Middle       | Head of department              | Male       | 29         |
| Low          | Team manager (volunteers)       | Female     | 25         |
| Low          | Team manager (volunteers)       | Male       | 24         |
| Volunteer    | Renovation                      | Female     | 13         |
| Volunteer    | Rigging and catering            | Female     | 18         |
| Volunteer    | Catering                        | Female     | 18         |
| Volunteer    | Security                        | Female     | 20         |
| Volunteer    | Accreditation                   | Female     | 22         |
| Volunteer    | Shaping                         | Female     | 22         |
| Volunteer    | Shaping                         | Male       | 20         |
| Volunteer    | Renovation                      | Male       | 21         |
| Volunteer    | Shaping                         | Male       | 22         |
| Volunteer    | Shaping                         | Male       | 22         |
| Volunteer    | Service and security            | Male       | 54         |

Notes: <sup>a</sup>interviewed together, <sup>b</sup>interviewed after the event and <sup>c</sup>interviewed once during and once after the event.

### 3.3 Data analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed before being analysed along with the field notes and the other written material. This analysis was completed according to the mystery construction method (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007) by applying a two-step, reflexive analysis. The aim of the first step is to reveal the mystery (i.e., the phenomena that existing theories do not explain). The second step is to solve the mystery by considering the respondents' reflections. These two steps are applied in an abductive process (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011); hence, the data analysis was carried out iteratively, going back and forth between the data and the literature to find breakdowns in the material and challenge 'theoretical[ly] informed expectations' [Alvesson and Kärreman, (2011), p.65]. The first step revealed the junior managers' descriptions of organisational setbacks. They did not appreciate being part of a negative organisational culture; however, they expressed only pride, not regret, in being part of the WSC. Based on the findings of this first step, the focus of the second step was, first, on how the junior

managers – who were promised to have influence and to be in charge – perceived their work environment and, second, on how their restricted influence affected their work. When compared to past findings concerning the failure and success of sport-event leadership (e.g., Parent and Seguin, 2007; Parent et al., 2009), these results indicate a potential failure due to the junior managers' perceptions of uncertainty and chaos. However, this is inconsistent with the external perception of a successful event. This divergence provided inspiration for examining the relationships between the apparent mystery, the existing theories, and the authors' own reflections; the result was a focus on the methods for coping with (and perceiving) uncertainty and chaos, including how those methods contributed to an external impression of a successful event.

The two steps of analyses were supported by consultations with a team of three external researchers who have special interests in major sport events and knowledge of governance, policy, volunteer management, and leadership. First, two of the authors discussed their experiences with each other, with volunteers, and with attendees of the WSF's general assembly. Searching for alternative explanations, they then shared their reflections with the external researchers, resulting in joint explanations of the phenomena. One of the interviewees and another important stakeholder then member-checked a draft of the article.

#### **4 Leadership issues at the 2012 Oslo WSCs**

This section describes the uncertainty and other problems within the WSC's OC and presents an analysis of how the junior managers coped with and solved these problems. These coping strategies and solutions are also discussed in relation to the external impression of the event's success.

##### *4.1 Factors that predict failure and success, as observed in the WSC*

All the interviewees, regardless of their organisational levels, agreed that the OC faced several problems. However, their perceptions of those problems differed by level. Although the top managers referred to these problems as crises, the junior managers perceived them as uncertainty and chaos. The perceived causes of these problems also differed by level. In the following, these impressions are presented using the factors described in Section 2. To prevent repetition, two pairs of factors were combined: mission, vision, and goals with due diligence procedures, and financial commitment with power and politics.

##### *4.1.1 Mission, vision, and goals and due diligence procedures*

Notably, internalised goal congruence among the OC, the event owners, and the other stakeholders was lacking. These problems affected the junior managers (who were contracted after the bidding phase) throughout the rest of the event cycle. The junior managers highlighted a general lack of planning and of written formal agreements within the OC. For example, no contracts had been signed until a year before the event; only informal conversations had occurred. In fact, the agreement with the event owners was not signed until approximately two weeks before the event; the last sponsor's contract was secured just ten days before the event; and the webcast agreement was signed just

two days before the event (WSC, 2012). This caused problems for the junior managers. Rather than formalising the contracts well before the event, the CEO prioritised broadcasting and communications with the media, the public, and the snowboarding scene. The CEO stated that only he, the event manager, and the managing director for sport truly understood the event's scope, risks, and opportunities.

When TTR tried to suggest changes to the OC, the CEO warned that the junior managers should not listen to the event owner. These warnings were framed as arguments that those in TTR had 'restricted technical knowledge' and a 'lack of understanding about the magnitude of the event'.

Internalised goal congruence was also lacking within the OC itself. When the junior managers started working in the OC, the CEO assigned their responsibilities orally, without providing printed guidelines or explanations that would allow for a common understanding of the event concept. Directions were kept to a minimum and contained merely the managers' areas of responsibility. A junior manager elaborated on this issue:

"The frameworks are imprecise in so far as nothing is written on paper or such. Some, who have not worked with the CEO or event manager previously, find it very difficult. I personally worked with them for five years and am aware that they have their visions. My job is essentially to put their visions into practice."

The lack of internal goal congruence was also expressed in a quote from another junior manager, who felt that the athletes were too involved in decision-making processes during the event. Although the top managers perceived the athletes' involvement as crucial to ensure the event's success, this reveals a lack of common understanding within the OC. The junior managers felt that their work suffered due to the lack of proper due diligence and the "absence of understanding of what the individual junior manager needs."

#### *4.1.2 Financial commitment and power and politics*

This study's data indicate that the WSC organisation had problems with financial commitments and with politics and power. The top managers experienced three large crises in these areas. According to the CEO, these political and financial crises were linked to the funding phase. The WSC organisers started preparations for the event in September 2010, after receiving the rights to host the WSC and a guarantee against a shortfall from the City of Oslo. At that time, they had not yet contracted any sponsors or recruited a main sponsor. Therefore, the CEO renegotiated the guarantee with the City of Oslo to obtain funding for the event. During this time, the CEO and the event manager had to focus on both finding sponsors and translating the event guarantee into funding. This problem was not solved until a month before the event. The process was time-consuming and distracted from leadership issues such as proper HRM.

As the event drew closer, the organisation's financial situation became more problematic due to poor cash flow. Three of the four department managers reported being given more responsibilities during this period than they had initially. At the same time, the top managers struggled with a political crisis: a disagreement with the event owners. The CEO consciously promoted his own ideas and ignored pressure, feedback, and requests from TTR and other stakeholders:

"I work a lot with corporate culture and have great respect for who owns and controls [...]. But during the WSC, we could not respect the owners and the



board of directors since the way they came back to us and asked us to change things would just have destroyed the event.”

Similar types of power struggles are evident throughout the data; they often stemmed from the CEO’s emphasis that the event was actually his project and his idea. The CEO had a clear idea of how to realise the event in terms of format, arena design, judging system, and all the other parts directly related to snowboarding. However, instead of involving others and discussing solutions, he chose an authoritarian approach:

“The event would have been bad had we chosen such a common sports policy approach to the event. Unfortunately, it had to be run quite dictatorially.”  
(CEO)

Despite these power struggles, the CEO stated after the event that “the WSC [was] a success in all parts, except for the finances.” The organisation was characterised by strong individuals who had political or government connections using their decision-making power to promote their own interests; this eventually led to conflicts. As the data reveal, these conflicts were often connected to HRM issues. These issues are explored in the following part.

#### *4.1.3 Human resource management*

All the interviewed junior managers shared the perception that poor HRM caused tensions between the top and lower managers, and all stated that the CEO and event managers acted unprofessionally. One junior manager explained, “My perception is that this organization suffers from poor leadership. There is a need for much greater leadership – better and more accessible leadership.”

The lack of structure, guidelines, and overall work practices made it difficult for the junior managers to perform their tasks. Based on their previous experiences working for other event organisations, many were used to regulations for coordinating various activities. One junior manager stated,

“At [X, a big music event], we were given a booklet containing maps, important phone numbers, mealtimes, breaks, reminders to carry water with us, rules regarding what to wear, and so forth. Everything is there. [...] Many of these things were not provided at the WSC. [...] There is much that can be improved. That is for sure!”

This junior manager was referring to institutional practices and bureaucracy that were absent at the WSC, which was surprising for an event of this level, particularly as its top managers had experiences with international, elite-level events. The absence of guidelines also led to struggles for the volunteers, many of whom just stood around because they did not know what to do (field notes, 17 February 2012). As described above, top management was focused on areas other than HRM: The complexity of the event and the unexpected number of media requests put strains on top management; these stressors then filtered down to the junior managers, making very simple tasks challenging. The lack of proper HRM was also connected to weak intra-organisational communication, as explained in the following part.

#### 4.1.4 *Communication*

The top managers and event owners communicated various contradictory messages. In one example, a junior manager was assigned a task but then relieved of that responsibility in the next moment. The interviewees explained that this contradiction was due to the top managers' uncertainty concerning how to organise the first WSC. The junior managers perceived the situation to be exhausting. One stated that when the CEO's requests come in at the last minute, "you feel there is not so much you can say; you just have to do it". The junior managers felt that their tasks were delivered ad hoc, without regard to their experience levels or knowledge; there was no time to dispute the orders, so the ad hoc decisions continued. One junior manager said,

"Giving someone responsibility for one thing and then taking it away again is so wrong. When I made a decision, and then they ran over it, they destroyed all the systems we had created. That made us all frustrated [...] and was unnecessary."

The lack of a formal communication platform and the existence of such contradictory messages within the OC created a 'bad leadership climate' and 'bad atmosphere'. A junior manager reflected on how the organisation ended up the way it did:

"Communication was to blame, no doubt. It was a group of incredibly strong experts in all sectors. There were people who were passionate about the project, entrepreneurs in the snowboard industry, and dozens of fine people. But the working culture [...] was very, very negative at the end. [...] How we started last year very positively but got there [chaotic situation] in April is difficult for anyone to answer, I think. Everyone must take an equal share of the blame."

The junior managers' negative perceptions of the OC's inner workings caused several problems and can be interpreted as a failure, as they caused negative experiences for the whole OC.

#### 4.2 *Junior managers' problem-solving and coping strategies*

This section describes how the junior managers coped with the uncertainty and other problems. In addition, it provides an explanation of how the OC as a whole came to perceive the event as successful despite these struggles.

The junior managers declared that they responded to the problems by, for instance, taking on more responsibility than they had initially been assigned because they saw these problems as challenges and because it 'was [their] duty to solve things' (junior manager):

"My general perception of those who were young managers at my level the departmental level] is that they were amazing. Without them nothing would have happened. [...] Had we all been 20 years older, we would have thrown in the towel and not bothered because there is no gratitude; it's just barking, unclear guidelines, and unclear messages all the time. So I think that was just luck that the World Snowboarding Championships [...] had such good people."

To cope with problems, the junior managers sought support from each other (field notes, 14, 15 and 17 February 2012) and from others, both inside the OC and in the external networks that they had formed from previous engagements. The junior managers reported wicked problems, such as having to provide an outdoor kitchen with organic food cooked

on-site, shuttle services for athletes, and a new arena, as well as adding side events late in the preparation phase, communicating the qualification rules for a new event to the athletes both inside and outside of national teams, and distributing the TV production (WSC, 2012). Mundane problems that could have been solved by managers (e.g., compiling contact lists or an overview of car rentals) became complicated because of the processes' velocity and the lack of formal structure (field notes, 17 February 2012). Solving these problems appeared to inspire one junior manager, however, who said,

“What was fun with the WSC was to solve all the problems. Things came up every single day, all the time, and they just had to be solved. Solving these problems was a high-level entrepreneurial task [...]. We would then settle down afterwards and think, ‘dear friends, we got through despite it all’.”

The junior managers used their networks to discuss tasks and to develop the required knowledge within their departments. They untangled problems by themselves or by ‘talking to people, calling here, calling there’, ‘having meetings’, and ‘Googling a little bit’.

Due to many contradictory messages from top managers, one junior manager reported deciding to block the top management's communications and manage independently.

The people recruited from the music-event industry had close relationships with each other and recruited most of the paid staff members in their departments from their own networks. This study's data indicate that the junior managers felt more loyal to the people whom they had recruited than to other members of the organisation and were mainly motivated to join the WSC because of the possibility of seeing old friends (field notes, 14 February 2012). Five of the interviewees even called the WSC a ‘music festival’. These workers' loyalty to their colleagues was more crucial to their actions and thoughts than was their dedication to the sport event. One junior manager said,

“The moral we tried to live by but also convey to our subordinates was “Yes, this goes as it goes, but our part is going to be good.” [...] We have a mutual obligation and responsibility for others, [...] so it's extreme loyalty. I suppose it is in the other departments as well [...] because we are colleagues at other places too, it was really like ‘all or none’.”

The event manager confirmed this strong loyalty and called the people whom the WSC had recruited from X ‘a very tight group’ and ‘very hard-working’, but he said they had “a different mindset in doing things than what [we] snowboarders have.”

The junior managers' work experience and networks from the music-event industry were evident when they solved challenges and shouldered responsibilities. Certain practices (e.g., ticketing systems) were directly adapted from the X event to the WSC. One junior manager explained that she implemented new practices such as establishing a log and setting up regular meetings. In her words,

“Everybody kept a log after the night watch – ‘what's new; what have we learned?’ Consequently, we had oral and written communication all the time, which was passed on to the next person on the job. [...] When a new volunteer was being trained, this was done step by step. Using the logs at meetings ensured that everyone had the right information at all times.”

To solve the OC's issues with low cash flow, another junior manager single-handedly managed to ‘obtain sponsors valued at approximately USD0.2 million’ for his department. This is another example of how the junior managers used their networks and experiences to overcome organisational shortcomings.

Even though the junior managers voiced many critiques of the event organisation, the positive external perceptions of the WSC provided them with a sense of pride and feeling of success. Despite the negative experiences articulated in the previous sections, such as their struggles with the managerial roles, the junior managers did not regret their involvement, and they actually took pride in their contributions to the WSC. The interviews indicate that the external perceptions of the event as a success outweighed the internal problems the junior managers had faced. As one of them phrased it, "Okay, it may boil internally, but look at what we produce externally. People are happy and satisfied. It is sunny and we may have the best arena in the world and that kind of thing."

## **5 Concluding discussion**

The purpose of this article is to expand the understanding of factors that can lead to success or failure in sport events by examining how junior managers at one such event coped with uncertainty and other problems and, as such, possibly contributed to the external impressions of the event's success. The article has expanded understanding by identifying a need to acknowledge factors that influence success and failure other than those identified in the existing literature. This paper is also meant to show a need to discuss what constitutes success more broadly. Perhaps the most important finding concerning this issue is that the external perception of the event being successful was decoupled from (and very different from) its workers' internal feelings regarding its success (or lack thereof). Many participants expressed that the event's working conditions were disastrous. Even so, the media and other stakeholders considered the event a success. The event should have been doomed to fail based on its lack of vision, mission, and goals; insufficient due diligence; problems concerning financial commitments; issues with politics and power; poor HRM; and communication failures. All of these factors can predict an event's failure (Parent and Seguin, 2007).

How, then, did organisational shortcomings that have contributed to the cancellation of previous events exist for another event that was externally perceived as successful? Turning one's attention to the junior managers' coping and problem-solving strategies can yield some alternative explanations. First, the lack of leadership and formal structures made it imperative for the junior leaders to look elsewhere for solutions to their problems. This being the case, they learned to discern new coping strategies and thus may have prevented the event from failing. From the results, it is evident that the junior managers' primary strategy involved horizontal organising processes (Alvesson et al., 2016). When the vertical modes of organisation (formal hierarchies, decision-making, division of labour, standardised procedures, etc.) had failed, the junior managers turned to their already established (yet informal) networks for assistance, guidance, support, and resources. Table 2 displays the problems that the junior managers faced and the coping strategies that they utilised.

