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Sport club consultants as street-level bureaucrats in sport policy processes: conceptualising micro-level interaction styles and their macro-level consequences

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is sport club consultants, an under-researched role that is uniquely situated at the interface of sport policy systems and clubs. Incumbents of this role—the label of which varies between countries—conduct club-directed developmental work to align clubs with centrally issued policies and programmes. Conceptualising sport club consultants as a sport-specific street-level bureaucrat, the paper's purpose is, first, to analyse sport club consultants' interaction style vis-à-vis clubs and, second, to demonstrate that broader and unintended transformative effects may follow from this rather micro practice. We propose that sport club consultants' institutionally shaped interaction style may be operationalised along four dimensions (e.g. case prioritisation principle, shaping of interaction context, interactor positioning, communicative strategy). The substantive empirical content of these dimensions may vary between systems and the policy in question. Nonetheless, we show that system-level fragmentation, professionalisation, and centralisation are potential consequences of the work through which sport club consultants attempt to reconcile tensions between centrally distilled policies and clubs' readiness, willingness, and ability to change.

KEYWORDS

Policy implementation; multi-level federative systems; sport development; system-level transformative effects; Sweden

The focus of this paper is an organisational role in sport that, despite being key to many sport systems, has been largely omitted from both policy and professionalisation discussions (Thompson et al., 2021). Incumbents of this role are termed *Vereinsberater* in Germany (e.g. Bayerischer Landessportverband, 2020); *Klubrådgivare* in Denmark (e.g. DBU, 2020); *sport development advisers/officers* in New Zealand and several other English-speaking countries (e.g. Sport, 2020); and *Idrottskonsulenter* in Sweden, the empirical context in focus here (SISU, 2019). Read in the languages they were coined,

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these labels infer what appears to be a similar make up for the role that we choose to term *sport club consultants* (CCs).

For the purpose of this paper, we follow Thompson et al. (2021) in conceptualising CCs as sport-specific *street-level bureaucrats* (SLBs; Lipsky, 2010). This is because they are situated at the lowest level of the organisational hierarchies of the umbrella organisations under which sport clubs are federated (e.g. national sport federations [NSFs]) in countries where sport is organised in multilevel federative systems. Furthermore, the purpose of their work is to align clubs with centrally issued policies and programmes, and for this purpose they carry out developmental work in direct interaction with clubs. CCs' work is thus uniquely situated in the policy space that is the interface between 'the system' and clubs (we acknowledge the fact that the term CC can, in other contexts, also refer to work carried out by private organisations contracted by NSFs, local service organisations or sport clubs, which is important to note when considering the potential transferability of our findings). This space is potentially contentious because there is oftentimes a discrepancy between the values and practices set out in umbrella organisations' (or governments') policies and programmes and clubs' propensity for change (e.g. Skille, 2008; Stenling & Fahlén, 2016; Thompson et al., 2021). Nonetheless, CCs operate at the 'ground floor of government' (Hupe, 2019, p. 7), where any unresolved policy tensions are bound to emerge but where there might be room for, or even an expectation to apply (Hoogendam, 2020), discretionary action to manage them. The location of CCs in this space makes them susceptible to conflicting loyalties because they may be torn between the normative frameworks of (shifting) policy objectives and the knowledge and understanding that come from their direct relationships with clubs (Thompson et al., 2021; see also Cureton & Frisby, 2011).

CCs' work is significant for several reasons. The most obvious one is that it amounts to government in action (Hupe, 2019), which gives it great implications for implementation effectiveness. However, CCs' work also bears significance for its broader transformative potential (Thompson et al., 2021). Speaking of public sector SLBs, such as social workers, Lipsky (2010) argued that one of the core reasons their *work practices* are significant is that they are 'redistributive as well as allocative' (p. 8) and therefore fundamentally 'delimit people's lives and opportunities' (p. 4). CCs are not social workers, of course, and their clients are not welfare-seeking citizens. Nevertheless, depending on how their work is carried out, it may have broader systemic implications, such as professionalisation of policy work, centralisation of power and mandate, and fragmentation among sport clubs due to uneven resource distribution, attention, and relationship building (cf. Thompson et al., 2021).

For these reasons, our purpose with this paper is to first analyse CCs' work practices, including how their discretionary action is guided by their institutional setting, and second provide some illustrations of their potential system-level transformative effects. Empirically, our work is set in the context of Swedish voluntary sport, where approximately 450 CCs play a key role in centrally framed but locally executed club development work. Specifically, we draw on interview and observational data that cover CCs' work associated with the change programme Strategy 2025, which has as its end targets the 20,000 Swedish voluntary sport clubs.

We make two main contributions with our analysis. First, building on available understandings of SLBs, particularly the interaction style concept (Van Parys, 2019; Van Parys & Struyven, 2018), we offer an account of the key dimensions of the way in which CCs interact with clubs. The account provides a preliminary theoretical operationalisation of CCs' work practices and, as such, can be used by researchers interested in exploring how this common but understudied category of staff go about their work. Our second contribution stems from the recognition of the broader implications of CCs as managers of policy tensions at the nexus of the sport system and clubs. Here, we extend the work of Thompson et al. (2021) by offering a discussion of the potential system-level transformative effects of the ways in which CCs view and deal with discrepancies between the changes that clubs are ready, willing, and able to take on, and those that policies and programmes effectively ask them to carry out.