Table 2 shows how, by forming their own informal organisational structures and networks (both within and outside the OC), the junior managers created a foundation that enabled other strategies. Thanks to these horizontal modes of informal organising, the junior managers were able to act autonomously and to circumvent bureaucratic flaws such as poor communication and haphazard leadership. This basis also freed the junior managers to make their organisational structures, task flows, and other bureaucratic

processes more flexible, thereby better equipping themselves to handle unforeseen events demanding quick and flexible solutions. In other words, instead of being at the mercy of failing structures, the junior managers formed an informal organisation within the OC and used it to apply their own strategies for due diligence, HRM, and communication.

**Table 2** Factors predicting event failure versus the perceptions and coping strategies of junior managers within the WSCs' organising committee

| <i>Factors predicting event failure<sup>a</sup></i>             | <i>Junior managers' perceptions of problems<sup>b</sup></i>  | <i>Junior managers' coping strategies<sup>c</sup></i>  |
|---|--|--|
| Mission, vision, and goals, as well as due-diligence procedures | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of goal congruence between partners</li> <li>• Lack of technical knowledge among stakeholders</li> <li>• Lack of understanding regarding the event's magnitude within the committee</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Networking and group work (e.g., forming informal networks within in the committee)</li> <li>• Autonomy (e.g., independently creating goals and performing due diligence)</li> </ul>  |
| Financial commitments, as well as power and politics            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Political and financial crisis due to budget problems in the planning phase</li> <li>• Poor cash flow</li> <li>• Lack of sponsors</li> <li>• Disagreements between the event owners and the CEO</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexibility (e.g., being able to take on more responsibility)</li> <li>• Autonomy (e.g., obtaining sponsorship for one's department)</li> </ul>   |
| Human-resource management                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor leadership</li> <li>• Insufficient bureaucracy (lack of formal structures, guidelines, and strategies)</li> <li>• Poor volunteer management</li> <li>• Lack of clarity regarding staff members' roles and responsibilities</li> <li>• Poor knowledge transfer</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Networking and group work (e.g., transferring knowledge and practises from music events)</li> <li>• Autonomy (creating bureaucratic structures and task flows for junior managers)</li> <li>• Loyalty (e.g., focusing on duty)</li> </ul>                                     |
| Communication   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contradictory messages from the top managers to junior managers and volunteers</li> <li>• Ad hoc decisions</li> <li>• Lack of a communication platform within the committee</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Networking and group work (e.g., transferring knowledge and practises from music events)</li> <li>• Autonomy (e.g., independently finding solutions)</li> <li>• Loyalty (e.g., accepting miscommunications between junior and top managers and following commands)</li> </ul> |

Notes: <sup>a</sup>taken from Parent and Seguin (2007), <sup>b</sup>based on empirical findings, and <sup>c</sup>the analytical dimension.

Evidence from the literature suggests that this result may have been due to the strong external networks that many of the junior managers possessed. Their common background allowed them to collectively draw on experiences from previous events (in this case, music events). This promoted a sense of loyalty in the group and, perhaps more importantly, allowed the managers to use their personal (yet shared) external networks. As Alvesson et al. (2016) argued, having peer support through horizontal modes of organising helps managers take advantage of the networks and communities where they are embedded. This study's results show that the junior managers felt less loyalty to the event, the overall organisation, or even the OC than they did to the task at hand and to their peers.

Acknowledging that every research approach has advantages and drawbacks, these findings indicate a need to pay attention to informal organisations when trying to pinpoint the factors that contribute to the success or failure of an event – not just attention to the formal structures displayed in official documentation that researchers typically focus on when attempting to understand the mechanisms behind success or failure. This study is focused on the micro-level processes in the inner workings of an OC, thus adding nuance to the conventional understanding (which is based on a macro-level perspective). That is, although sport event researchers have provided insights on macro-level leadership issues and challenges from an inter-organisational and stakeholder perspective (e.g., Kristiansen et al., 2016; Parent, 2008; Parent et al., 2017b), this study's insights are instead related to the mechanisms within the micro-level structures of an OC. As pinpointed by Parent and Seguin (2007) and Parent et al. (2017a), the ability to initiate and support networking is an important leadership skill for top managers; it is also a success criterion for sport events. Our study's results also show that coping with leadership issues in middle management is very important, as are certain new mechanisms – group work within the OC, personal networking, and autonomy – that contribute to success. Building on these insights, this study draws attention to the interplay of external and internal perceptions of success, thus operating in the intersection between the discourses on how leadership contributes to success and how success is measured. In the sport-event context, this study reveals that failure can be perceived differently depending on one's viewpoint; one person's failure can be someone else's success. In addition, as in this case, external success can obscure internal failures. From the junior managers' point of view, the WSC was a success, but the organisation was a failure.

To conclude, these findings have practical implications, as they indicate the necessity during hiring of considering potential OC managers' abilities to network and work in groups. As this case study's results indicate, it can be fruitful to hire managers whose backgrounds and event experiences are not specifically connected to the event in question, as this can expand the available network and lead to creativity in problem-solving. This study also has implications for future research, as its results affirm the importance of the factors for failure and success that Parent et al. (2007) identified. More specifically, it would be interesting to investigate how these factors affect the retention of personnel within sport-event OCs. Finally, it is imperative that future explorations of success and failure factors be based on a holistic foundation of success and failure criteria.

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### **Article 3**

Bodemar, A. (resubmitted to *Sport in Society*). The balancing act of conformity: aspiring leaders' response to managerial pressure.



## **The balancing act of conformity: aspiring leaders' response to managerial pressure**

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## **The balancing act of conformity: aspiring leaders' response to managerial pressure**

This paper explores conformity processes in various sport events' institutional contexts. More specifically, I examine how conformity evolves for young aspiring leaders in two inaugural major sport events representing different institutional contexts. My study draws upon qualitative data. Cross-comparative analyses reveal three different conformity modes: straight, reflexive, and cynical. My results show how conformity modes depend greatly upon the degree of institutionalization of practices, rules, and power structures within a given event's organization. I identify strong institutional frameworks and expediency as key drivers. This paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the significance of the institutional context and consequences of control regimes in event management. Pressure towards conformity seems to be a fast-paced process. Capturing young people's reflections is important because sport organizations will benefit from reflexive leaders and managers who can solve current and future challenges in such organizations.

*Keywords:* Aspiring leaders; conformity modes; functional stupidity; institutional context; sport events

## **Introduction**

In recent years, there has been increased focus on the education of young managers, leaders, and coaches in sport structures (Skirstad, Parent, and Houlihan 2017; Bodemar, Strittmatter, and Fahlén 2020). Studies on young people's engagement in sport organizations found that some young people in sport seek to improve their competencies in order to increase their influence in their organizations (Waldahl and Skille 2016; Strittmatter and Skille 2017). However, the small body of research which has taken an explicit interest in following young people's agency from their own perspective has revealed that sports organizations do not really succeed with creating an attractive environment for young leaders (Larsson and Meckbach 2013; Strittmatter and Skille 2017). The reproduction of traditionally prominent values seems to be salient, with a pressure towards conformity rather than participating in, developing, or influencing sport by allowing new ideas and giving a youth perspective to the future. Strittmatter (2020) found that lack of life experience and tacit knowledge within sport governance structures hinder young people's access to leadership positions in sport organizations. At the same time, there is a wish to hire young people into leadership positions, because they are seen as driving forces for renewal and change. Often, young people who are hired to take charge are instead provided with symbolic agency and pushed towards submission to a regime that is resistant to change (Waldahl and Skille 2016). This article sheds light on the reflections of young people aged 25–35 years who were hired to exercise leadership at two major sporting events, hereafter referred to as *aspiring leaders*.

My study is based on qualitative empirical studies addressing aspiring leaders' agency in two distinct different institutional contexts: the highly institutionalized 2012 Innsbruck Youth Olympic Games (YOG) and the more loosely institutionalized 2012

Oslo World Snowboard Championships (WSC). Both events explicitly aimed to involve and educate aspiring leaders in middle and lower leadership positions, giving them the possibility to influence sport organizations. This expectation of agency parallels an understanding of managers as partly being leaders (Northouse 2015; Bass and Bass 2008). However, having been promised influence, the aspiring leaders in both events felt pushed towards conformity by complying with rules and regulations in the YOG and by following CEO commands in the WSC. I explore modes of conformity and key drivers behind these pressures. Hence, I address the following research question: How do various institutional contexts of sport events influence aspiring leaders' conformity processes?

I draw on the concept of functional stupidity (Alvesson and Spicer 2012) to help capture aspiring leaders' reflections behind the conformity processes and to understand how power can influence such reflections in achieving functionality, especially when entering a new institutional setting. An inaugural sport event setting with aspiring leaders provided the contextual opportunity to explore how conformity in organizations occurs before staff are socialized, attitudes have been internalized, and practices are established. In that regard, this study contributes to both theory and practice. Theoretically, I capture the relationship between institutional settings and conformity modes, a neglected research field within sport event management literature. Practically, I emphasize the advantage of capturing young people's early reflections as they enter a new institutional context, and thus contribute implications for successful events.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows: the next section develops the conceptual background of the study. This is followed by the methodology and an explanation of the cases. The case analysis draws on the concept of functional stupidity (Alvesson and Spicer 2012) to capture reflections and show how various institutional



contexts create different modes of conformity. Then, I provide a discussion before concluding remarks are drawn.

### **Conformity and functionality**

My conceptual framework builds on the conformity literature (Kärreman and Alvesson 2009; Müller 2013) and the concept of functional stupidity (Alvesson and Spicer 2012; Paulsen 2017).

### ***Conformity in organizations***

Conformity has been widely studied through different theoretical approaches. In a sociological perspective of sport organizations, it has mainly been studied on the field level through institutional analysis (Hemme and Morais 2021; Lantz and Marcellini 2018; Strittmatter et al. 2019). Conformity processes in sport event settings are reflected in other events imitating the Olympic Games (OGs) (Batuev and Robinson 2019; Strittmatter et al. 2019), including aspects such as the inclusion of various disciplines, bidding procedures, the sport competitions themselves, and side events and festivities for spectators.

*Conformity* occurs when individuals adapt their own perceptions, beliefs, and behaviours to group norms as a result of influence from group members. Norms become normalized as unwritten (or sometimes written) rules and expectations; they are repeated and thereby shape normal behaviour. Conformity evolves as normal behaviour becomes organizational behaviour. Conformity can also be created through compliance (Kärreman and Alvesson 2009) and normative control. I follow Müller's (2013, 6) view of conformity as a resistance, meaning "engaging in practices that defy the normalizing tendencies in an organization or run counter to them". By exploring employees' reflexive thoughts of normative control in a German IKEA store with a core focus on

culture management, Müller (2013) found four variations of conformity: enthusiastic, affirmative, pragmatic, and reflexive. *Enthusiastic* and *affirmative conformity* refer to an extreme and positive response to the culture. I refer to these variations of conformity in which employees' internal values are coherent with the perceived organizational values as "straight conformity". Employees with *pragmatic conformity* distance themselves more from the culture. In *reflexive conformity*, employees take a more critical approach to the culture and can comprehend the ideological setting, but still support the organization.

There is also a risk that expectations clash with the reality. When for example employees experience leaders as being "out of line", they are more likely to develop cynical behaviour (Fleming and Spicer 2003), which can shape cynical conformity as an act of resistance (Kärreman and Alvesson 2009). In such examples, modes of conformity can disclose an inconsistency between the internal values and the organizational behaviour. Therefore, it can shape different modes of conformity within an organization where group behaviour becomes more solidified.

Willmott (1993) argues that conformity is rewarded more than independent thinking in most organizational contexts because it makes work procedures easier for everyone. With many young people with less work experience, the workforce can be more adaptable to conform (Kärreman and Alvesson 2009). Furthermore, uncertainty can increase conformity (Toyokawa, Whalen, and Laland 2019).

Nevertheless, young people who, for example, are engaged in sport organizations and promised influence can find pressure toward conformity demotivating. Conformity can hamper personal progress and ruin organizations' ability to implement new ideas.

### ***Functional stupidity***

The concept of functional stupidity (Alvesson and Spicer 2012) was developed as a reaction to the common assumption that intellectual assets are the most important resource in organizational life. I argue that functional stupidity fosters conformity. Alvesson and Spicer (2012, 1196) claim that issues of power and politics counteract employees' critical reflections: "Functional stupidity entails a refusal to use intellectual resources outside a narrow and 'safe' terrain". Unwillingness to question and reflect on commonly accepted routines leads to functional stupidity (Alvesson and Spicer 2012). Functional stupidity facilitates organizational support through three deficits: *lack of reflexivity, substantive reasoning, and justification*. In other words, functional stupidity can serve as an explanation of why smart people *stop* questioning, do *not* seek a good reason, and do *not* foresee consequences. The concept of functional stupidity has recently been applied in sport contexts. Feddersen and Phelan (2021) examined individuals in two British elite sports organizations. They found a gradual normalisation of behaviour towards- low levels of reflexivity, justification, and substantial reasoning resulting in unethical and unprofessional behaviours. Furthermore, they found that periods of significant change increased such behaviour.

In this article, the concept of functional stupidity is used to capture the reflexive process behind managerial pressure towards conformity. Acting functionally stupid is not regarded as necessarily negative (or positive) and has nothing to do with actual stupidity. Instead, the interests are the pressures and reflections that drive coping mechanisms and conformity (Alvesson and Spicer 2012). Aspiring leaders may readily conform to do their jobs, but at the same time reflect upon managerial pressure. Their reflexive thoughts can explain how such conformity comes about.

Functional stupidity assumes that we live in a society structured in an economy of persuasion with organizations focused on image-building activities (as opposed to past central production). Image is created by symbolic manipulation (Hancock 2005) through visions, grandiose presentations, and goals which are often decoupled from everyday business (Alvesson and Spicer 2012). This also accounts for sport events where the event's image is important to attract sponsors, the best athletes, and spectators (Parent and Foreman 2007) and exercised by means of the sport event's visions and objectives to create identity. Parent and Foreman (2007) claim that a strong cultural identity increases employees' commitment to the organization. According to Alvesson and Spicer (2012), this can be viewed as a biased process to persuade leaders and volunteers to undermine independent thinking and act according to organizational practices.

Symbolic manipulation is supported by a power perspective that blocks communication through direct suppression, setting the agenda, shaping the ideological setting, or the subject's direct submission (Fleming and Spicer 2007, p. 14). The exercise of power hinders communication and enhances stupidity management, resulting in stupidity self-management. Employees may be sceptical, but most people buy this and are symbolically manipulated. Thus, employees often operate in a context where conformity counts more than critical reflection. In stupidity management, the boss or the organization tries to limit critical reflection. Stupidity self-management leads to either certainty ("I do what is best") or dissonance, which in turn leads to doubt and increased reflexivity. The notion of certainty produces functionality, as the individual can concentrate on doing the job and on saving "the organization and its members from the frictions provoked by doubt and reflection" (Alvesson and Spicer

2012, p. 1196). To do what one is told can provide efficiency in a sport event setting, but one should be aware of the consequences.

Functional stupidity has been identified in excessive work-time regimes (Alvesson and Einola 2018), in sustainability issues (Sheppard and Young 2020), and in everyday practice in construction (Love et al. 2018). Paulsen (2017, p. 186) applied the concept of functional stupidity by asking “How can employees who are highly critical of their organization also be highly active in reproducing it?”. He identified ten rationales behind stupidity self-management, which represent different modes of reflections and explain employees’ coping mechanisms. Following Paulsen (2017), I suggest that functionality can be both positive and negative. Furthermore, reflexivity allows members of organizations to see the stupidity in conformity before behaviours in a process of socialization become taken for granted. In other words, reflexive thoughts decrease over time. This process of decreasing reflexivity can be studied when young people enter a new institutional setting of an inaugural event.

## **Method**

This paper draws upon a hermeneutical approach in which the research process circles between the part and the whole, and where the researcher’s preunderstanding is both qualified and challenged (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2009). The study is based on a multiple case study (Yin 2009) drawing on qualitative data gathered at two large-scale sport events. Given the distinct difference in institutional settings between the cases (e.g., the absence or presence of rules, regulations, reporting requirements, or written agreements), I conducted a comparative case study. Such cases representing polar types (here, high and loose degrees of institutionalization) can help reveal contrasting patterns (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007, p. 27). My study is built on forty-seven semistructured interviews with staff representing different organizational levels, supported by

observations with field notes and documents. Table 1 provides an overview of the sample.

Table 1. Description of the sample

|                            | YOG   | WSC   |
|----------------------------|---|---|
| Semi-structured interviews | 9 aspiring leaders: 24–34 years (mean 29 years)<br>– Department leader (3)<br>– Functional area leader (4)<br>– Volunteer team leader (2) | 7 aspiring leaders: 24–29 years (mean 27 years)<br>– Department leader (2)<br>– Functional area leader (2)<br>– Volunteer team leader (2)<br>– Event leader (1) |
|                            | Volunteers (20)   | Volunteers (11)   |
|                            | CEO (age 42)  | CEO (age 43)  |
| Observation                | 10 days during game-time<br>City-to-city post-event debrief<br>Field notes (16 pages)   | 8 days during game-time<br>Pre- and post-event meetings<br>Participant observer (3 days)<br>Field notes (26 pages)  |
| Documents                  | Evaluation report (179 pages)<br>Research report on volunteers  | Evaluation report (79 pages)<br>Research report on volunteers (254 participants)  |

*Note:* YOG = Youth Olympic Games; WSC = World Snowboard Championships.

The interviews with aspiring leaders focused on perceptions of their own leadership, their relationship to volunteers, the top management, and the concept owners of each event. I particularly focused on the aspiring leaders’ perceptions of their opportunity to and restrictions to influence. To capture a bottom-up perspective, I conducted additional interviews with volunteers that focused on how volunteers perceived their working environment and their leaders. To shed complementary light on the aspiring leaders’ experiences and capture a top-down perspective, I also conducted

interviews with the CEOs, focusing on experiences of their own roles and responsibilities as well as those of the leaders beneath them.

Participant and nonparticipant observations were conducted with access to most arenas. My observations focused on situations that aspiring leaders and volunteers were involved in, and where newly implemented ideas were identified. Several informal conversations took place during the observations. Observations and informal conversations were written down in field notes. The observations were part of a wider study and partly used in this study referred to as field notes. Additional documents, including published (YOG) and unpublished (WSC) evaluation reports and published (YOG) and unpublished (WSC) reports regarding volunteers at the events, were used to strengthen data analysis (IYOGOC. 2012; WSC. 2012).

Even though my data analyses included both managerial and volunteer levels, the present paper mainly addresses the aspiring leaders' perspective. The conformity modes are primarily derived from narratives in the interviews with the aspiring leaders. However, field notes, documents and interviews with top managers and volunteers helped to gain an understanding of conformity on various organizational levels and in different institutional contexts. The different empirical sources were first analysed by asking questions inspired by Alvesson and Deetz (2000): What is happening and what is the result? What do the aspiring leaders think they are doing? This helped me gain a deeper understanding of the studies' context.

The second step of analysis was inspired by Davis (1971), in search for what is interesting. This step of analysis was guided by reflexive research (Alvesson and Kärreman 2011) in an iterative abductive process – that is, going back and forth between data and literature. This step enabled me to dive more thoroughly into the processes of conformity and how the preliminary finding of high conformity in the

WSC despite a loose organizational regime could be understood. Comparing cases (cf. Eisenhardt 1989, 540-41) implicates moving back and forth between details about how leaders related to the institutional context and paying attention to differences, similarities, fragmentations, and discrepancies. In sum, this helped me refine my understanding of the themes that emerged and provide insightful examples rather than statistical presentations.

During the data analysis, findings were discussed with peers, other researchers, and leaders at the YOG and WSC. A research colleague with experience of both event concepts (doing research on the YOG and serving as a volunteer at the WSC) functioned as a reader and a sounding board. I discussed a draft of the article with two persons involved with the YOG and WSC for feedback. My reflections were also shared with one external researcher with expertise in critical perspectives on leadership. This review process resulted in joint explanations.

The study was approved by the Norwegian Centre of Research Data, the CEOs of the events, and the Youth Olympic Games Laboratory for Youth and Innovation. Each interviewee signed a written consent form. I have a former involvement in both national and international snowboard organizations. I served as General Secretary of the Norwegian Snowboard Federation 2001–2008 and was voluntarily engaged in the World Snowboard Federation from its foundation in 2001 until 2018 as both a board member and committee leader. However, like the aspiring leaders in the WSC, I first entered the sport of snowboarding as an outsider. At the time of data collection, I knew a few people in the organising committee but had not previously worked closely with any of them. My former involvement facilitated access to key persons and documents (e.g., the WSC evaluation report mentioned above). Considering limitations of research biases, I employed processes of reflexivity and member checking. I reflected upon my



preconceptions (Berger, 2015) and what I took for granted within event organizing, especially in the context of snowboarding. A draft of the data analysis was sent to the interviewees. This resulted in few minor changes of wording and some supplementary information.

### **Introduction of the two cases**

The two cases I investigated were large-scale international youth elite sport events (see Table 2). They can be classified as different institutional contexts (high and low degree of structure) due to different concepts, ownerships, organizational structures, and institutionalized practices.

The YOG is a large-scale multisport event for young elite athletes (aged 14–18 years old) organized every fourth year by different host cities. The first winter edition of the YOG took place in Innsbruck, Austria, January 13–22, 2012. The YOG are highly institutionalized, as all their application procedures, legal sources, and contracts are guided by comprehensive written guidelines of the OGs (e.g., the Olympic Charter, the YOG Candidature Procedures and Questionnaire, Host City Contract, and Event Manual; (IOC. 2008, 2011). To comply with requirements from the IOC (International Olympic Committee), the organizing committee (OC) is expected to carry out approximately eight hundred milestones, which are to be reported in predetermined ways. The YOG's OC was organized in thirty-nine functional areas. During the implementation phase of the games, the leaders in charge had to conduct regular conference calls twice a day with their counterparts in the IOC. This implies that aspiring leaders work in constellations with controlling senior IOC leaders. In sum, working with the IOC requires following strict rules and structures. This hierarchical work paradigm and the highly bureaucratic traditional structures within OG events leave

limited room for innovation (Strittmatter et al., 2018). This stands in contrast to one of the main goals of the YOG, to act as a “catalyst for innovation” (IOC. 2019, p. 1).

Just a month after the YOG, the first edition of the WSC took place in Oslo on February 10–19, 2012. The WSC is a large-scale single-sport event organized every fourth year by different hosts. Snowboarding has moved from being an alternative sport with few standard organizational practices (Strittmatter et al. 2019) to a mainstream sport that is represented in the OGs. However, it is still a youth-driven subculture whose sport develops in close interaction with practitioners (Strittmatter et al. 2019). In their search for independence and freedom, snowboarders challenge the establishment and key agents in sport organizations such as the IOC and the International Ski Federation (FIS). In contrast to organizations such as the IOC and FIS, snowboarding represents an anti-establishment culture with fewer regulations and requirements of standardisation (e.g., competition formats; Strittmatter et al. 2019). In the WSC, there was no manual or guideline, a general lack of written agreements and instructions, and a lack of control routines. A senior leader who had previously been involved in a FIS-governed sport event awarded this absence of reporting requirements and documents with guidelines, stating this was an “opportunity” (field notes Feb. 13, 2012).

The WSC represents a hybrid, voluntary, and not-for-profit organization – the World Snowboard Federation (WSF) – which cooperates with commercial organizations (the Arctic Challenge [TAC] and Ticket to Ride [TTR], representing private event owners) and the snowboard industry.<sup>1</sup> In such hybrid organizations with principles of volunteerism versus professionalism (which has requirements for income),

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<sup>1</sup> The WSC was owned by two international snowboarding organizations, the WSF and TAC. The local organizing company, Snowboard-VM 2012 AS 1, was established and owned by three equal shareholders: TAC, the Norwegian Snowboard Federation, and Oslo Winter Park (a resort).

there will likely be tension caused by contradictory goals, means, culture, or management forms (Engelstad and Steen-Johnsen 2010).

Table 2. Parameters at WSC and YOG

|                    | YOG            | WSC          |
|--------------------|----------------|--------------|
| Employees in OC    | 109            | 100          |
| Volunteers         | 1,357          | 600          |
| Suppliers          | Over 1,025     | Over 100     |
| Venues             | 6              | 4            |
| Functional areas   | 39             | 44           |
| Sports             | Multisport     | Single-sport |
| Disciplines        | 15             | 3            |
| TV production      | No live stream | Live stream  |
| Operational budget | €23.7 million  | €3 million   |

*Sources:* Data from (IYOGOC. 2012; WSC. 2012).

*Note:* YOG = Youth Olympic Games; WSC = World Snowboard Championships; OC = organizing committee.

Although the OCs for both the YOG and WSC had similar hierarchal organizational structures, their degrees of institutionalization were distinctly different. The highly institutionalized YOG stood in contrast to the loosely institutionalized WSC. In this regard, the YOG and WSC can be viewed as extreme cases: the highly bureaucratic, technically controlled YOG versus the anti-bureaucratic, sparsely technically controlled WSC. For example, in the WSC the CEO simply assigned responsibilities orally, as stated by an aspiring leader: “You’re in charge of [the given area]. If something goes wrong, it is your responsibility”. Accordingly, bureaucracy was kept to a minimum; in the WSC, the aspiring leaders had to develop their own

bureaucratic systems within their departments. Hence, there was a considerably looser bureaucratic character, without the predetermined and required reporting routines of the YOG. The WSC was found more risk tolerant – that is, willing to try out new concepts and flexible to change plans. For example, just a week before game time, the WSC finally decided to add a new discipline with a new arena to the competition (WSC, 2012). Another distinct difference was the concept owners' possibilities to secure help with problems and resources. While aspiring leaders in the YOG could call their counterparts in the IOC and "fly in" their expertise, this was not the case in the WSC. The concept owners of the WSC could not provide such resources. In addition, the interference from concept owners in the WSC was considerably lesser compared with the YOG.

Both events consisted of a young international work force. Most of the aspiring leaders were in their late twenties, with more than three years of event experience. In the YOG, most leaders have been recruited from the commercial sport industry with higher education in sport management or organizational science. At the WSC, aspiring leaders were mainly recruited from the music industry and had non-sport-related higher education. Hence, most of the aspiring leaders in both events had entered a new institutional context. The CEOs of both the YOG and WSC were of the same age with similar education (higher education in business and marketing) and working experience (more than ten years of private international elite snowboard event experience). In both events, the working conditions of the aspiring leaders were extreme, with cramped office space and long working hours, something they willingly exposed themselves to. Several quotes confirmed this: "From 1 January, we [two aspiring leaders] worked from half past six in the morning and left the office at eleven o' clock at night" (YOG leader). "We worked somewhere between eighteen to twenty hours a day" (WSC leader).

In both the YOG and WSC, there was an outspoken aim to contract and educate young people in leader positions. The CEO of the YOG expressed that “to [make the event] be authentic, I think it needs to have a certain credibility”. Therefore, “you need ... to have an understanding of how young people are thinking and acting and behaving” (Interview, CEO, YOG). The CEO of the WSC stated, “We wanted to be part of developing the young [leaders]”.

Compared with the YOG, the WSC was perceived as more risk tolerant regarding trying out new concepts and flexibility to change plans. However, the events represent two distinct institutional contexts. The YOG had a highly restrained setting and strong hierarchical institutional collectivistic order (author’s reference). The WSC started with a loose institutional indulgence, but individualistic order. While the IOC is the heaviest ruler in the power structure of the YOG, the top management is the heaviest ruler in the WSC.

### **Conformity modes in the YOG and WSC**

In this study, three modes of conformity emerged: straight, reflexive, and cynical. Each mode is presented by describing the mode and the visibility of reflection framed with examples in quotes.

#### ***Straight conformity***

In the YOG, there was only one respondent within the mode of straight conformity, a person who had previously worked at IOC-regulated events and who expressed a desire for future working positions within the IOC. This is disclosed in the following quote:

I mean those five rings, it's just something special ... It was great to work closely with the IOC, because I will be very interested in working with them in the future. I got a closer view on how the IOC are organized and how the people work.

When I asked this interviewee whether she could see the Olympic values in the office, she expressed uncertainty:

We have a lot of people who are just doing their jobs. They come from university. They have never been in touch with the games. And in the summer, I was sometimes a bit frustrated because I thought there was a lack of getting the idea of the games. (YOG leader)

She reflected on the difference between those in the OC who had “been in an IOC games environment” (YOG leader) and those who had not. However, a month before game time, she saw change: “It changed a little. So, I think a few of the people [about whom] I thought ‘they [will] never get it’, they now have a better understanding about the games”.

This person stands out in the sense that she internalized the IOC's symbolic manipulation. Considering the context of an event (vs. a permanent organization), there is limited time for symbolic manipulation. As she states, it changed – this can be seen as an example of how symbolic manipulation happens over time (Alvesson and Spicer 2012).

In straight conformity, “Yes, I'll do it” can be interpreted in the sense that one does a task without reflection because they are convinced that this is how it should be. There is no need for coping mechanisms due to an inner conviction that adapting to the

IOC's institutionalized framework is best. In this context, straight conformity can be interpreted as naïve, as reflexivity is absent.

### ***Reflexive conformity***

Reflexive conformity (Müller 2013) was dominant in the YOG. Reflexivity is derived from the IOC's overreliance on the policies, rules, and supervision to which they expected the aspiring leaders to adhere. "If there is a rule, then it should be followed" (YOG leader) and a lot of effort and time should be used to implement IOC's ideas by following the bureaucratic and time-consuming routines.

Referring to these strong guidelines, one aspiring leader summarized, "We [aspiring leaders] think that they [IOC] have really good ideas, but they are stuck in structure". One of the YOG leaders spoke of IOC procedures by saying that "some of them are good" and "some of them are quite useless". For example, competition leaders had to make a phone call each time "when they [the competitions] start, when they end as well as in case they are delayed". These rigid routines and control mechanisms aided rule enforcement and made it difficult to implement youthful ideas (e.g., posting video clips on the web page). A certain degree of mild criticism and cynicism was behind these reflections. However, these feelings did not cause the leaders to resist conforming to the regulations. Similar to Müller (2013) case, the YOG leaders still liked their working environment and the cooperation with the IOC.

The exercise of power with demands on follow-up routines and protocols was also directly applied to communication. "It was always politics what we were allowed to say to whom" (YOG leader); thus, standardization tends to block communication and results in people following routines and protocols (Alvesson and Spicer 2012).

The aspiring leaders reported that they had problems understanding what the IOC wanted. In the following example, one aspiring leader tried to explain young people's behaviour to the IOC. The IOC had asked the athletes not to 'run' out of the bus to the welcome tents. The aspiring leader explained that "they are running because they want to be the first in the line [...] it's a normal" behaviour for them. Nonetheless the IOC requested "more security" staff. "And then we [aspiring leader] put more security [staff], and after the first day, the security said—No, we will not stand in front of the bus because they will run over us". This illustrates the generation gap between aspiring leaders and the IOC. While the aspiring leader understood that it was meaningless to try stopping young people from running, the IOC did not take his explanation seriously.

Horizontal group work helped the aspiring leaders follow the routines and not cause complications. Specifically, aspiring leaders aimed to avoid "mistakes" in their correspondence with the IOC. The following excerpt describes how one leader asked a colleague to check emails before sending them to the IOC.

We (department leaders) have to write important emails, and I have made a lot of mistakes writing emails to the IOC with invalid information or with just thoughts. And the IOC is forwarding this to other guys, and in the beginning, this was definitely a major issue. And now my colleague and myself, if we have to write emails that are very important, we will check each other's emails. . . . I will check, and then I suggest changes here and there. (YOG leader)

The YOG leaders learned to adapt to IOC bureaucracy, but they found it challenging when they had to make quick decisions without being able to wait for



feedback from the IOC. The aspiring leaders learned to live by the motto “I’ll do this, but I am not convinced that this is the right way to do it”, which is at the core of reflexive conformity (Müller 2013); thus, the aspiring leaders reflected upon the functionality of different institutional practices. If possible, the leaders would have liked to do some things differently but felt they had to perform their tasks according to the rules, routines, or commands.