In addition to this introduction, we structure the paper into five main parts. First, we further contextualise CCs' work in Swedish voluntary sport and describe Strategy 2025. After that, we describe the conceptual lens through which we approached our topic. This is followed by a methods outline and a section that unfolds our analysis related to the first part of our purpose (i.e. CCs' interaction style). The final part of the paper contains our illustrations pertaining to the second part of our purpose (i.e. potential transformative effects of CCs' interaction style), with limitations and suggestions for future research woven into the account.

CCs in the context of Swedish voluntary sport and strategy 2025

Following Thompson et al. (2021), we suggest that CCs operating in different countries are likely to share overarching similarities that allow us to think of them as a type of SLB. However, the specific practices of the CCs under study here must be understood in the context of the characteristics of the Swedish sport system, particularly its dual governance structure. Swedish voluntary sport is a member-based and democratically governed, federative system in which 3,300,000 members (a third of the Swedish population) in approximately 20,000 sport clubs form the base. These clubs are in turn members of one or several of the just over 70 NSFs that represent the interests of each sport, and the decisions taken by the NSFs' general assemblies apply to all clubs federated under a particular NSF (Swedish Sports Confederation [SSC], 2002).

In addition to this *special interest* structure, the NSFs together form the SSC, a cross-sport umbrella organisation that represents Swedish sport's *shared interests*. The biannual SSC general assembly is Swedish sport's highest decision-making body, and the majority of decisions taken by the over 200 NSF delegates during the assembly apply to all federated organisations (including clubs; SSC, 2002). Nonetheless, what is viewed as urgent, appropriate, and desirable for an entire system may not be so for one sport and most certainly not for a single sport club. Indeed, despite Swedish sport's structural setting and all-encompassing applicability of centrally generated policy output, Swedish sport clubs, like their international counterparts (e.g. Skille, 2008; Thompson et al., 2021), are quite difficult to govern 'from above', not least when new policies and programmes require substantial change to clubs' core orientation and

activities (Fahlén et al., 2015; Skille & Stenling, 2018; Stenling, 2013, 2014; Stenling & Fahlén, 2016).

Therefore, despite the bottom-up democratic way in which central decisions are taken, there is fertile ground for tensions between the scope and type of change that is asked of sport clubs in sport-wide policies and programmes, and clubs' change proclivity. These tensions are bound to surface at one point or another (Hupe, 2019), and because CCs operate at the interface between the system-issuing policies and clubs, they are confronted and forced to deal with these tensions to the best of their ability. Approximately 450 Swedish CCs do so in interactions with around a third of the 20,000 Swedish sport clubs each year. Impressive as this may seem, as is typical for SLBs (Lipsky, 2010), the case load (i.e. the number of clubs each CC needs to meet with to cover all clubs) for each CC is rather high. This suggests that, like their counterparts in Thompson et al.'s (2021) study, CCs may be compelled to channel their efforts towards 'easy targets'. These may be clubs that, due to their current orientation, are close to alignment with policy objectives or that have demonstrated an inclination to change. CCs are likely to be well situated to judge these aspects because their work largely consists of direct interactions (i.e. meetings) with clubs. Therefore, not only are they reliant on connective capacities (Hoogendam, 2020) but their club-directed relationship building allows them to garner unique insights in, and potentially appreciation for, clubs' everyday working life.

CCs are employees of regional sport federations (RSFs)—that is, the geographic extensions of the SSC. As their mother organisation, the 19 RSFs focus on issues of shared interest for sport, and since 2017 the RSF-employed CCs' club-directed work has been mobilised to support the club-level implementation of Strategy 2025. Importantly, for CCs' interaction with sport clubs, RSFs receive government funding based on the number of individuals and clubs CCs have met with and how many so-called 'educational hours' they have created during a year (SISU, 2019). Because the resource allocation system is based partly on volume, there is arguably a financial incentive for RSFs to try and reach as many clubs and individuals as possible to secure funding to their own organisations (cf. Thompson, 2021). In one sense, the adoption of Strategy 2025 was therefore a blessing for RSFs because it situated them and their CCs as key agents in the work required for successful implementation of the strategy.

Strategy 2025

At the 2017 SSC general assembly, five strategic 'transformative trajectories' were adopted that were intended to tackle, among other things, increasing dropout rates from club sport: a new approach to practice and competitions; the modern club that creates engagement; inclusive sport for all; gender equality for successful sport; and a strengthened leadership (SSC, 2017). These transformative trajectories are the overall framework for what is termed Strategy 2025. The strategy is quite bold in its aspirations and considering Swedish sport's dual governance structure (described above), as well as sport clubs' proven lack of susceptibility to externally formulated change

programmes, it presents quite the implementation challenge for the SSC, its regional extensions, and, most certainly, the frontline staff (i.e. the CCs).