Conforming initiates reflections during or after the event about the forces of conformity. The degree of reflexivity can be related to the degree of institutionalization (Greenwood, Suddaby, and Hinings 2002). Young people are socialized to different degrees, and the reflexivity in this mode is visible. The aspiring leaders questioned the institutional practices and tried to argue, but they conformed.

### ***Cynical conformity***

In the WSC, cynical conformity was dominant. Cynical conformity was shown as outspoken critiques and as a disidentification (Fleming and Spicer 2003) of the aspiring leaders’ perceptions of the organizational culture and power structures. All the aspiring leaders I interviewed criticized the bad leadership, especially that of the CEO and the event manager. The absence of leadership, lack of “communication”, “lack of pedagogical insights”, “bad planning”, and “commands that came from all over” were some of the critiques mentioned by the aspiring leaders. However, the aspiring leaders still performed within the hierarchical power structure. They tried to suggest changes, but when met with resistance, they realized there was no point, as exemplified by this aspiring leader:

We sold tickets in the city, and people could really just go in the store right next door and buy them cheaper. It was something that I perceived as very strange. When I questioned this, no one listened to me at all. (WSC leader)

The aspiring leaders were used to an organizational context where they had a say and organizations with “order and structure” (WSC leader). One leader referred to the WSC’s organizational practice as “that’s how you never do it”, claiming that “you just have to learn from it [as a bad example]”. *We* here is related to those organizations and colleagues outside the WSC OC. This and similar quotes can be interpreted as resistant through a disidentification with official culture and with a visible cynicism (Fleming and Spicer 2003). Such resistance through cynicism is also visible in the following quote, where a WSC leader explained how they coped with contradictory messages coming from “all over”: “We could not relate to them, so we blocked them”. She further explained how she was “filtering all contra messages” before she decided upon actions and involved followers. Another aspiring leader explained how the “extreme loyalty” between those she had hired into her department who were “colleagues at other places, too” served as an example of how power worked through disidentification detached from the organizational culture: “the morality, which we tried to pass on to ourselves, but also to our subordinates” was “Yes, this goes as it goes, but our part will be good”. As claimed by Fleming and Spicer (2003, p. 161), “Cultural power may work through a dis-identification”, and in this case, corporate power relations led to functionality as the aspiring leaders reproduced the power structures.

In contrast to the YOG, the aspiring leaders in the WSC who came from the music event industry, cannot be defined as organization friendly. They were outspoken with their criticism and did not respect the leadership styles of the CEO and the event

manager. The aspiring leaders reflected on how the event's leadership affected their ways of working and leading. This reflection happened in the form of group work with leaders at the same level or networking with former colleagues outside the OC, for both the YOG and WSC, though in different forms. At the WSC, reflexive discussion and networking took place mostly with colleagues in the WSC who came from another organizational culture, that of music events (field notes, 14, 15, and 17 February 2012)]. For example, in the catering "a crisis arose when the food for athletes and judges should have been distributed and had not been. Then three middle managers locked themselves in the office. After several phone calls, they solved it somehow without involving the volunteers" (field notes 17 February 2012).

Even though the aspiring leaders heavily criticized the event's leadership, they acknowledged that the CEO had done quite well regarding the contest, international issues, and TV production of the events. This was also confirmed during the author's fieldwork and in informal conversations before game time. Illustrative statements include "Even if there is a lack of structure and weaknesses in the top leadership, this will be a good event" (statement of a manager in the OC, fieldnotes 13 February 2012); "There have been many arms and legs, but it will be a fantastic event nonetheless" (statement from an employee in the Norwegian Snowboard Association, fieldnotes 14 February 2012). While the aspiring leaders were dissatisfied with how the top leaders had operated, they were genuinely proud of having staged the WSC. One aspiring WSC leader said, "It was a very fun event, a good project, and I'm very proud of what [the top leaders] have achieved".

In the WSC, a high degree of economic uncertainty created critical problems. This caused expediency and authoritarian behaviour. These were key drivers behind cynical conformity. Here, expediency is related to the CEO's lack of bureaucracy

allowing him to change directions quickly and give commands according to his own ideas. The limited budget also resulted in increased work effort by requiring the aspiring leaders to take over more responsibility: “They pushed the second department over on me too, so I ended up with much bigger responsibility for the same salary” (WSC leader). This resulted in the aspiring leaders working “somewhere between 18 to 20 hours a day” (WSC leader). This form of manipulation can also be related to an exercise of power (Fleming and Spicer 2007).

Cynical conformity is a mode where the internal strategies can be described as “for sure, this is not right; I do this because it makes it easier for everyone”. This mode involves different reflexive processes of survival strategies for cynicism. The reflexivity is visual. The aspiring WSC leaders conformed even though they feel maltreated, and they discussed this loudly with their colleagues. The level of reflexivity presumably decreases in the long run and is taken for granted (Alvesson and Spicer 2012). In those cases, this action can be seen as a transition from cynical conformity to reflexive conformity. However, in the case of the WSC, the aspiring leaders chose not to work for the same CEO again (WSC leaders).

### **General discussion**

Although the two events represented different institutional settings and exercises of power, the aspiring leaders reported similar leadership experiences. In both cases, the aspiring leaders expressed challenges in balancing doing what was formally correct (i.e., adhering to the norms) and what they thought was factually correct (i.e., what actually should be done). Being paid for functional stupidity and conformity is typical of what happens when one enters an institutionalized environment. There are expectations of how to do things, but these expectations are not always reasonable, factually correct, or easy to adapt to. The balancing act was clearer in the YOG because

there was a strong normative force of institutional learning about how the IOC was functioning. This was also relevant in the WSC, but in this case, it was a reaction to the focus of entrepreneurship and expediency.

Managerial pressure in the YOG was about following the rules and routines of the IOC. This form of power limited the communication between the aspiring leaders and the IOC— “if there is a rule, it needs to be followed”. The disadvantages of this are well known in organizational research. Reliance on formal plans and objectives, concentration on doing everything formally right, and the evaluation and inspection of a “check-off list” lead to a lack of commitment and flexibility and a low degree of creativity (Argyris 1986; Kunda 2009). Even though the aspiring leaders asked the IOC for more autonomy, the IOC emphasized the rules, which limited the aspiring leaders’ ability to take action and bring in their own ideas. However, these ideas may have been valuable as the aspiring leaders were much younger than the representatives of the IOC and closer in age and culture to YOG participants, situating them well to make adjustments. In the WSC, managerial pressure was about following commands to implement the CEO’s entrepreneurial ideas.

Both the YOG and WSC were characterized by functional stupidity (conformity), but it appeared in different ways. In the YOG, functional stupidity was caused by a strong institutional framework. In the WSC, functional stupidity was caused by expediency—a desire to have things done fast and to find quick solutions. Stress caused by time pressure fosters stupidity. Even though the WSC was characterized by dissonance, the aspiring leaders managed to fulfil their responsibilities and stage a successful event.

Paulsen (2017, 185) claims, “Functional stupidity can be seen as the modus operandi of ego-dystonic compliance we enter in order to endure long hours of imposed

work assignments we would rather not perform”. In contrast to the highly dissatisfied employees in Paulsen’s (2017) study, the aspiring leaders at the YOG and WSC felt proud to be part of the event, which encouraged internal motivation, resulting in reflexive and cynical conformity. Consistent with Paulsen, this study shows that both certainty and dissonance in this setting leads to functionality.

As previous research has shown, organizations characterized by stupidity management are efficient and successful in the short run (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). In this study, both events were externally perceived as successful (by visitors, athletes, and TV viewers) during the time of the event (IYOGOC. 2012; Methodmag.com 2012; WSC. 2012; Hanstad, Parent, and Kristiansen 2013). However, in the longer run, whether an OC can maintain this efficiency with such high managerial pressure is uncertain. At the same time, this question could be negligible in one-off sport events, because their OCs do not exist in the long run. The YOG has a good chance of continuing to be efficient because the highly institutionalized routines of documentation and bureaucracy are advantageous for knowledge transfer to future OCs (Parent, MacDonald, and Goulet 2014). However, the WSC, which lacked routines and regulations and was characterized by oft-changing commands and practices, has not yet established managerial tools for transferring knowledge to future event organizers.

Sport events have a hugely compelling ultimate goal. Challenges are time, development, and conceptual change (Parent 2010). They also contend with are rules and regulations, expectations, and economic issues. This creates pressure on the focal organization regarding conformity and regulates the possibilities for agency (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). The agency is governed back to functionality because of the significant pressure to meet the event’s aim and schedule. Due to a strong focus on the implementation of the event, there are no or few alternatives. The strong focus on

getting the event staged leaves no room for discussing better solutions. Workers just have to conform and “stupidly” follow—but this makes sport events function. At the same time, however, it restricts learning. While the YOG managers tried to bring youthful thinking into the OC, the WSC managers tried to bring more professionalism into their event. In the case of the YOG, the managers learned the traditional system of the IOC (and adapted to it), and this was functional. However, it could also be irrelevant for those managers who do not want to work in this kind of organization. The WSC had no learning and no transfer of learning. The aspiring leaders wanted to transfer their knowledge from earlier experiences with music events to the organization, but they were stopped, which explains why the aspiring WSC leaders turned to cynical functional stupidity. It was functional because it made the aspiring leaders reflect on conformism, but it also restricted learning. Aspiring leaders who respond to managerial pressure with functional stupidity have a good chance of obtaining management assignments in new events. In other words, by conforming, aspiring leaders can secure future jobs, and in that perspective, conformity serves to exploit the thought “what’s in it for me?”

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

By exploring aspiring leaders’ reflections on conformity processes, I identified two main modes of conformity: reflexive and cynical. The modes were highly dependent on the degree of institutionalisation within the two different contexts. A strong institutional framework was identified as a key driver behind reflexive conformity, and expediency caused cynical conformity. The organizational setting, an inaugural one-off event, is in many ways not usual but includes significant and perhaps important aspects of work life in general, especially for aspiring leaders in a sport event context.

In accordance with Paulsen (2017), this study shows that the aspiring leaders conformed with the organization and its leaders to do their jobs, but at the same time, the aspiring leaders critically reflected on their own actions. The behaviour (to conform with rules and/or commands) was the same, but the reflections appeared different and shaped different modes of conformity. Seemingly, the reflections behind the behaviour were important to capture. The reflections seem to appear contingent on a process of compliance shaping a normative behaviour of conformity in a short time within the same age group of aspiring leaders entering a new institutional context. In a balancing act, conformity processes of required behaviour trigger visible reflections. If possible, the young managers would rather do their work another way. According to Paulsen (2017), these reflections cannot be considered stupid. Of course, conformity happens naturally in organizations. As pointed out before, not every single manager felt constrained by pressure towards conformity. Furthermore, reflections may change or decrease over time, suggesting that they may differ and fade in time. The data represent important snapshots of reflections that are important to capture before they become socialized and the practices are taken for granted. In this study, the approach of functional stupidity helped capture these reflections.

Regardless of dissonance and increased reflexivity, this study shows that functionality can be achieved, especially in the short run (Alvesson and Spicer 2012; Butler 2016). Conformity captured in functionally stupid behaviour can be a success factor in sport events that do not have a long run—leading to functionality and efficiency. However, the backdrop needs to be considered as sport organizations have to be aware of the consequences of missed opportunities to bring in new ideas (Larsson and Meckbach 2013). Despite functionality in conformity processes, event owners and top managers need to address aspiring leaders seriously. Moreover, when contracting



aspiring leaders, owners and managers should anchor their expectations in reality and form a real picture of what the aspiring leaders are going to do and what is expected of them. If conformity is required, aspiring leaders should not be enticed or fooled into thinking they may have a great influence. On the other hand, taking aspiring leaders' reflections seriously presents the possibility of critical interpretations helping to shape the understanding of how leaders act, whose purpose they serve, and what they try to accomplish when contracting young people in managerial positions. Aspiring leaders should be encouraged to continue to reflect and share their reflections with top managers before less suitable institutional practices become taken for granted. If sports organizations want to have more young leaders, young people need to be given the chance to make decisions and be creative in solving tasks—and not just forced to conform with institutional practices or commands. Sports organizations will benefit from reflexive leaders and managers who are capable of solving current and future challenges such as implementing new sport activities and correcting integration and inequality issues.

A main limitation of this study is the limited number of cases. The two selected cases represent extreme institutional settings. Thus, future research should develop an understanding of a broader variety of institutional settings and their influence on aspiring leaders' conformity modes. Another limitation is the lack of a longer-term perspective on the aspiring leaders' development. This was not part of the study, but a short exploration of the interviewees' LinkedIn profiles shows that in the case of the YOG, the majority are still involved in IOC-regulated events or organizations that work closely with the IOC. In the case of the WSC, none of the interviewees have been involved in additional events organized by the CEO of the WSC 2012, indicating that cynical conformity may lead to disconnection from previous leaders. However, to

develop a better understanding of conformity modes, future research should apply a long-term examination of aspiring leaders' personal and professional development.

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#### **Article 4**

Bodemar, A. & Skille, E. Å. (submitted to *Sport Management Review*). The disappearance of leadership? Aspiring leaders' agency and conformity in various sport event contexts.



**The Disappearance of Leadership? Aspiring Leaders' Agency and Conformity in Various  
Sport Event Contexts**

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**Abstract**

This article investigates aspiring leaders at sport events and explores how leadership is often replaced by conformity in the context of sport events, and why leadership fades. Studying two sport events—the 2012 Innsbruck Youth Olympic Games (YOG) and the 2012 World Snowboarding Championships (WSC)—we conducted 49 interviews with staff from different managerial levels in the organizing committees; and supplemented with observations before, during, and after the events. Employing two relatively new theoretical perspectives into research on sport management leadership, “modes of organizing” and “functional stupidity”, we discuss the empirical material that showed how leadership “faded” and was replaced by conformity. While the agency of aspiring leaders’ was diminished at both events, the processes leading to conformity differed between the highly institutionalized YOG and the more loosely structured institutional context of the WSC. Nevertheless, in both contexts, the aspiring leaders conformed to the pressures they perceived in functional and thus apparently “stupid” ways.

*Keywords:* leadership in sport management, aspiring leaders’ agency, multilevel analysis, critical leadership studies, modes of organizing.

**The Disappearance of Leadership? Aspiring Leaders' Agency and Conformity in Various Sport Event Contexts**

According to Welty Peachey et al. (2015), “most of the leadership research in sport management has paralleled the leadership theories in business management and social psychology” (p. 577), with transformational leadership theory dominating and revolving “around the leader encouraging a follower to maximize his or her potential” (p. 572; see also Gammelsæter, 2021). In that respect, researchers often contribute to the reproduction of an individual-centred understanding of leadership and even of a leader-centred and leader-applauding society. On a societal level, one impact can be that individual leaders are naively valued; on an analytical scholarly level, a consequence can be that we overlook other understandings and explanations of the empirical contexts we scrutinize. Against this background, we want to contribute to leadership research in sport management by responding to a call for “a new generation of thinking” (Ferkins, Skinner, & Swanson, 2018) where leadership is considered “a social, collaborative, and relational experience focusing on the idea that leadership emerges from the interactions and constructions of people in particular contexts” (p. 77). This article responds to the call and moves the field further forward by integrating a critical perspective on leadership.

Moreover, the literature on sport management presents an increasing interest in young leaders (Bodemar et al., 2020; Skirstad et al., 2017). Despite sport organizations' outspoken interest in facilitating for young people, the research indicates a limited success in providing an attractive and developing environment for young leaders. Rather, there tends to be pressure towards conformity instead of giving young people the possibility to flourish and perceive agency (Larsson & Meckbach, 2013; Strittmatter & Skille, 2017; Waldahl & Skille, 2016).

Nevertheless, there is probably no lack of goodwill. Especially for sport events, there seems to be a desire to engage young people in leadership positions in order to renew the organizations and events (Strittmatter, 2020; author's reference). This article scrutinizes two such contexts and studies what we will call *aspiring leaders* at the Youth Olympic Games (YOG) and World Snowboard Championships (WSC). We seek empirical information from the two mentioned sport events and analyse the findings with the application of theories explaining conformity: modes of organizing and functional stupidity.

While Feddersen and Phelan (2021) have shown how people change their behaviour within sport organizations as gradual normalization, we contribute to that literature by showing something similar in more time-limited projects such as the organisation of sport events. Author (author's reference) has elsewhere shed light on the reflections of aspiring leaders and highlighted how they have conformed to institutional pressure in various ways. In this article, we take the analysis further and try to explain how and why such conformity takes place. To do so, we contribute to the reevaluation of leadership theories and leadership research in sport management (e.g. Ferkins et al., 2018; Welty Peachey et al., 2015, p. 5); moreover, we touch on concerns related to how leadership is approached, conventionally referring to a leader-centric phenomenon as an inherently good, objective, concrete, and specific behaviour aimed at growth and efficiency, a behaviour that is consistent across individuals and contexts (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012a; Sinclair, 2007).

Aiming at understanding the reality primarily as seen by the aspiring leaders at the YOG and WSC, we pose the following research questions: How is leadership often replaced by conformity in the context of sport events? and: Why does leadership fade?

This paper follows a classic setup: Next, we present the theoretical approach, combining modes of organizing (Alvesson & Blom, 2019) and functional stupidity (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012b); we sketch the contexts and cases, and the employed methods, mainly interviews supplemented by observation and documents, and we apply the theories in discussing the two empirical cases. Finally, we conclude and summarize with reflections regarding our contribution to the practical and research fields.

### **Theory**

As mentioned, leadership research in sport management has followed the generic field of leadership research (see, for example, Ferkins et al., 2018), which often—at least until recently—implies an application of trait, behavioural, transactional and transformational perspectives. Recently, however, there has been a call for a critical approach in sport management (Amis & Silk, 2005; Frisby, 2005; Gammelsæter, 2021; Knoppers, 2015; Parent, 2015; Shaw & Frisby, 2006; Zervas & Glazzard, 2018). Along the same lines, Parent (2015, p. 59) strongly recommends an analysis of the inner working conditions in the organising committees of sport events through critical management studies by applying concepts that represent an alternative to mainstream management theory. In the myriad of theories into leadership, our choice took the empirical contexts as our points of departure (see context descriptions in the methods section); hereafter, the aspiring leaders' expectations of some degree of agency when being contracted as leaders; moreover, given the middle managerial positions in the hierarchical relationships, the aspiring leaders are both leaders and followers (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). In that respect, we needed tools to assist with analysing the individual perception of agency and how the context enables and/or constrains such agency. Building on author's analysis into how aspiring leaders conform to institutional pressures (author's reference), we apply two critical theoretical

approaches: modes of organizing (Alvesson & Blom, 2019) and functional stupidity (Alvesson & Spicer, 2021b).

The first theoretical perspective we employ is Alvesson and Blom's (2019) "modes of organising", which can be considered as an "alternative vocabulary to leadership" (Alvesson & Blom, 2019, p. 35). The perspective provides a taxonomy for organizational processes that identify everyday activity. The six modes of organising are divided into two main orientations: vertical and horizontal. In the vertical mode, leadership is defined as "influencing meanings, values and beliefs in a hierarchal (unequal) relation" (p. 28). Management refers to "direction and control based on formal rights and hierarchy", and power is "based on force and/or political skills" (Alvesson & Blom, 2019, p. 31).

Given the empirical findings and the identification of all the three horizontal modes of organizing, we present them here. The first mode is network influencing, or "guidance and support from peers within the same occupational speciality/community of practice (outside one's own work group or organizational unit)" (Alvesson & Blom, 2019, p. 31). The second mode is group work, which differs from networking through co-decision-making and support coming from within the group. The third mode is autonomy or self-management, in which a person defines her own standard and evaluates what work should be done and how (Alvesson & Blom, 2019, p. 31; Alvesson et al., 2017). It should be stressed that the modes are analytical, ideal types and that the horizontal and vertical modes are always simultaneously at work. We choose this perspective on modes of organizing because it offers a critical alternative to the leadership-centred research approach; it offers new ways to analyse "old issues" such as, for example, power, followership, tasks to be delivered, and problems to be solved, as well as the relationship between follower and leader.

Leaning on former findings from the overall study (author's reference), the process in which commonly accepting routines leads to conformity can be described as functional stupidity (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012b). This is the second theoretical approach we apply. Functional stupidity refers to an “organizationally supported lack of reflexivity, substantive reasoning, and justification. It entails a refusal to use intellectual resources outside a narrow and ‘safe’ terrain” (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012b, p. 1196). Functional stupidity is not related to intellectual capacity, intelligence or being stupid (Alvesson and Spicer (2012b).

Functional stupidity extends perspectives representing a limited rationalistic view of an organization and associated individuals and involves a “non-heroic” approach to leadership (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012b, p. 1196). In our context, when the goal is to stage a sport event on schedule, individuals—top leaders, aspiring leaders on a middle-management level, and others such as volunteers—are given limited time to reflect (Falkheimer et al., 2016; Michelon et al., 2016; Parent, 2010). The time for thinking things over one more time, time to discuss with colleagues, and time to devise new inventions, is limited; perceptions of pressure increase, and functionality becomes a priority. This may lead to perceptions of constrained agency. Functional stupidity helps explore the pressures to which aspiring leaders are exposed and how they respond to them. Thereby, it can provide explanations for how organisational processes enable and constrain leadership.

The perspectives chosen, especially functional stupidity, are criticised (e.g. Butler, 2016; Paulsen, 2017). Most significantly, and obviously, the very term “stupid” is subject to criticism. We will show that being “apparently stupid” can be considered relatively rational on occasions (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012b) in the context of sport events. Actually, being “apparently stupid” can also appear—in many situations—a smart way to act, given the circumstances. And this is

crucial; the circumstances depend on the context—here, sport events. Critics are also concerned about how a lack of reflexivity can be examined methodically. We follow Paulsen (2017), who claims that “no matter how stupidly we behave during the working day, we retain the capacity to critically reflect on it in hindsight—and to re-enact it again and again” (p. 189). This opens up the possibility of applying the theoretical concept of functional stupidity in case studies by paying attention to observations and reflection in the form of hindsight in interviews.

### Methods

While leadership research has predominantly entailed quantitative, scale measure-based, single-level analyses of successful, senior, Western, White males (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012a; Grint, 2005; Yammarino, 2013), this is a qualitative study of two cases: the 2012 YOG and the 2012 WSC. The sampling criteria included a combination of age (24–34 years old; author’s reference) and experience. We sought leaders with some event experience (4–10 years),<sup>2</sup> at events expressing a youth focus (Parent & Smith-Swan, 2013). Moreover, we chose events with presumed differences regarding their institutional context.

The first winter YOG was held January 13–22, 2012, in Innsbruck, Austria. It was a 10-day multisport event “for young people and driven by young people” (International Olympic Committee, 2008a, p. 4) with the vision of creating “a modern youth-oriented sports event” (IYOGOC, 2012, p. 16). It should also test new competition formats for the Olympic Games. Hence, YOG has its own characteristics yet simultaneously relates to the Olympic Games. The YOG resembles the Olympic Games by following similar comprehensive guidelines (e.g., the *Olympic Charter* (International Olympic Committee, 2011), *YOG Candidature Procedures and Questionnaire* (International Olympic Committee, 2008b), *Host City Contract*, and *YOG Event Manual* (International Olympic Committee, 2013)). To comply with the IOC, the YOG

organizing committee reported on approximately 800 milestones; thus, the YOG is a highly institutionalized event.

Oslo, Norway, hosted the WSC on February 10–19, 2012.<sup>3</sup> The vision was “to create the best snowboarding event to date and demonstrate the potential of independent snowboarding to the world” (World Snowboarding Championships, 2012). In comparison to the YOG, the WSC lacked institutional stability. It had no secure funding, few full-time employees in the planning mode, and therefore few to lean on for help. Moreover, whereas the YOG employed documentation, manuals, and guidelines, the WSC had no instructions for practice. One year before game time, contracts had been only orally agreed upon (field notes, WSC, February 18, 2012). As a hybrid organization owned by voluntary and private event organizers,<sup>4</sup> the WSC faced potential tensions between institutional contexts (Steen-Johnsen, 2008); the institutional pressure from the event owners was substantively lower for the WSC than for the YOG (author reference; World Snowboard Federation, 2010). Both events had a strategy for contracting a young workforce.

We conducted interviews ( $N = 49$ , 27 women and 22 men) and supplemented with observations and document analyses (see Table 1). Triangulation of data collection methods (Eisenhardt, 1989) facilitated multiple perspectives in the selected events. Thus, it provided us with an opportunity to cross-check statements on different hierarchical levels (Schaefer & Alvesson, 2020).

[Table 1 near here]

This study was approved by Norwegian social science data services, the WSC, and the YOG. All interviewees signed a written consent form. The first author interviewed CEOs of both



events, nine aspiring leaders during the YOG and seven aspiring leaders during the WSC. The interviews lasted between 24 min and 2 hr, 13 min ( $M = 58$  min). An interview guide was followed, and probing questions were used to obtain examples. The interview topics consisted of participants' background information; roles and responsibilities; and relationships with superiors, peers, and volunteers. We asked about why they wanted to become leaders, support (e.g., "Tell me about how you have been trained and supported in your leadership role"), influence (e.g., "What are the general perceptions of young leaders in the YOG?"), and self-reflections of themselves as leaders. We asked about structure (e.g., "How do you perceive the given frames for the event?") and agency (e.g., "Can you give some examples of how you tried to adapt the frames to go your own way?").

In addition, we conducted interviews with 31 volunteers, focusing on how they perceived the leaders; we also interviewed the CEOs about their responsibilities, including those regarded the aspiring leaders, recruitment procedures, support, and differences related to age and experience.

### **Data Analyses**

The data analyses followed a two-step process (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2010); first, the interview transcripts were openly coded, and second, they were theoretically coded. The interviews with the aspiring leaders led us to the identification of conformity modes and later to the understanding of functional stupidity. Member checking entailed interviewees' commenting on the drafts of papers, resulting in minor changes and the addition of supplementary information. The analyses included re-readings and new interpretations, discussions with researchers into sport events and expertise in critical leadership studies, as well as discussions with practitioners from the two events. In sum, the cross-checking through different data-

gathering methods (interviews, observations, and documents) and the inclusion of different organizational levels were applied for data triangulation and to capture different dimensions of the same phenomenon.

### **Results and Discussion**

To enter the field, we first—relatively descriptively—examined how the aspiring leaders expressed their reasons for engagement and their experiences alongside the CEOs’ and volunteers’ perceptions of the aspiring leaders. We then explored how the aspiring leaders perceived their agency for leadership and the organizational processes and pressures at play. As the outcomes of the aspiring leadership role are summed up as conformity in the third part, we finally discussed how and why leadership is diminishing and simultaneously somewhat replaced by conformity.

#### **The Aspiring Leaders Wanted to Lead**

In both the WSC and YOG, the aspiring leaders considered it “exciting to have a lot of responsibility” (WSC 2), liked the challenge of completing tasks (WSC 2, 3, 4; YOG 4) because “I’ve always had a tendency to take the initiative to do things” (WSC 5). They “like to be in the front” (YOG 1), and one stated: “I’m a team leader in my heart” (YOG 3). Another claimed that this leadership trait was shaped at a young age when she “convened a meeting with the kindergarten management ... to sort things out” (YOG 7). The aspiring leaders conceived themselves as capable and believed that others would listen to them and engage with what they had to say. In other words, the aspiring leaders wanted more than simply having the title of leader on paper; they wanted “to be involved in making decisions and then be allowed to take those actions and allowed to accept the consequences if they have done something wrong” (WSC 5). Given these interview extracts, we interpret the aspiring leaders to desire agency.

Both events had a stated goal of engaging young people in various positions. In order to make the event “authentic, I think it needs to have certain credibility [and] you need ... to understand how young people are thinking and acting and behaving” (CEO of YOG). Both CEOs held that the aspiring leaders added an important contribution to the event organizations. The CEO of YOG considered the young people to be “even more motivated than the older ones to take responsibility ... because they understood the opportunity.” Comparing them with more experienced leaders, the aspiring leaders’ lack of experience was an advantage because they were not “caught in certain routines” and were more “open to innovation,” and the “young people basically challenged every single decision and every single functional approach” by asking questions such as “Why don’t we do it this way?” aiming at making their tasks “easier, quicker, cheaper, more fun” (CEO of YOG).

The WSC’s CEO also encouraged the idea of supporting aspiring leaders: “We wanted to be part of developing the young [leaders].” Because the WSC struggled to find people for administrative and leadership tasks in their own ranks within the given budget, they mainly recruited people from music events. “There, we gained a lot of expertise, and they are very young ... a tight group [who] toiled hard”. However, these young leaders were not so familiar with the sport context and had “a different mindset on how to do things than we [snowboarders] had” (CEO of WSC). To develop aspiring leaders, it was necessary “to give them responsibilities;” it was the superiors’—especially the CEO’s—responsibility to balance the tasks and the burden with the aspiring leaders’ experience and competence. The superiors tried to “be conscious of not putting them in tasks that are too big for them” and to “be aware that they have much less ballast” compared to more experienced leaders (CEO of WSC). Thus, the attitude towards the aspiring leaders was a double-edged sword. Both CEOs wanted to provide

opportunities for aspiring leaders and an environment for taking responsibility through agency but not unnecessarily overload them. We see this as an example of how the framework of an event and the superior's trust in young people enabled their agency and development.

Volunteers mainly reported a positive relationship with the aspiring leaders. A common description of the relationship was friendship and a non-hierarchical affiliation (in YOG volunteer 2,3,4,5,7,8,10,12,14,15; WSC volunteer 3,5,9,10,11). As one YOG volunteer shares: "It is more a friendship than a real leader-and-follower relationship" (YOG volunteer). WSC volunteers had similar perceptions, and one holds that an aspiring leader "is trying to be a friend and be cool. In that way trying to gain your respect, but she does not need to because I will do anything she says" (WSC volunteer 3). While volunteers are not contracted, as are the leaders, the leaders have little formal power to make volunteers follow orders. However, as just indicated ("I will do anything she says"), volunteers consider themselves to be followers—but in a non-hierarchical manner: "I think we are at the same level" (WSC volunteer 9); "The hierarchy is not [something] you can feel so much. They don't make themselves superior" (YOG volunteer 16). There were no empirical observations that implied that the aspiring leaders had to persuade volunteers in any way.

Given the tasks and the contexts of events, the time for negotiation and persuasion is limited—and probably seen as a waste of time from both parties. "There was simply not enough time, really" (YOG 5), and the volunteers were "surprisingly dutiful" (YOG 7). Moreover, if tasks were easy and solved by volunteers in a straightforward manner, there was not much need for guidance because "it's an easy kind of activity" (YOG 3). The aspiring leaders simply held an overview of the task being done; hence "they tell us what to do" (WSC volunteer 2) and "delegate tasks but not responsibilities" (YOG 7). Analysing the activities and reflections from

the volunteers and aspiring leaders in light of Alvesson and Blom's (2019) modes of organizing, the organizational mode at play between the aspiring leaders and the volunteers is primarily management. Thus, it could be discussed whether the aspiring leaders exercised leadership.

### **Constrained Agency and Organizational Processes at Play**

The aspiring leaders at the YOG felt motivated and capable, but the hectic environment was demanding. "Regarding the aspiring leaders, they work very hard, [are] dedicated and passionate in their work". Moreover, many aspiring leaders were "able to unfold within the IOC frames [and had] a good dialogue with IOC". However, there were also "many examples of how they have been steered by the frames and discussions about these frames. Some leaders have accepted it, and others have tried to make changes for the better for the event. They appear as stressed ..." (field notes YOG January 19<sup>th</sup>. 2012). Although they entered the event with the expectation of having influence, they soon experienced limitations. Both the aspiring leaders and volunteers reported concerns about the bureaucratic and hierarchical organization: "If there is a rule, then it should be followed" (YOG 9). When given a task, "it should somehow be checked before you can deliver," and if not, it results in a "loss of motivation, in a way" (YOG 7). The decreased motivation was linked to restricted possibilities of having any influence; the aspiring leaders "were told, 'Your delivery is ABC. It looks like this, a square box. Here you are!'" (YOG 7).