Conceptual lens

Stemming from Lipsky's ground-breaking 1980 book, research into SLBs and the organisations they work in (street-level bureaucracies) takes an interest in the ways in which employees that are in direct contact with the subjects of policies conduct their work. SLB is a diverse research area that does not operate under any unified theory. Nonetheless, SLB research is underpinned by assumptions that are constitutive of the SLB role itself. Validating our suggestion to view CCs as a type of SLB, the analysis of our empirical material will show that these aspects certainly apply to the CCs under study here.

The first constitutive assumption is that SLBs are positioned at the lowest level of organisational hierarchies, but because they regularly interact with recipients of policy in the course of their daily work, their actions effectively *become* agency policy (Lipsky, 2010). SLBs' work is thus more than 'just an administrative act' (Hupe, 2019, p. 7). It is invariably political in the sense that it, as Lipsky (2010) noted with reference to Laswell's classical definition, affects 'who gets what, when, and how' (p. 84). Second, the position of SLBs embodies a consequential paradox. Although their work is scripted to achieve policy objectives, it requires judgement and responsiveness to individual cases that are difficult to 'reduce to programmatic formats' (Lipsky, 2010, p. 15). Third, SLBs work in organisations whose goals are often 'ambiguous, vague, or conflicting' (Lipsky, 2010, p. 27). Although this may be true for all organisational actors, not least those in sport (Sam, 2009), SLBs have no subordinate level to delegate to and thus 'must resolve issues that, deliberately or not, may have been left unresolved further "upward"' (Hupe, 2019, p. 7). A fourth and final key condition of SLBs' work that both precedes and is accentuated by the previous three is that it involves a significant amount of discretion relative to policy or programme goals and rules that are meant to structure their implementation (Lipsky, 2010). This discretion emanates from the uniqueness of their position, which makes them difficult to survey and prone to experiencing clashing loyalties, for example between policy/programme goals and the worldviews, conditions, and ambitions of service users (Thompson et al., 2021).

Institutionally shaped SLB interaction styles

Although SLB research has branched off into multiple directions (for a recent overview, see for example Hupe [2019]), SLBs' work practices and their antecedents and consequences remain a core concern. Because we seek to explore these aspects in the context of CCs' work, the following provides an outline of how we approach them conceptually.

First, to draw analytical boundaries around work practices, we employ the concept of interaction styles (alternatively labelled regulatory or enforcement styles), denoting SLBs' actual conduct in their day-to-day interactions with clients (Van Parys, 2019; Van Parys & Struyven, 2019), where clients in our study refer to clubs. Research under this

theme has indicated the multidimensionality of interaction styles (Lehmann-Nielsen, 2016). May and Winter (1999, 2000), for example, suggested that building inspectors' interaction styles can be captured using two dimensions (i.e. formalism and coercion) and that behaviour along these two dimensions add up to three distinct interaction styles: insistent, token, and rule-bound. Another example of a categorisation of SLBs' behavioural approaches is the distinction between styles that involve moving towards, moving against, and moving from the subjects of policy (Tummers et al., 2015).

The second aspect of our study in need of conceptualisation is the antecedents of interaction styles. Here too, SLB research is diverse in its theorising attempts, where some have sought individual-level explanations in, for example, SLBs' demographic characteristics (e.g. ethnic background, gender), interests (Lehmann-Nielsen, 2016), or policy views (May & Winter, 2009). Although not denying these factors' influence, we understand interaction styles as contextually shaped and shaping. The term *context*, as Hupe and Buffat (2014, p. 554) noted, 'stands for a seemingly endless range of factors, stemming from different sources, and located at difference scales of aggregation' (p. 554). We take cue from Garrow and Grusky (2013) in adopting an institutional view on interaction styles. For us, this view enables an analysis of how CCs' conduct is shaped by institutionally available material (e.g. caseloads, governance structures, resource allocation systems) and ideographic elements (e.g. understandings of strategic goals, interorganisational positioning, CCs' role placement and execution) that together form action prescriptions as well as their associated meanings and rationales (cf. Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Friedland & Alford, 1991; March & Olsen, 2004).

Pertaining to the second part of our purpose (i.e. transformative effects of CCs' interaction style), we follow the views of Sieber (1981) and Hood (1991) around the propensity for policy instruments and organising more generally to have effects beyond what was intended. This has been shown in several studies situated in a sport context (Fahlén, 2017; Fahlén et al., 2015; Fahlén & Stenling, 2019; Sam, 2011; Stenling & Sam, 2020a, 2020b; Thompson et al., 2021; for conceptual discussions, see also Sam, 2009; Nagel et al., 2015) and can be attributed to the trade-offs between values that are invariably made in policy and organising processes. As an illustration, Thompson et al. (2021) showed that English NSF sport development officers' management of tensions between centrally mandated policy priorities and sport clubs' orientation reduced SDO club relationship building, thus undermining long-term NSF developmental trajectories and sustainability.