The aspiring leaders at the WSC reported similar concerns. Still, these were more related to decisions at a higher hierarchical level: "When your boss overrules the system we create, then we just have to say, 'Well, then, we'll do it in the way you decided.' ... That's how the hierarchy works" (WSC 5). The aspiring leaders held that "many things were ... sort of double-checked and compared to [what we were] directly ordered to do" (WSC 6). All in all, aspiring leaders

conceived of themselves as those “solving the problems ... every single day, all the time” (WSC 5), but without having any agency to create the solutions themselves. While the solution to complex problems mostly requires a long-term perspective, the velocity at sport events provides no time to innovate through experimentation and lessons of failure at an event. In the YOG case, the IOC representatives had more know-how from mega-events. Simultaneously, the IOC officially wanted aspiring leaders to think creatively and downsize mega-event solutions into a large-scale sport event that attracts younger generations.

The aspiring leaders had to balance the ambiguous expectations of being enabled and constrained; thus, they experienced a discrepancy between the desire for agency and the experience of being relatively constrained by pressure as a result of power. Although the mode of organizing in both contexts was power and resulted in the confirmative behaviour of the aspiring leaders, the power had different origins in the two contexts: the IOC (event owner) for the YOG, and the CEO for the WSC. Thus, the institutional pressure leading to conformity took different forms in the two contexts. For the YOG, it was related to institutional expectations to adapt to the norms. The aspiring leaders experienced tensions regarding the relationship with the IOC, their interpretations of institutional elements based on their former event experience, and their perceptions of themselves (author’s reference), especially perceptions of constrained agency. For the WSC, the perception of limited agency stemmed from authoritarian behaviour from top management. A chaotic organizational environment combined with a lack of leadership on the part of the CEO led to perceptions of uncertainty. The aspiring leaders coped with this uncertainty by applying horizontal modes of organizing. First, they autonomously put in a lot of effort: “I probably work approximately 20 hours a day” (WSC 3) and “call here and there ... have meetings ... Google a bit” (WSC 3). Second, the aspiring leaders took advantage of group

work because they “knew each other from before” when they “were colleagues elsewhere” (WSC 5). At the WSC, the group work among the aspiring leaders contributed to finding solutions to organizational problems; this is an example of the difference between network and group work, where group work includes co-decision-making with guidance and support (Alvesson et al., 2017). Third, the aspiring leaders at the WSC took advantage of their networks in the music industry to help them to solve tasks. As one aspiring leader shared: “Fortunately, we knew a lot of people from other organizations” (WSC 6). In line with former research, we saw that support from peers through horizontal modes of organizing helped the aspiring leaders to take advantage of the network communities in which they were embedded (Alvesson et al., 2017; Parent et al., 2009; Parent et al., 2009). Initiatives for solutions originated from the aspiring leaders’ former music festival experience and know-how. These structures of networks, partly outside of the event, combined with the aspiring leaders’ flexible behaviour and loyalty to the aim of accomplishing the event helped the WSC to succeed. Hence, through horizontal modes of organizing, the aspiring leaders acted as agents who perceived that they were conducting their “own” practice.

At the WSC, the CEO and the aspiring leaders perceived problems differently. A main reason for the discrepancy in their understanding of the same social reality is that the aspiring leaders “had very little information” and therefore had to reply with “no idea” if they were confronted with requests regarding lounge access, transportation, plans in the snowboard village, etc. (field notes at WSC, February 14th, 2012). According to the aspiring leaders, the information stopped at the top—with the CEO. Whereas the CEO responded to problems with authoritarian behaviour, the aspiring leaders called for leadership (authors reference). The CEO’s behaviour was not the type of organizational process that many of the aspiring leaders

expected—a situation that can be interpreted as a “construction divergence” (Alvesson, 2017, p. 8). At the YOG, the exercise of power characterized the relationship as unequal, where the IOC and CEO were influential on the aspiring leaders. The mode of organizing between the aspiring leaders and the volunteers revealed management processes involving targeting the volunteers’ behaviour more directly with task assignments and resource allocations.

At both events, the internal circumstances were paradoxical in nature, as they were described as being challenging compared with the external image of a successful event. Both events were successful regarding their outspoken, youthful images (IYOGOC, 2012; World Snowboarding Championships, 2012; World Snowboard Federation, 2010). Although the aspiring leaders disliked the pressure to follow the institutionalized rules and superiors’ commands, they felt proud to be part of the successful events. For example, an aspiring leader at the WSC, who was critical of the top leaders, shared, “It was a very fun event ... and I’m very proud of what [the top leaders] have achieved” (WSC 5). This can be seen as a form of self-deception when it comes to belonging, as the aspiring leaders experienced a lack of agency but still liked the situation (Humphreys & Rigg, 2020). In addition, the CEOs emphasized the demanding circumstances (e.g., the lack of resources and the time pressure) in explaining the conformity pressures they created. The aspiring leaders’ restricted agency makes empirical sense due to the ultimate compelling goal to stage the event on schedule, combined with unforeseen circumstances, including mistakes and bad decisions. How can this be explained? We now turn to the more theoretical explorations, and we explicitly explore how the perspective of functional stupidity can help us to understand the empirical cases.



**Explaining Conformity with a Focus on Functionality**

With our goal being to analyse the balancing act between the desire for agency and perceptions of a constraining structure, the concept of functional stupidity assists us in understanding how the aspiring leaders considered many of their tasks to be functional even though they were not necessarily perceived as meaningful at the moment. For example, an aspiring leader at the YOG reflected upon being instructed to “tape and cover everything: coffee machines, toilets, everything” (YOG 9), which was also observed during the fieldwork (field notes, January 16<sup>th</sup>, 2012). When the aspiring leaders found a task to be a “little ridiculous,” it could be argued that this was due to the poor communication of the rationale for the task, as many jobs include relatively mundane tasks. In this situation, the described behaviour can be designated as stupid because people are apparently encouraged not to think for themselves (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012b, 2016). It should be noted that events and event organizations comprise several small tasks and actions that may appear to be stupid when isolated but that add up to a successful result when put together. Before we explore the outcome of stupidity management, we will take one step back and have a closer look at how power in the two institutional event contexts blocked communicative activities.

The aspiring leaders reported several concerns that made it difficult to operate within the framework of the YOG. First, they struggled to understand the professional hierarchy. As the time for supervision was limited, one aspiring leader explained, “It was quite a challenge to get an overview because the whole structure is quite complicated”; this leader was referring to both the structure within “the IOC and also the structure in our organization [OC] with so many different functions” (YOG 4). Therefore, she “just started to look for the information everywhere” (YOG 4). Second, the aspiring leaders felt that “there are some rules that make life

harder for us”, referring to, for example, “the uniform guidelines” (YOG 4) or “this rule 50 [of the Olympic Charter] thing” (YOG 3). One aspiring leader claimed that “it was always a political affair what we were allowed to say, what to whom” (YOG 3), and “the strong regulations and all structures” made the IOC “stuck in structure” (YOG 3). Third, the aspiring leaders struggled to find out how they were supposed to act within their positions so that they could adapt their strategies regarding how to get things done in a way that nudged things in a significant way: “Sometimes it was a bit complicated because I did not have a high enough rank to get a direct message from the IOC” (YOG 7). This aspiring leader elaborated further: “The IOC that sits in a way a bit with the conclusion. So, they can come and say like this: ‘What you do is wrong. It says in the book [the event manual] that you should not do that, you should do this’. And it is not experienced very constructively either . . . , and these high lords [IOC delegates] were not seen as very productive, as they were very far from the operational” (YOG 7).

The aspects mentioned above are related to a fourth aspect, which we denominate the IOC culture, because it was related to understanding “the IOC's language and way of seeing the world or the way of seeing the event is very special” (YOG 7).

The aspiring leaders at the WSC struggled to understand the snowboard culture as well as the operational focus. They felt that top management had control of aspects related to “knowledge of the snowboard sport, international contacts and aesthetics and [of] what should look cool on TV” (WSC 2). However, they lacked focus on practical aspects of the event, such as “planning [...], logistics, practicalities, organization and implementation” (WSC 2). As one aspiring leader reflected: “You do not always feel that you speak the same language, because you have a slightly different focus” (WSC 3). Another aspiring leader blamed the snowboarding culture for being a culture of risk-taking and causing ad-hoc solutions: “It was not clarified

whether it would be Holmenkollen [adding a new discipline to the event in a new arena] until January, two weeks before the event. It's way too little time. But it's part of the snowboard culture, too. I have discovered that” (WSC 5).

The event concept of the YOG can be categorized as an institution-based youth event (as defined by Strittmatter & Parent, 2019) because the IOC created it as a supplement to its senior events, the Olympic Games (OG). Therefore, the IOC applied a similar and traditional set of organizational structures and practices. In contrast, the WSC can be categorized as a youth-driven event with a looser institutional setting (Strittmatter & Parent, 2019). Such events often have an innovative focus, where the concept is not decided upon beforehand and can be adapted by the organizing committee. Contradictory to the highly institutionalized IOC, snowboarding events are still in the process of institutionalization (Strittmatter et al., 2019). This explains how the CEO of the WSC could operate with expediency.

Although the aspiring leaders perceived less agency than first anticipated, they all perceived their efforts to be pieces of a larger, positive puzzle. A positive outcome of functional stupidity is that organizational order is maintained, as people simply accept regulations (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012b). However, the aspiring leaders might have also seen their efforts as contributions to reproducing an organization of which they were critical. Thus, functional stupidity includes reflexivity and self-management. The aspiring leaders combined agency with institution: they actively and deliberately adapted to the institutional environment's expectations (Paulsen, 2017). Agents' evaluation of the rationales behind their own and others' actions include coping mechanisms stemming from the desire for functionality, although they often resulted in a collective organizational reproduction. At the YOG, the CEO stressed that “everybody is in line with YOG's vision to make the project successful. So, yes, I did spend a lot

of time on telling them about the vision and explaining the vision, and that was in every single function.” Such communication from above probably helped the aspiring leaders to understand the event’s wholeness as well as the importance of their own pieces of the puzzle (such as taping to cover brands on coffee machines) despite experiencing immediate feelings of mundaneness and flatness. We interpret this as symbolic manipulation that led to stupid management due to the highly institutionalized context. At first sight, stupid self-management among the aspiring leaders stemmed from their being encouraged not to question the IOC framework (for example, regarding regulations for logos on equipment).

Also, within the context of the WSC, the aspiring leaders’ tasks were to put “visions into practice” (WSC 3). However, whereas the YOG had a tradition and an established institution, including written manuals and formalized knowledge transfer procedures, the WSC—especially given the lack of the trickling down of information as per above—was framed as the project of the CEO. Instead of involving the aspiring leaders and providing opportunities to influence decisions, the CEO ruled. In his own words: “The event would have been bad had we chosen such a common sports policy approach to the event. Unfortunately, it had to be run quite dictatorially” (CEO of the WSC). The aspiring leaders were encouraged to stop asking questions after efforts were made to interfere with the event in the beginning: “I questioned it. No one listened to me at all” (WSC 6). Moreover, the lack of written guidelines and other institutionalized procedures necessitated that the CEO make decisions, often solely based on the CEO’s own judgments.

Consequently, as an aspiring leader, “you feel there is not so much you can say; you just have to do it” (WSC 5). In the end, these experiences led to compliance and conformity because all aimed for a successful event. This is in line with Jackall (1988), who explained that “what is

right in the corporation is what the guy above you wants from you” (p. 6). The above example of aspiring leaders who comply instead of resisting, which they might have wanted to do according to their own judgements of the situations, can serve as an example of a reflexive agent—one who, after reflection, ends with “choosing” obedience. One might ask why the aspiring leaders adapted or complied instead of being creative, exerting influence, or opposing, especially after initially being given the impression that they would have space for agency and then experiencing the opposite. The simple answer to this is that the aspiring leaders as a collective wanted a successful and on-time event, which appeared to be on track to happen. In this respect, functional stupidity becomes a product of vertical organizational practices focusing on discipline to shape the structures and to secure the outcome needed to execute a given event.

An institutionalization process was taking place; thus, different institutional contexts led to conformity in different ways. On an aggregated level, we can claim that the aspiring leaders (and others) adapted to the event context’s institutional framework. However, what they did more specifically was to adapt to the IOC at the YOG, as well as to the top managers at the WSC. In both cases, the aspiring leaders conformed to the organization to do their jobs and to fulfil the event’s mission. However, different dominating responses toward conformity and various forms of stupidity existed depending on the institutional context. At the YOG, the aspiring leaders were institutionalized into the IOC’s way of thinking, and at the same time, they were flattened out as leaders. At the WSC, the aspiring leaders conformed due to master suppression techniques as well as the sense of urgency to handle various commands coming from above. Zervas and Glazzard (2018) observed a similar lack of flexibility in event owners’ ability to listen to and involve local organizing committees in the decision-making process.

By highlighting the reflections behind the conformity, we have interpreted different modes of conformity: straight conformity as obedience, reflexive conformity as a deliberation of persuading oneself (Müller, 2013), and cynical conformity as resistance to practices or circumstances that the aspiring leaders would have rather changed (in line with Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009). Although the result under all circumstances was conformity, which to some extent may appear to be “stupid”, this was primarily functional. The various modes of organizing were motivated by efficiency and were aimed at accomplishing the event organizations’ goals. We interpreted and labelled this conformity as functional stupidity. Although the aspiring leaders tried to understand the core aspects and values of the inaugural sport event, they tried to use their competence in line with their identities, and based on their previous experience with sport events in the new environment. However, they had to accept that this was only possible to a very limited extent (if at all). The divergence between their perceived and preferred agency implies conformity.

### **Conclusion**

In an overarching (Western) context, aspiring leaders are fostered in a leader-centric society, where leadership is seen as valuable, important, and something to desire. We, too, found that the aspiring leaders wanted to and believed that they would conduct leadership when they entered the focal sport events. They were highly motivated and entered their jobs with the understanding of being given opportunities for innovative solutions, which we sum up in the concept of agency. However, the aspiring leaders’ experience was that they were given little room for agency and soon learned that it was better to comply with the institutional pressure of the context to get the job done.

An inspiration for this article came from researchers (Welty Peachey et al., 2015; Yammarino, 2013; Yukl, 2012) who pinpointed that leadership research—in sport management and elsewhere—was dominated by approaches that used quantitative measures; were functionalistic, single levelled, and gendered; and often naively interpreted leadership as good. We agree that the need exists to challenge the traditional approaches; therefore, we studied youthful contexts with aspiring leaders of both genders, applied several qualitative methods, and investigated our target subjects—the aspiring leaders—from various levels. Most importantly, we took on an alternative analytical approach when describing the aspiring leaders' experiences and understanding their conditions for conducting leadership. Thus, it is timely to remind the reader that different perspectives provide different answers. One must live with these contradictions because no perspective can explain everything. In this respect, we conceptualized a framework and created an interview guide with the aim of studying aspiring leaders' agency within institutional contexts.

To answer how aspiring leaders “lost leadership” in the studied sport events, we applied the theoretical approaches of modes of organizing (Alvesson & Blom, 2019; Alvesson et al., 2017) and functional stupidity (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012b) to study agency and conformity, where conformity is a variant of agency. Modes of organizing provided us with a notion of alternatives to a leadership-centric view both in practice and in research. We discovered how aspiring leaders balance their own aspirations toward institutional conditions. In Feddersen and Phelan's (2021) study, it was shown how behaviour in sport organizations changes gradually and over time in ways that may appear to be stupid, and hence, it is functional. However, we showed how similar mechanisms also happen in event organizations and thus relatively instantly. Specifically, “not being reflective can be positive in certain situations” (Feddersen & Phelan,

2021, p. 9), and “despite the negative connotations, selective stupidity can prove functional and lead to success” (Feddersen & Phelan, 2021, p. 2). The functional stupidity framework enabled us to explain two mutual empirical paradoxes: a youthful and innovative image versus perceived discipline, and internal tensions versus external success. The aspiring leaders were highly committed to the main goal of successfully arranging the event and realized that this required that the organization work operationally. Functional stupidity can explain why events do not collapse/fail despite the lack of “leadership”.

Previous literature claimed that leadership is the clue behind successful events (e.g., Parent, Beaupre, et al., 2009; Parent, Olver, et al., 2009; Parent & Séguin, 2007). In contrast, empirical studies in mainstream management research showed that leadership is sporadic in everyday practices (e.g., Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a, 2003b; Karp, 2013; Kelly et al., 2006). With this study, we explained this paradox by showing how and why leadership as a mode of organizing “disappears” on three hierarchal levels.

In the scrutinized contexts, functional stupidity works because it involves paying attention to reflexivity irrespective of the objective behaviour. This idea contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the institutional context as well as the consequences of controlling regimes in event management. A conflict seems to exist between the frameworks and reality. Furthermore, it gives us a notion of power structures. In our cases, different perceptions at different organizational levels make leadership diminish as a mode of organizing. Rather, we observed management towards volunteers, horizontal processes between the aspiring leaders at the same level, and power between the CEO/event owners and the aspiring leaders. In sum, our study showed that the aspiring leaders’ perceptions of following rules, regulations, and orders were stronger than their perceptions of being leaders who could directly impact the event were.



Hence, in our cases, the perception of agency (and the power to take action) was more related to pressure for conformity, where leadership as an organizational practice is more limited.

An event has many goals to fulfil, and developing young people through aspiring leader positions is relatively low on the list. Thus, an empirical answer to why leadership fades is simply that fulfilling an event's schedule *and* nurturing aspiring leaders becomes an impossible equation from the very outset. The main practical implication of our findings is that capturing young people's reflections is important because sport organizations will benefit from reflexive leaders and managers who can solve current and future challenges. Therefore, we do believe that this article provides several contributions to the sport management research. First, we consider the focus on conformity and "stupidity" as frameworks that can challenge the positivistic and conventional approaches to leadership theories and perhaps combine existing theories. Second, we encourage a critical approach to leadership that focusses on organizational processes and outcomes. Third, as a methodological sidekick to the main focus and contribution of this study, the applied framework has the potential to encourage multiple-hierarchical-level research, for example, as we did with data from not only the aspiring leaders put under scrutiny but also their volunteers (subordinates) and CEOs. Finally, in organizations, people must have a shared understanding of various organizational aspects as well and recognize them all as important.

Regarding future research, we suggest—given the negative connotation of the name of the theoretical perspective (including the word stupidity)—discussing functional stupidity more explicitly with research participants.

**Table 1*****Overview of Data Collections***

| Methods                   | YOG   | WSC   |
|---------------------------|---|---|
| Semistructured interviews | <p>Nine aspiring leaders (YOG 1–9), aged 24–34 years (mean 29 years)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Department managers (n = 3)</li> <li>▪ Managers of a functional area (n = 4)</li> <li>▪ Volunteer team managers (n = 2)</li> </ul> <p>Volunteers (n = 20)</p> <p>CEO (age 42)</p> | <p>Seven aspiring leaders (WSC 1–7), aged 24–29 years (mean 27 years)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Department managers (n = 2)</li> <li>▪ Managers of a functional area (n = 2)</li> <li>▪ Volunteer team managers (n = 2)</li> <li>▪ Event manager (n = 1)</li> </ul> <p>Volunteers (n = 11)</p> <p>CEO (age 43)</p> |
| Observations              | <p>10 days during game time</p> <p>City-to-city debriefing after the event</p>  | <p>8 days during game time</p> <p>Meetings, pre- and postevent</p> <p>Participant observations (3 days)</p>   |
| Reports                   | <p>Published evaluation report (179 pages)</p> <p>Published research about volunteers</p>   | <p>Unpublished evaluation report (79 pages)</p> <p>Unpublished research about volunteers (254 participants)</p>   |

*Note.* YOG = Youth Olympic Games; WSC = World Snowboarding Championships.

**Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup> In this study, we designated the young leaders put under scrutiny as aspiring leaders because of the event organizers' outspoken aim of educating young leaders. Herein, being an aspiring leader was related to being a specific age (24–34 years old), having a minimum of four years of event experience, and entering a new organization as an aspiring leader (author's reference).

<sup>2</sup> The exception was one team manager at the WSC who had less experience.

<sup>3</sup> The International Ski Federation has organized the WSC every second year since 1996, but the last WSC that independent snowboarders ran took place in 1999.

<sup>4</sup> The concept of the WSC is owned by Ticket to Ride, which represents private event owners, and the World Snowboard Federation, which represents nations. The event-organizing company, Snowboard VM 2012, represented a threefold ownership, owned by Ticket to Ride, the Norwegian Snowboard Federation, and Oslo Vinterpark (a resort).

<sup>5</sup> Paulsen (2017) identified 10 rationales behind stupidity self-management, representing both reflective and unreflective modes of compliance.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Summary in Norwegian

Den empiriske konteksten for denne avhandlingen er ledelse i idrett og spesielt ledelse ved idrettsarrangementer, innenfor det akademiske forskningsfeltet sport management. Denne avhandlingen tar sikte på å analysere unge ledere på idrettsarrangement. Mer spesifikt undersøker den hvordan unge aspirerende ledere (i alderen 24-34 år) oppfatter og utøver ledelse i ulike institusjonelle idrettsarrangementskontekster. Avhandlingen undersøker fire forskningsspørsmål: (a) den institusjonelle kontekstens innflytelse på aspirerende ledes utøvelse av innflytelse; (b) aspirerende ledes mestringsstrategier for å håndtere usikkerhet og sikre vellykket gjennomføring av idrettsarrangementer; (c) påvirkning av institusjonelle konteksten på aspirerende ledes konformitetsprosesser; og (d) årsakene til at lederskap erstattes med konformitet på idrettsarrangement.

Det teoretiske rammeverket kombinerer nyinstitusjonell teori og to kritiske ledelsesperspektiver (modes of organizing og funksjonell dumhet). Nyinstitusjonell teori brukes for å forklare hvordan ulike institusjonelle kontekstene muliggjør og begrenser ledelse. Modes of organizing lederskap bidrar til å bestemme ulike organisasjonsprosesser, og funksjonell dumhet brukes for å forklare utfallet og nøkkeldriverne bak organisasjonsprosessene (omdannelse til konformitet).

Forskningsdesignet er en multiple-casestudie med innsamlet data på to idrettsarrangementer: 2012 Innsbruck Youth Olympic Games (YOG) og 2012 VM i Snowboard (WSC). Studien er kvalitativ undersøkelse basert på 47 intervjuer med ansatte og frivillige som representerer ulike organisasjonsnivåer i organisasjonskomiteene, støttet av observasjoner før, under og etter arrangementene, feltnotater og dokumenter.

Resultatene viste at både svært institusjonaliserte kontekster, som i YOG, og løst institusjonaliserte kontekster, som i WSC, begrenset aspirerende mellomleders mulighet for agency og følgelig lederskap. Agency virket minimert, kontrollert og disiplinert av toppledere og begrenset av eksternt trykk. De to institusjonelle kontekstene skapte imidlertid ulikt press. I YOG var press knyttet til institusjonelle forventninger om å overholde normer og forskrifter, men i WSC var press knyttet til mangel på orientering i en løst strukturert institusjonell setting og topplederes autoritære atferd. Komparative analyser av arrangementene avdekket to hovedformer på



konformitet som presser og begrenser; refleksiv og kynisk. Resultatene viste at konformitetsmodusene er svært avhengig av graden av institusjonalisering av praksis, regler og maktstrukturer innenfor arrangementets organisasjon. Den kontekstuelle hastigheten på idrettseventet, maktstrukturer og presset mot konformitet fører til fenomenet falmende lederskap. For å sikre vellykket gjennomføring av arrangementer erstatter alternative organiseringsmåter lederskap. Resultatene viste at aspirerende ledere som utfører management overfor frivillige, horisontale prosesser mellom aspirerende ledere på samme hierarkiske nivå, og makt mellom CEO/arrangementseier og de aspirerende lederne. Videre tydet analysene på at presset mot konformitet er en hurtig prosess. Dermed er det viktig å fange unge ledes refleksjoner i forbindelse med nyansettelser, spesielt siden idrettsorganisasjoner vil ha nytte av refleksive ledere og som kan løse nåværende og fremtidige utfordringer som idretten og idrettsarrangementer står overfor.

Tidligere forskning bruker vanligvis single-level analyser for å studere ledelse. Dette gir unøyaktige distinksjoner og definisjoner av de organisatoriske prosessene som former lederskap.

Avhandlingen bidrar til litteraturen om lederskap innen Sport Management gjennom flemnivåanalyser og gjennom å undersøke agency med kritiske perspektiver. Dermed bidrar avhandlingen til å utforske unge og aspirerende ledes muligheter til å fungere som ledere. Mer spesifikt, gir den en dypere forståelse av hvordan den institusjonelle konteksten påvirker aspirerende ledes agency og press mot konformitet. En av avhandlingens begrensninger er at den bare kan gi et øyeblikksbilde i få utvalgte caser som representerer ekstreme institusjonelle kontekster. Det foreslås derfor at fremtidig forskning utforsker flere institusjonelle sammenhenger og bruker et langsiktig perspektiv.

Denne avhandlingen er den første som undersøker organisatoriske prosesser på idrettsarrangement på mikronivå med en kritisk tilnærming. Den forklarer nøkkeldrivere og resultater av konformitetsprosesser i ulike arrangementskontekster og belyser hvordan og hvorfor ledelse som en organisatorisk organiseringsmåte forsvinner i en idrettsarrangementskontekst. Videre er denne avhandlingen den første som undersøker unge menneskers oppfatninger og utøvelse av lederskap på idrettsarrangement. Det gir verdifulle praktiske implikasjoner for eiere og arrangører av idrettsarrangement, som har blitt populære for å utdanne unge aspirerende ledere.

**Appendix 2: Norwegian Social Science Data Service – acceptance for collecting and keeping personal data**



# NSD NORSK SENTER FOR FORSKNINGSDATA

## Vurdering

### Referansenummer

199891

### Prosjekttittel

Prosjekt 29713 - Unge ledere ved store idrettsarrangementer

### Behandlingsansvarlig institusjon

Norges idrettshøgskole / Institutt for idrett og samfunnsvitenskap

### Prosjektansvarlig (vitenskapelig ansatt/veileder eller stipendiat)

Annika Bodemar, annika.bodemar@nih.no, tlf: 93448822

### Type prosjekt

Forskerprosjekt

### Prosjektperiode

01.01.2012 - 01.08.2022

### Vurdering (4)

---

#### 13.01.2022 - Vurdert

Vi har vurdert endringen registrert 17.12.21.

Vi har nå registrert 01.08.2022 som ny sluttdato for behandling av personopplysninger.

Vi vil følge opp ved ny planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet.

Kontaktperson ved Personverntjenester: Karin Lillevold  
Lykke til videre med prosjektet!

#### 02.08.2021 - Vurdert

NSD har vurdert endringen registrert 25.06.21.

Vi har nå registrert 01.12.21 som ny sluttdato for behandling av personopplysninger.

NSD vil følge opp ved ny planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet.

Kontaktperson hos NSD: Karin Lillevold  
Lykke til videre med prosjektet!

## 12.06.2020 - Vurdert

### BAKGRUNN

Prosjektet er tidligere meldt og vurdert av NSD, referansenummer 29713. Ny innmelding gjelder forlengelse av oppbevaring av innsamlete personopplysninger. Denne vurderingen erstatter den forrige vurderingen.

Det er NSD sin vurdering at behandlingen er i samsvar med personvernlovgivningen, så fremt den gjennomføres i tråd med det som er dokumentert i meldeskjemaet 28.08.2019 med vedlegg, samt i meldingsdialogen mellom innmelder og NSD. Behandlingen kan fortsette.

### MELD VESENTLIGE ENDRINGER

Dersom det skjer vesentlige endringer i behandlingen av personopplysninger, kan det være nødvendig å melde dette til NSD ved å oppdatere meldeskjemaet. Før du melder inn en endring, oppfordrer vi deg til å lese om hvilke type endringer det er nødvendig å melde:

[https://nsd.no/personvernombud/meld\\_prosjekt/meld\\_endringer.html](https://nsd.no/personvernombud/meld_prosjekt/meld_endringer.html)

Du må vente på svar fra NSD før endringen gjennomføres.

### TYPE OPPLYSNINGER OG VARIGHET

Prosjektet vil behandle alminnelige kategorier av personopplysninger frem til 30.06.2021.

### LOVLIG GRUNNLAG

Prosjektet har innhentet samtykke fra de registrerte til behandlingen av personopplysninger. Vår vurdering er at prosjektet legger opp til et samtykke i samsvar med kravene i art. 4 og 7, ved at det er en frivillig, spesifikk, informert og utvetydig bekreftelse som kan dokumenteres, og som den registrerte kan trekke tilbake. Lovlig grunnlag for behandlingen vil dermed være den registrertes samtykke, jf. personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 bokstav a.

### PERSONVERNPRINSIPPER

NSD vurderer at behandlingen av personopplysninger følger prinsippene i personvernforordningen om:

- lovlighet, rettferdighet og åpenhet (art. 5.1 a), ved at de registrerte får tilfredsstillende informasjon om og samtykker til behandlingen
- formålsbegrensning (art. 5.1 b), ved at personopplysninger samles inn for spesifikke, uttrykkelig angitte og berettigede formål, og ikke behandles til nye, uforenlige formål
- dataminimering (art. 5.1 c), ved at det kun behandles opplysninger som er adekvate, relevante og nødvendige for formålet med prosjektet
- lagringsbegrensning (art. 5.1 e), ved at personopplysningene ikke lagres lengre enn nødvendig for å oppfylle formålet

### DE REGISTRERTES RETTIGHETER

Så lenge de registrerte kan identifiseres i datamaterialet vil de ha følgende rettigheter: åpenhet (art. 12), informasjon (art. 13), innsyn (art. 15), retting (art. 16), sletting (art. 17), begrensning (art. 18), underretning (art. 19), dataportabilitet (art. 20).

Informasjonsskrivet er godt utformet, og i tråd med gammelt lovverk. Vi gjør likevel oppmerksomme på at for å oppfylle forordningens krav til innhold jf. art 13 burde kontaktinformasjon til personvernombud og informasjon om retten til å klage til datatilsynet være med. NSD vurderer likevel at informasjonen som er gitt er tilstrekkelig

for å innhente et gyldig samtykke. Det ble også informert om lagring i 10 år etter prosjektslutt. Innhenting av nytt samtykke fra de registrerte er ikke nødvendig.

Vi minner om at hvis en registrert tar kontakt om sine rettigheter, har behandlingsansvarlig institusjon plikt til å svare innen en måned.

#### FØLG DIN INSTITUSJONS RETNINGSLINJER

NSD legger til grunn at behandlingen oppfyller kravene i personvernforordningen om riktighet (art. 5.1 d), integritet og konfidensialitet (art. 5.1. f) og sikkerhet (art. 32).

For å forsikre dere om at kravene oppfylles, må dere følge interne retningslinjer og/eller rådføre dere med behandlingsansvarlig institusjon.

#### OPPFØLGING AV PROSJEKTET

NSD vil følge opp ved planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet.

Lykke til med prosjektet!

Kontaktperson hos NSD: Karin Lillevold  
Tlf. Personverntjenester: 55 58 21 17 (tast 1)

#### 17.02.2020 - Vurdert

#### BAKGRUNN

Prosjektet er tidligere meldt og vurdert av NSD, referansenummer 29713. Ny innmelding gjelder forlengelse av oppbevaring av innsamlete personopplysninger. Denne vurderingen erstatter den forrige vurderingen.

Det er NSD sin vurdering at behandlingen er i samsvar med personvernlovgivningen, så fremt den gjennomføres i tråd med det som er dokumentert i meldeskjemaet 28.08.2019 med vedlegg, samt i meldingsdialogen mellom innmelder og NSD. Behandlingen kan fortsette.