Methods

Together with the dearth of knowledge concerning CCs, the purpose of our study prompted us to collect data that provided insight into CCs' work practices and their ascribed meaning and underpinning rationales, and we wanted these insights to reflect CCs' own understandings of their work. Therefore, we opted for a qualitative data collection and analysis strategy. In particular, with the aid of three research assistants, we carried out a form of shadowing (McDonald, 2005) of CCs. Shadowing essentially involves following an individual during their daily work, both observing their behaviour and inquiring into the reasons for it. It is thus a qualitative data collection

strategy that allows the exploration of practices and their associated meaning making from the vantage point of the shadowed subject.

Following our purpose, we were particularly interested in the work CCs carry out in direct interaction with clubs. Consequently, we collected data via shadowing of CCs as they made visits to clubs within their jurisdiction. Immediately after each shadowed visit, a follow-up talk was conducted that focussed on the meaning of and reasons for the observed actions, as well as how representative they were of the CCs' work practices.

Furthermore, our theoretical outlook implies that we understand work practices as shaped by the institutional context in which they operate (Garrow & Grusky, 2013). Some aspects of this context were accounted for in the second section above, but we also wanted to grasp contextual facets from the perspective of CCs, particularly how they understood their and other umbrella organisations' (e.g. the SSC and the NSF's) role in shaping their work around Strategy 2025. Therefore, prior to the shadowing, we carried out semistructured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014) covering these issues with each of the shadowed CCs.

Sampling and data collection

Within the resource limitations of the project, we were faced with a core sampling issue: whether to shadow a few individuals during their meetings with several clubs or more individuals during fewer club meetings. Recognising that both options have advantages and drawbacks, we chose the latter based on the presumption that this would give us a better chance of producing a more analytically generalisable account of the key characteristics of CCs' work practices.

Two RSFs that were geographically located in a way that facilitated data collection were approached with a request to come into contact with CCs willing to participate in the study, resulting in the recruitment of four CCs from each RSF. All eight participants agreed to be interviewed and were shadowed during one of their club meetings.

In terms of data collection instruments, we constructed a broad observational grid to facilitate consistency. The grid contained three overarching categories: strategic content (i.e. whether emphasis was placed on any of Strategy 2025's five transformative trajectories), communication (i.e. how the content was framed), and materials or props (i.e. CCs' use of artefacts such as video clips, PowerPoint presentations, etc.) in which the CCs' behaviours relating to each category were noted using pen and paper during the shadowing. Questions prompted by these behaviours were also noted as they occurred, and they formed the basis for the postmeeting conversations with the shadowed CCs. Notes from these conversations were inserted into the observational notes. Directly after each shadowing, the notes from the meeting and postmeeting conversations were typed out, and initial analytical thoughts were noted.

The interviews taking place prior to the shadowing lasted approximately 30 min and followed a semistructured guide with five themes: (1) the interviewee and their general role within the RSF; (2) the RSFs' work with Strategy 2025; (3) the CCs' overall work with Strategy 2025; (4) the CCs' work mode strategy during club meetings; and

(5) the clubs' reception of Strategy 2025 and its implementation model. These themes were specifically constructed to solicit data that would further illuminate, explain, and provide nuance to the data that were constructed via shadowing.

Data analysis

Subsequent to finishing the data collection, interviews were transcribed verbatim and in a first step sorted according to the shadowing grid categories and interview themes. Thereafter, we applied our institutional understanding of the interaction style concept as a conceptual point of departure in posing the following analytical questions to the full body of data material: (a) 'Is there a distinguishable pattern in how the eight CCs interact with clubs'; (b) 'If so, what are the key dimensions of this interaction style'; (c) 'What are the context-specific empirical expressions of these dimensions'; and (d) 'How does the institutional context appear to be shaping the interaction style?'. We approached the data material with these questions as an à priori analytical frame, but the answers to them are purely data driven, and we utilised the constant comparison method (Charmaz, 2014) as we built our data-structure matrix (cf. Gioia et al., 2013). In other words, throughout this process, we bracketed our knowledge of findings pertaining to the interaction styles of SLBs in other contexts, and we did this because we wanted the dimensions constructed through our analysis to be relevant and specific to CCs' work practices (rather than, for example, policemen, social workers, or teachers). However, where there is fit, we will link our account to previous findings on SLBs' interaction styles.

Analysis

This section reports our analysis pertaining to the first part of our purpose. It thus lays out, first, the institutional characteristics that may be discerned as shaping CCs' work with Strategy 2025. The second part of the section accounts for the four dimensions that constitute CCs' interaction style and their substantive content in the context of the strategy.

Antecedents of work practices

In addition to the features of Swedish sport described in the paper's second section, two contextual conditions appear to shape the ways in which CCs interact with sport clubs throughout the process of implementing Strategy 2025. The first is that the SSC's regional extensions—the RSFs—, with CCs as their 'boots on the ground,' have been accorded a great responsibility to lead the club-level change associated with the strategy: 'Our work has become more focused on spearheading the change associated to Strategy 2025, on leading the clubs in this process' (Interviewee 8). However, notwithstanding this responsibility, and despite being employed by the regional extensions of the SSC, CCs express a lack of formal (and informal) mandates to shape the direction and form of the transformative work that is to take place in clubs, let alone demand change: 'We're supposed to head the work with Strategy 2025, rather than

simply support it. But we've got no mandate to enforce anything. All we've got is responsibility, no mandate' (Interviewee 8). From the CCs' perspective, if such a mandate even exists outside of clubs themselves, it lies with the NSFs. This is because, in the participants' view, NSFs are the democratically legitimate authoritative body of the respective sports, and they are therefore positioned to place demands on their federated clubs. Interviewee 6, interpreting decisions made at the SCC general assembly as decisions made by the NSFs, commented on this:

The challenge lies in making NSFs take a greater responsibility [for the implementation]. They should, because it's actually their strategy. We haven't taken the decision, the SSC hasn't taken the decision, it's the NSFs that have voted through the strategy.

However, from the CCs' perspective, NSFs have failed to take an authoritative stance on the strategy vis-à-vis their federated clubs. A second shaping contextual feature is the perceived lack of specification of what Strategy 2025, particularly the transformative trajectories, actually means. Around this, CCs present the view that neither the SSC, their regional management, or the NSFs have 'done the job properly' and that a lot of ambiguities therefore remain. As an illustration, Interviewee 7 stated that 'The modern club, for example, we still don't know ... what is a modern club? Nobody knows.' Interviewee 8 similarly said:

There are 2025 objectives, but they are quite vague, and there's also a vagueness around the actions that need to be taken to get there. The strategy says something like "In 2025 we have modern sport participation." Okay, well, what does that mean?

In addition to illustrating how these aspects are telling of the SLB character of CCs' work conditions (Lipsky, 2010), they reflect the tendency in Swedish sport to, under the guise of grassroots autonomy, forward responsibility for elaborating change programmes downwards in the sport system due to a fear among federative bodies of stepping on clubs' toes (Fahlén et al., 2015; Stenling, 2014). This fear may certainly be valid in a system where, to achieve policy change, federations are dependent on clubs for their legitimacy and must rely on clubs' voluntary inclination to comply rather than on a coercive means of policy implementation. The problem for CCs, however, is that they operate 'where the buck stops' (Hupe, 2019, p. 7), which means that CCs are handed strategy content that, in their view, has been left unclarified by actors upwards in the hierarchical chain. Because it has been made clear to CCs that 'the strategy should permeate everything we do' (Interviewee 2) and that the strategy is their 'daily DNA' (Interviewee 5), they must find a way to deal with any ambiguities. The following is an account of the four dimensions of the interaction style they employ as they attempt to do this while simultaneously fulfilling their ascribed responsibility to spearhead the change associated with Strategy 2025.

Work practices: CCs' interaction style

CCs' interaction style has four analytical dimensions that together enable analyses of how federative sport systems' frontline staff interact with clubs (i.e. the targets of policies and programmes): case prioritisation principle, shaping of interaction context, interactor positioning, and communicative strategy. The substantive empirical content

of these dimensions may of course vary between sport systems and the policy in question, but in the context of Strategy 2025s implementation, a clear cross-CC pattern emerges from our analysis. In the following, we describe the dimensions and their empirical meaning in the case under study here.

Case prioritisation principle

Lipsky (2010) argued that one of the defining work conditions of SLBs is that the number of potential subjects of their services surpasses their disposable resources to the extent that they must develop strategies for prioritising which cases to direct their efforts towards. Upon analysing our data, it became clear that, like the SDOs reported on by Thompson et al. (2021), the CCs we studied have developed such strategies. As previously described, Strategy 2025 applies to all 20,000 clubs federated under the SSC, and CCs are reportedly encouraged to try reaching as many of the clubs under their responsibility as possible. This is certainly so come the end of the year, when reports are due on the number of educational hours produced during the year (recall that educational hours are a measure upon which RSF funding is based). However, CCs are also asked to do in-depth work with Strategy 2025 in clubs. Reaching as many clubs as possible while working in depth in clubs, however, is a difficult equation. This contradiction in strategic directives leads CCs to work superficially with many clubs, directing their additional in-depth effort at a selected few. The prioritisation principle under which CCs do this is a key dimension of their interaction style because it fundamentally structures which clubs are selected for additional resources, support, praise, and scrutiny.

In the context of the implementation of Strategy 2025, CCs, as their English counterparts (Thompson et al., 2021), prioritise clubs that they interpret as having a *policy-approximate disposition*. CCs prefer to direct their efforts at clubs that are understood to already be on a path towards Strategy 2025; they have goals and values that align with Strategy 2025, and appear to have change momentum. Interviewee 7 explained the following:

Some clubs hand in their lists of completed educations to get their funding, and then they're satisfied at that. We'd rather work with clubs that want to work with us, that want to change, want to take steps forward, so we focus our efforts on them. We don't have time to dive deep into every club anyway, so we prioritise those that want to change.

In short, clubs must be ready for and receptive to Strategy 2025 for CCs to deem them worthy of in-depth work. CCs thus opt for a strategy that in their view increases their chances of succeeding in transforming a club into one that aligns with Strategy 2025, rather than focussing on clubs that are farthest from living up to it. This tendency among SLBs to 'cream skim' was noted by Lipsky (2010), and in a sport context it has been identified as the 'default "best practice"' (Sam & Macris, 2014, p. 516) arising from the establishment of neoliberal performance regimes (Fahlén et al., 2015; Sam, 2012; Sam & Macris, 2014; Thompson et al., 2021).