#### MELD VESENTLIGE ENDRINGER

Dersom det skjer vesentlige endringer i behandlingen av personopplysninger, kan det være nødvendig å melde dette til NSD ved å oppdatere meldeskjemaet. Før du melder inn en endring, oppfordrer vi deg til å lese om hvilke type endringer det er nødvendig å melde:

[https://nsd.no/personvernombud/meld\\_prosjekt/meld\\_endringer.html](https://nsd.no/personvernombud/meld_prosjekt/meld_endringer.html)

Du må vente på svar fra NSD før endringen gjennomføres.

#### TYPE OPPLYSNINGER OG VARIGHET

Prosjektet vil behandle alminnelige kategorier av personopplysninger frem til 30.06.2021.

#### LOVLIG GRUNNLAG

Prosjektet har innhentet samtykke fra de registrerte til behandlingen av personopplysninger. Vår vurdering er at prosjektet legger opp til et samtykke i samsvar med kravene i art. 4 og 7, ved at det er en frivillig, spesifikk, informert og utvetydig bekreftelse som kan dokumenteres, og som den registrerte kan trekke tilbake. Lovlig grunnlag for behandlingen vil dermed være den registrertes samtykke, jf. personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 bokstav a.

#### PERSONVERNPRINSIPPER

NSD vurderer at behandlingen av personopplysninger følger prinsippene i personvernforordningen om:

- lovlighet, rettferdighet og åpenhet (art. 5.1 a), ved at de registrerte får tilfredsstillende informasjon om og

samtykker til behandlingen

- formålsbegrensning (art. 5.1 b), ved at personopplysninger samles inn for spesifikke, uttrykkelig angitte og berettigede formål, og ikke behandles til nye, uforenlige formål
- dataminimering (art. 5.1 c), ved at det kun behandles opplysninger som er adekvate, relevante og nødvendige for formålet med prosjektet
- lagringsbegrensning (art. 5.1 e), ved at personopplysningene ikke lagres lengre enn nødvendig for å oppfylle formålet

#### DE REGISTRERTES RETTIGHETER

Så lenge de registrerte kan identifiseres i datamaterialet vil de ha følgende rettigheter: åpenhet (art. 12), informasjon (art. 13), innsyn (art. 15), retting (art. 16), sletting (art. 17), begrensning (art. 18), underretning (art. 19), dataportabilitet (art. 20).

Informasjonsskrivet er godt utformet, og i tråd med gammelt lovverk. Vi gjør likevel oppmerksomme på at for å oppfylle forordningens krav til innhold jf. art 13 burde kontaktinformasjon til personvernombud og informasjon om retten til å klage til datatilsynet være med. NSD vurderer likevel at informasjonen som er gitt er tilstrekkelig for å innhente et gyldig samtykke. Det ble også informert om lagring i 10 år etter prosjektslutt. Innhenting av nytt samtykke fra de registrerte er ikke nødvendig.

Vi minner om at hvis en registrert tar kontakt om sine rettigheter, har behandlingsansvarlig institusjon plikt til å svare innen en måned.

#### FØLG DIN INSTITUSJONS RETNINGSLINJER

NSD legger til grunn at behandlingen oppfylder kravene i personvernforordningen om riktighet (art. 5.1 d), integritet og konfidensialitet (art. 5.1. f) og sikkerhet (art. 32).

For å forsikre dere om at kravene oppfylles, må dere følge interne retningslinjer og/eller rådføre dere med behandlingsansvarlig institusjon.

#### OPPFØLGING AV PROSJEKTET

NSD vil følge opp ved planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet.

Lykke til med prosjektet!

Kontaktperson hos NSD: Karin Lillevold  
Tlf. Personverntjenester: 55 58 21 17 (tast 1)

**Appendix 3: Information letter to the interviewees and consent declaration form**





## To young leaders and volunteers at the Youth Olympic Games

Innsbruck, January 16. 2012

### Information about YOG research project on young leaders

During the 2012 Youth Olympic Games (YOG) in Innsbruck, we have been conducting a study. The aim of this research project is to gain more knowledge about the Youth Olympic Games in regard to youth sport, and how youth experience elite sport competition. Further, we would like to investigate how young leaders and volunteers experience their part of and role in making an event like YOG a success.

The main research location for the project and project leader is situated at the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences (NSSS). The project is approved by the Youth Olympic Games Laboratory for Youth and Innovation (YOGINN 2012), the Innsbruck Youth Olympic Games Organizing Committee (IYOGOC), and the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD), and

Participation is voluntary, but we hope that as many as possible understand the importance of gaining more knowledge about young leaders' experiences during a major event – something we know little about.

**Background:** The project will investigate the role of volunteers and young leaders, and their experiences during major events. The project is important as we intend to gain new knowledge about their role. The results will be published in international scientific journals. Therefore, we encourage you to participate in the research project and read the information below.

**Data collection:** The data will be collected with the help of one interview that will take about 15-45 minutes to complete. We are only interested in information related to volunteers and young leaders' experiences during an event. Participation is voluntary.

**Information:** The study will be carried out by Associate Professor Dag Vidar Hanstad PhD Candidate Annika Bodemar. As researchers, we follow the ethical guidelines of The Norwegian Research Registry/Norwegian Social Science Data Services. The data will be handled with strict confidentiality and in accordance to ethical criteria. The contents will be used only for academic purposes (publications, technical reports) and your confidentiality will be protected. Your name will not appear in the research findings; only a broad title such as "Volunteer CEP 1" will be used. After the 2012 YOG in Innsbruck, no one will be recognized when publishing the data. Only the research team will have access to the data. Data will be coded. The results

will be pooled and made available in the form of technical reports and articles submitted to scientific journals.

The data collected (interview results, notes, and data analysis files) will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the principal investigator's office for ten years post-publication. All the data collected will be destroyed (e.g., shredded, deleted) after the data conservation period.

If you choose to participate, it is important to underline that there are no right or wrong answers. Of course, there are no consequences for choosing not to participate. It is also possible to withdraw from the research project at any time. If you have any questions, please contact Annika Bodemar, [annika.bodemar@nih.no](mailto:annika.bodemar@nih.no).

We really appreciate this, thank you!

Yours sincerely,

*Dag Vidar Hanstad, & Annika Bodemar*

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Mobile: 95 11 60 16  
Email: [a.bodemar@nih.no](mailto:a.bodemar@nih.no)

#### **APPROVAL OF PARTICIPATION IN YOG 2012 RESEARCH PROJECT**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**For the volunteer/young leaders:**

I, \_\_\_\_\_  
(print your name), accept to participate in this research project.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

EMAIL:

SKYPE:

**We, Dag Vidar Hanstad and Annika Bodemar, hereby confirm that the results from the interview will not be used for any other purposes than the ones described in the preceding information letter. If you have any questions about procedures etc., do not hesitate to contact us.**

**Yours sincerely,**

Dag Vidar Hanstad & Annika Bodemar

## To young leaders and volunteers at the World Snowboarding Championships

Oslo, 16. februar 2012

### Information about WSC research project on young leaders and volunteers

During the 2012 the World Snowboarding Championships (WSC) in Oslo, we have been conducting a study. The aim of this research project is to gain more knowledge about how young leaders and volunteers experience their part of and role in making an event like WSC a success.

The main research location for the project and project leader is situated at the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences (NSSS). The project is approved by WSC CEO Henning Andersen, and the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD).

Participation is voluntary, but we hope that as many as possible understand the importance of gaining more knowledge about young leaders/volunteers' experiences during a major event – something we know little about.

**Background:** The project will investigate the role of young leaders/volunteers, and their experiences during major events. The project is important as we intend to gain new knowledge about their role. The results will be published in international scientific journals. Therefore, we encourage you to participate in the research project and read the information below.

**Data collection:** The data will be collected with the help of one interview that will take about 15-45 minutes to complete. We are only interested in information related to young leaders/volunteers' experiences during an event. Participation is voluntary.

**Information:** The study will be carried out by Associate Professor Dag Vidar Hanstad and PhD Candidate Annika Bodemar. As researchers, we follow the ethical guidelines of The Norwegian Research Registry/Norwegian Social Science Data Services. The data will be handled with strict confidentiality and in accordance to ethical criteria. The contents will be used only for academic purposes (publications, technical reports) and your confidentiality will be protected. Your name will not appear in the research findings; only a broad title such as "Leader1 WSC" will be used. After the 2012 WSC in Oslo, no one will be recognized when publishing the data. Only the research team will have access to the data. Data will be coded. The results will be

pooled and made available in the form of technical reports and articles submitted to scientific journals.

The data collected (interview results, notes, and data analysis files) will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the principal investigator's office for ten years post-publication. All the data collected will be destroyed (e.g., shredded, deleted) after the data conservation period. All data will be anonymous before January 2016.

If you choose to participate, it is important to underline that there are no right or wrong answers. Of course, there are no consequences for choosing not to participate. It is also possible to withdraw from the research project at any time. If you have any questions, please contact Annika Bodemar, [annika.bodemar@nih.no](mailto:annika.bodemar@nih.no).

We really appreciate this, thank you!

Yours sincerely,

*Dag Vidar Hanstad, & Annika Bodemar*

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#### **APPROVAL OF PARTICIPATION IN WSC 2012 RESEARCH PROJECT**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**For the volunteer/young leader:**

I, \_\_\_\_\_  
(print your name), accept to participate in this research project.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Mobile: \_\_\_\_\_

Skype: \_\_\_\_\_

**We, Dag Vidar Hanstad and Annika Bodemar, hereby confirm that the results from the interview not will be used for any other purposes than the ones described in the preceding information letter. If you have any questions about procedures etc., do not hesitate to contact us.**

**Yours sincerely,**

Dag Vidar Hanstad & Annika Bodemar



## **Appendix 4: Interview guide - leaders**

### **Background information**

- Place of residence:
- Year of birth:
- Level of education:
- Do you have any connection to sport (as a leader, athlete etc.)?
- Profession and experience:
- What kind of experiences did you have with other organizations before you started in WSC (YOG)?
- Time of entering WSC (YOG):
- Official job title in WSC (YOG):
- Responsibilities, main and sub-tasks WSC (YOG):
- Who do you work closest to?
- Who is your leader? To how do you report?

### **Your staff**

- Could you tell me about your staff, number, age, background, competence?
- Can you tell us about recruiting process of volunteers to your department?
- How was the training?
- How did you build a team, including volunteers and employees?
- How will you describe the relationship between you and the volunteers?
- What are the biggest challenges when managing volunteers?
- What is the overall impression so far?



## **Leadership**

### **Motivation**

- Why did you become a leader? What motivates you to be a leader?

### **Facilitation around young leaders in WSC (YOG)**

- Tell me about how you have been trained and supported in your leadership in WSC (YOG).  
Have you been supervised by mentors or other persons?
  - Has there been any need for facilitation/support that you have been missing?
  - What do you think is important to support young leaders?
  - Who inspired you most as a leader in WSC (YOG)?

### **Subjective perception of young leaders' impact**

- How is the leadership climate around you as a young leader?
- What are the general perceptions of young leaders in WSC (YOG)?
  - Are the young leaders as recognized as the older leaders? If you compare the young leaders with more senior leaders, describe the most significant differences?  
Do they supplement each other, or is it not age that's the clue here?

### **Self-awareness**

- Can you briefly describe yourself as a leader:
- Can you describe something that has triggered your leadership development in WSC (YOG):
- What qualities do you bring to the leadership (your strengths)?
- What leadership qualities would you like to develop (your weaknesses)?
  - (Do you think you need to make any adjustments to your personal and leadership development? If so, what are they?)

### **Self-regulation**

- How do you handle failures or disappointments in your leadership role? (Does it constrain you, or have you been able to reframe them as learning experiences?)
- Do you try consciously or unconsciously avoiding situations in which there is a risk of failing? If yes, how is your fear of failing impact your leadership and career decisions?

### **Values, true self and moral**

- What are the values that are most important to you? What are the principles on which you base your leadership?
- Recall a situation in your WSC (YOG) experiences where your values were tested and in which you deviated from your values to achieve your goals:
- Tell us about the situation
  - How will you handle the situation if you face it in the future?

### **Building relationships and openness**

- Have you connected closely to some of the other leaders or volunteers in WSC (YOG)? Who? Will you keep in contact with her/him/them after the games?
- What will you do after finishing your work in WSC (YOG)? Future plans?

### **Institutional context**

- What do you perceive as the mission of WSC (YOG) and your department? Has that been clear all the way, have it changed during the journey, have you had any discussions?
- Tell me about when you started at WSC (YOG),
  - What motivated you to be a part of the WSC (YOG)?
  - How was the recruitment process?
  - What were your first tasks, and how was the start?
  - What was and have been your biggest challenges?
- When you started the work with developing your department, where did you get inspiration?
  - Have you collected any inputs from athletes, other sport federations and others?
  - Do you feel that the young athletes have influenced how you've developed the event? If yes, describe how you managed that.

### **Given frames and cooperation**

- What kind of given frames was conducted from the WSC (YOG)-board (TTR/WSF (IOC))?
- Can you give examples of how you adapted tasks from other organizations/events into WSC (YOG) or where there no need for this kind of adaption?

- Tell me about the cooperation between WSC (YOG) and TTR/WSF (IOC):
  - What were your thoughts about WSC (YOG) before you started? What has been a good experience, and have you had any bad experiences?)
  - Have you experienced matters that were taken for granted by TTR/WSF?

**New concepts and ideas**

- What kind of new ideas have been created in WSC (YOG) that's never been done before?
- How have new ideas been perceived (accepted or denied)? Examples
  - By the Board or TTR/WSF (IOC)
  - Within your organization, your staff
- Do you think WSC (YOG) will influence the Snowboard sport (other IOC-related events)? If yes, how and in what way?

## **Appendix 5: Interview guide - volunteers**

### **Background information**

- Gender
- Year of birth
- Where do you live?
- Level of education
- Profession
- In which functional area (or section) are you working at the WSC (YOG)?
- Did you volunteer at WSC (YOG) before the event started?

### **The role as a volunteer**

- What does volunteerism mean to you? (Can you give a definition?)
- Do you have any connections (today) to the sport as athlete, coach, leader etc.?
- When did you register for volunteering at the WSC (YOG)?
- Can you describe your tasks as a volunteer during WSC (YOG)?
- Have you taken part in any training sessions before WSC (YOG)?
- Have you any previous experience as a volunteer? If so, where and when?
- How important are the volunteers for an event like WSC (YOG)?

### **The motivation for voluntarism**

- How were you recruited to this role as a volunteer?
- Which factors made you determine to accept this role?
- Is being a volunteer something you learned at home? Did your parents do voluntary work?
- Do you feel that being a volunteer gives you some extra dimensions in life, for example by:
  - o Giving you a good feeling of contribution/being important
  - o Social aspects (team spirit, being together with your friends, who are volunteers at WSC (YOG) etc.)
  - o Material effects like clothing, souvenirs, partly paid etc.

- Your career:
  - Do you include this experience in your résumé/ CV?
  - Do you include this experience when you apply for jobs/ in job interviews?

### **Satisfaction with being a volunteer**

- To what extent do you feel that your expectations and motivation for being a volunteer has been met at the WSC (YOG)?
- Do you feel valued and that your effort has been appreciated during the WSC (YOG)?
  - From volunteers in similar roles?
  - By other volunteers also working during WSC (YOG)?
  - By the leaders
    - Any difference between young and «old» leaders?
    - Volunteers
    - Employees working at WSC (YOG)
- What are you most pleased with during this event (so far)?
- What has been most disappointing? What would you have changed if you could?
  - For your own welfare
  - In order to make a better job as a volunteer

### **Management and relations**

- How is the relationship between the volunteers?
- How is the relationship between volunteers and your closest supervisors?
- Can you describe the leadership style of your closest leader during WSC (YOG)?
- Has the relationship with your nearest leader developed during the event?
  - Do you feel the leader has trust in you?
  - Is he/she giving you stimulating tasks?
  - Do you feel you can be totally open with your leader?