Shaping of interaction context

This dimension of CCs' interaction style relates to what Lipsky (2010) described as SLBs' inherent possibility to shape the setting in which they interact with service-

takers. This enables SLBs to structure the relationship between the two parties, which ultimately helps shape compliance. For instance, 'Fixed rows of desks in schools, all facing the teacher, physically represent the demand for order that teachers and schools require' (Lipsky, 2010, p. 118).

In the context of CCs' interaction style, this dimension captures the format of the actual meetings between CCs and clubs. Our data reveal that in connection with the work around Strategy 2025, there is a great variety in CCs' physical meetings with clubs. However, a general principle underpinning the shaping of the interaction context is one of meeting clubs at their terms, and of clubs being the main active parties during the meetings. For example, CCs routinely set up small-group discussions, act as process leaders during reflective discussions, or meet club representatives for coffee. Interviewee 5 illustrated this variety of meanings for club visits:

So far this year, I've done approximately 30 club visits. All of those visits are based on Strategy 2025 in some sense, but in some cases the visit was a coffee and an hour-long discussion with the club's educational officer. In other cases, I had meetings with the board or a group of coaches, and in still others I undertook process leadership.

The deliberate structuring of the interaction setting in this particular way can perhaps partially be explained by the RSFs' popular education (*Folkbildning*) tradition, which builds heavily on participant activation and takes a point of departure in participants' experiences and abilities (Åberg, 2008). However, interaction structuring is arguably also related to the perceived necessity among CCs to acknowledge clubs' autonomy, along with the goal of clubs feeling ownership of change processes. Settings are significant because they cue service recipients' expectations (Lipsky, 2010, p. 118); in this case, CCs appear to be moving towards clubs (Tummers et al. 2015) to engender the view among clubs that CCs see clubs' 'home turf' as the legitimate point of departure for developmental work. Since CCs almost always meet clubs in their facilities, the strategy of moving towards clubs applies in the most literal sense, too.

Interactor positioning

This dimension of CCs' interaction style refers to the ways in which CCs position and present themselves to clubs as representatives of a democratic yet hierarchical system in which clubs are the grassroots organisations. It thus captures the general approach to clubs, whether they are 'friendly and helpful, sceptical and questioning, or threatening and picky' (May & Wood, 2003, p. 119).

On this dimension, the data analysis shows that CCs attempt to establish themselves as knowledgeable allies to the clubs. CCs express the view that it is essential to 'get down to [the clubs'] level. You have to engage with clubs in the context of their everyday life' (Interviewee 6) and 'at their wavelength' (Interviewee 1). Interviewee 4 elaborated on this:

I try to be really clear that my role is to support them based on their needs, and that if they have an idea around something they would like to do, but feel like they don't have the energy or the financial resources, they should talk to me about it. This way of approaching clubs is usually a good way to establish a relationship, and once that's in place, things tend to roll on pretty well.

Because it is a strategic positioning, this is somewhat different from the alignment with a competitive club sport habitus that Thompson et al. (2021) found in their study. From this position, CCs can convey to clubs that they are there to help by providing the professional knowledge they have earned in their role. In an earlier study, Stenling (2014) suggested that being of service to clubs on clubs' own terms is central to RSFs' institutionalised organisational identities. Related to this, and again linking to the 'moving towards' strategy identified by Tummers et al. (2015), one can conceive of CCs' interactor positioning as an attempt to move towards clubs identity-wise.

Communicative strategy

The goal of CCs' interaction with clubs is ultimately to reach policy objectives by inducing behavioural change of some sort. Our analysis reveals that a final key dimension of how CCs attempt to do this is by applying a particular communicative strategy, meaning they are deliberate in what they convey to clubs and how. For the case under study here, we find that CCs use a communicative approach that involves bringing Strategy 2025 in through 'a side door'. That is, CCs aim to persuade clubs to initiate change processes that are in line with the strategy, but without confronting the clubs with the strategy head on or in an authoritative manner. On this, Interviewee 6 said,

[As a CC], you can't approach a board and be like, "let's get to work on this specific issue." You need to cherry pick [from the strategy] in relation to the context at hand. Working specifically with the strategy doesn't work in everyday interactions [with clubs].

Interviewee 8 likewise stated the following:

I don't decide what clubs are going to work with, but I can steer them in a certain direction. So, what is it that they want? What kind of help do they want? And in terms of meeting those aspects, we of course try to steer them onto the path of the transformative trajectories.

In line with their interactor positioning, CCs generally begin their work with a club by conducting a needs analysis. During this process, the strategy and the problem formulations associated with it are used by the CCs as an analytical grid to frame club problems and resulting needs in line with one or several of the strategy's transformative trajectories (see Stenling & Sam, 2020c). Interviewee 7 illustrated this well:

[As a CC] you try and get a sense of what the club is interested in, and that's rarely a Strategy 2025 transformative trajectory. They have a problem or a need that may be related to the transformative trajectories. So, we rather talk about a problem that's part of Strategy 2025 than a specific transformative trajectory.

Ironically, this process is facilitated by what CCs see as a less than complete elaboration of the strategy by actors upward the hierarchical chain. Put differently, because the meaning of a transformative trajectory is left open, it can be flexibly applied to a wide range of club issues. The usage of this room for manoeuvre implies that CCs hardly ever deliver a prepacked Strategy 2025 message, and they rarely provide concrete suggestions for club-level actions unless this is explicitly sought by clubs, instead hoping that clubs will formulate their own assessment of the actions needed to be taken. The reluctance to 'preach' the strategy appears to stem partly from the fact

that the strategy, in the eyes of CCs, has not been sufficiently packaged by the SSC, leaving CCs with a lack of adequate rhetorical tools to use in their interaction with clubs. Interviewee 6 illustrated this by saying, ‘The SSC produces a lot of material, but it’s not always reality-based...’. The material has got to be based on clubs’ activities and their everyday practices.’ Interviewee 7 similarly stated the following:

Take for example the gender equity transformative trajectory. What arguments can be used, other than that we from a moral standpoint believe that clubs should be gender equal? What arguments are there that I can keep up my sleeve and pull out to get clubs to buy into the idea of working with gender equality?

However, Swedish CCs’ communicative strategy once again seems to also stem from a reluctance to convey to clubs that the strategy is a top-down mandate. CCs believe that if clubs view it as such, it will spark change resistance, almost regardless of the content of the strategy, because if clubs feel that ‘something comes from above, they oppose it’ (Interviewee 2).

One important exception to the side door ushering-in of the strategy is interactions with clubs that are federated under NSFs that are clear in their communication around Strategy 2025, and which have an elaborated model for implementing it in their member clubs. In such cases, CCs latch on to these models while indicating to clubs that the authoritative body of their sport, governed by a board elected by the clubs, has mandated the change inherent in the model. As an illustration, Interviewee 2 stated the following:

It is, in fact, the club members that make the decisions. They have decided who should represent their club—most often the board—and so it continues upwards the system. Decisions emanate from them, and I try to point that out. 71 NSFs have decided this together. It’s not the SSC; they don’t decide anything—it’s the 71 NSFs that have approved [the strategy] at the general assembly. And if you explain that, people usually get it.

In lieu of a sense of mandate to enforce change, CCs thus attempt to appropriate the NSFs’ mandate, and this appears to be why they wish their mother organisation, the SSC, would put pressure on the NSFs to intensify their work with the strategy:

[The SSC] should make it clear to the NSFs that “you need to do this: you’ve got to pursue this downwards in your system,” because if the clubs perceive their NSF as going out in front, our work with the clubs becomes a lot easier. (Interviewee 8)

This section has detailed the four dimensions of the CC interaction style, illustrating their meaning in the context of Swedish CCs’ work with implementing Strategy 2025. In the next and final section of the paper, we discuss some potential system-level transformative effects of the empirical meaning of these dimensions, along with noting some limitations of the study and providing suggestions for future research.

Concluding discussion, limitations, and suggestions for future research

With this paper, we have sought to shed light on the professionalised organisational role of CCs which, although neglected in previous research, may greatly impact policy processes due to its locus at the intersection of the sport system and organisations that are the main deliverers of actual sport activities (clubs; Thompson et al., 2021).

We have shown that, because of these features, CCs can be understood as a type of SLB (Lipsky, 2010) with a style of interacting with clubs that is institutionally shaped (Garrow & Grusky, 2013). We thus found that although they share many of the features that define SLBs in other contexts, CCs' interaction style is somewhat specific to a context where interdependence abounds and where not only the employers of SLBs, but their service recipients, too, are voluntary organisations that historically have proven rather difficult to 'govern from the top' (Fahlén et al., 2015; Skille, 2008; Skille & Stenling, 2018; Stenling, 2013, 2014a; Stenling & Fahlén, 2016).

The first main contribution and conclusion of our work is that CCs' interaction style may be conceptualised along four dimensions: the case prioritisation principle, shaping of interaction context, interactor positioning, and communicative strategy. Of course, future research will have to validate these dimensions' analytical value, but we assert that they can be used as a preliminary theoretical operationalisation in future studies of CCs' interaction styles. What is likely to vary across sport systems and the policy under study, however, is the substantive empirical content of these dimensions.

Swedish CCs' interaction style in the context of the implementation of Strategy 2025 appears to be shaped by an institutional context in which umbrella organisations take great care not to be perceived by clubs as infringing on their autonomy (see Fahlén et al., 2015; Stenling, 2014). Although there may be other reasons, this is perhaps why the SSC, while clearly pushing for the strategy to permeate every corner of Swedish sport, has refrained from 'doing the work properly' in terms of spelling out Strategy 2025 in full. Regardless of the cause, it leaves CCs with a sense of great responsibility vis-à-vis the SSC, but with an unclear understanding of how to fulfil it. Nonetheless, because of their placement at the bottom of the organisational hierarchy, they must figure out a way to reconcile a top-driven policy with the clubs' approach to ideas that emanate from outside of their own organisation. The result from this distinctively *street-level* condition is the interaction style we have described here.

Potential system-level transformative effects

In addition to analysing CCs' institutionally shaped interaction style vis-à-vis clubs, another aim with this paper was to build on ideas (Sieber, 1981; Hood, 1991) and sport-specific empirical research (Fahlén, 2017; Fahlén et al., 2015; Fahlén & Stenling, 2019; Sam, 2011; Stenling & Sam, 2020a, 2020b; Thompson et al., 2021) around unintended effects of policy and organising processes to draw attention to the system-level transformative effects that may follow from what appears to be a rather micro-level practice. In this final part of the paper, we outline our second contribution by providing some illustrations of such possible effects of Swedish CCs' interaction style. Our study is limited in the sense of capturing these effects directly, but these illustrations nonetheless show that broader consequences may follow from the countless interactions that continually take place in the sport systems that rely on CCs to legitimise club-level organisational change. Important to note in that regard, is that our findings also might have limited reach in contexts in which the term CCs can carry other properties (such as other organisational affiliation, mandate, or position vis-à-vis clubs).

A first illustration is related to the dimension case prioritisation principle, meaning how CCs prioritise which clubs to direct their efforts towards. Considering CCs' case-load (recall that 450 CCs are responsible for 20,000 clubs), prioritising workable cases, as we, like Thompson et al. (2021), found Swedish CCs to do, is understandable from the perspective of work–life management and sense of achievement. However, not only is this practice contrary to the cross-sport scope of Strategy 2025, it may also have fragmenting effects because it unevenly channels resources and attention in a way that is likely to increase the discrepancy between clubs that are on board with the strategy and those that are not. That is, since prioritising workable cases often entails directing efforts towards clubs appearing ideationally closer to Strategy 2025, more resources are channelled to such clubs. As a consequence, less attention and resources are directed at clubs appearing ideationally further from Strategy 2025, thus widening the gap between clubs more inclined to agree with centrally decided policies and clubs more inclined to oppose.

A second possible systemic effect is associated with the interactor positioning dimension. Because organisational change in institutionalised contexts requires justification and elaboration (see for example Greenwood et al., 2002; Strittmatter, 2016), the implementation of change programmes under Strategy 2025s scope is arguably helped by the use of 'merchants of meaning' (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1990, p. 139) of some sort. That is, individuals whose task is not only to stimulate programme-aligned changes in their 'client' organisations, but more fundamentally to explain what the programme means and why it is necessary. In many regards, Swedish CCs and their counterparts in other sport systems are uniquely situated to perform this task. They have dedicated time, expertise, and close relationships with clubs, all of which underpin the legitimacy of their role as benign and knowledgeable allies to clubs. Furthermore, although CCs suggest that their weak mandate limits their possibility to enforce change, it simultaneously allows them to present themselves as being on the side of clubs. In that sense, independent from the implementation-related effectiveness of their work, CCs' legitimacy as professional frontline policy staff is likely to be further strengthened by their central function in the implementation of programmes such as Strategy 2025. By extension, CCs' positioning vis-à-vis clubs may bolster professional work focussed on downward directed 'soft' promotion of centrally decided policies, in turn disguising and enabling further advancement of professionally managed policy processes. Indeed, it is likely that in systems that are reliant on internal 'selling' (rather than coercive 'sticks' such as withdrawal of funding for clubs that do not align with policy goals), an increase in centrally promulgated policy will further augment the role of, and resources spent on, CCs operating at the front line, potentially at the expense of resources allocated directly to clubs.

Related to the second, a third and final potential systemic effect is linked to the two dimensions shaping of interaction context and communicative strategy. Arguably, the way in which the CCs we studied construct the meeting setting and communicate with clubs is telling of the working conditions of frontline staff in a highly structured yet bottom-up democratic sport system. In many ways, discretion is inherent in and even necessary for their role. It allows CCs to convey a centralised message while maintaining a sense and expression of loyalty to clubs. At the same time, the CCs

lament the lack of elaboration of Strategy 2025 and the unbalanced allocation of responsibility and mandate they are faced with. Indeed, CCs seem to latch on to opportunities to borrow NSFs' mandates to enforce change, and they wish that more NSFs, the SSC, and their own management would more fully enforce their mandates, specify the meaning of the strategy, and coordinate its implementation. If heeded by these organisations, this request foreshadows an increased centralisation that, although carried out under the guise of a supposedly neutral needs analysis, may come at the expense of member influence and developmental work that take its point of departure in clubs' unfiltered wants rather than their centrally distilled needs (Stenling & Sam, 2020b).

To close, this article has placed focus on CCs, a ubiquitous, impactful, but understudied role in sport systems worldwide. Our two main contributions are, first, an empirically grounded operationalisation of CCs' institutionally shaped interaction style in four dimensions, facilitating future research into CCs in diverse contexts. Second, to draw attention to the potential for a rather microlevel practice to have broader policy implications, we provide an assessment of the unintended yet conceivable transformative effects of the manifestation of these dimensions in Swedish sport. Together, these two contributions provide a starting point for future work on the shaping conditions, characteristics, and effects of the work carried out by a role that is situated at the nexus of sport systems and the clubs that constitute their base.

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