SPORT POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

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Overview

In Skille (2008) I developed a framework for the analysis of sport policy implementation via local and voluntary sport clubs or, as the title of the article indicates, for ‘understanding sport clubs as sport policy implementers’. Thus, the general phenomenon of interest was sport policy, and the specific phenomenon of interest was the implementation process (of sport policy). My intent was to find or create a framework for a specific empirical research project regarding Norwegian sport clubs. In that respect, the framework is both focused upon and limited to a sport club point of view. To my knowledge, the use of this specific theoretical framework was new in sport management – and sport (social) sciences in general – when I introduced it in 2008.

The specific constructs and key propositions of the framework are taken from neo-institutionalism, especially from an updated and ‘agency-friendly’ version of neo-institutionalism, as opposed to what I label the classic and reproductive-oriented institutionalism. From classic neo-institutionalism, I had earlier used the key concepts of rationalised myths and the three versions of isomorphism (see more details on the process in the next section). I had used, first, the concepts of Meyer and Rowan (1977) to analyse how the Norwegian confederation of sports (NIF), as the monopolistic and relatively independent (from the state) sport organisation in Norway, reproduces its monopolistic and relatively independent position in the field of sport also during phases of claimed change. It does so by leaning on the rationalised myth of being the best and only provider of sport activity in Norway (Skille, 2004b). I had used, second, the concepts from DiMaggio and Powell (1983) to show how inventions in the sport field (which was an empirical example of the claimed change), referred to as alternative sports (alternative in organisation, with a less competitive focus and more adolescent-controlled as opposed to adult-controlled, in comparison with conventional sports) underwent isomorphic processes and resembled conventional sport (Skille, 2005c).

At the outset of the focal paper it was, therefore, crucial to search for a theoretical framework which focused on how organisations respond to external pressure and at the same time focused on how internal strategies of organisations were created. It could be claimed that I then searched for rather contradicting theoretical perspectives, and that a combination of very different theories would be needed in order to fulfil the two foci. I turned, however, to relatively recent developments within neo-institutional theory, rather than combining with other theories.
These developments are based on a critique of the classic neo-institutionalism and its focus on how organisations resemble each other in an institutional field, and how external influence is seen as a more important reason for organisational behaviour than internal agency. I leaned on earlier theoretical developments in sport management, with various positions on the structure-agency axis (Kikulis, Slack and Hinings, 1995; Stevens and Slack, 1998). In line with, for example, Kikulis (2000), I claimed that there are fundamental elements of agency implicit in the institutional perspective; the establishment and sustaining of institutions depend on individual agents’ behaviour (Berger and Luckmann, 1991).

The key concept in the proposed theoretical framework is translation. The concept of translation focuses upon organisational change, where type and degree of change in an organisation depends on how the focal organisation adapts to institutional elements in the institutional environment. The adaption process is about importing institutional elements from other fields or successful parts of its own field. Important here is how translation is seen as a more appropriate denomination than diffusion. When diffusion is used, the process is associated with a passive sense, as it is a metaphor stemming from a chemical and biological process of a movement of a substance from one side of a membrane to the other, based purely on the pressure difference on the two sides of a membrane (Berry and Berry, 1999). Hence the concept of translation was introduced in order to indicate an active process where, such as in my empirical case, the local sport club and its relation to central sport policy were conceived as active processes conducted by active agents (individual representatives of sport clubs).

After criticising former paradigms within institutionalism for not clarifying their criteria for the analysis of institutional change, and for not clarifying the underlying mechanisms for institutional change, Campbell (2004) identifies two such mechanisms: *bricolage* and *translation*. In short, the former is about being innovative and recombining intrinsic institutional elements into new forms, thereby creating change from within the focal organisation. According to Campbell (2004), ‘actors often craft new institutional solutions by recombining elements in their repertoire through an innovative process of *bricolage*’ (p. 69). The latter refers to the import of new elements from the outside of the focal organisation. About translation, he explains:

More specifically, new ideas are combined with already existing institutional practices and, therefore, are *translated* into local practice in varying degrees and in ways that involve a process very similar to bricolage. The difference is that translation involves the combination of *new* externally given elements received through diffusion as well as old locally given ones inherited from the past.

*(Campbell, 2004, p. 80)*

Translation is a process with several steps, of which each has an active aspect. Translation implies, first, that there is a new institutional element taken from outside the focal organisation, which is actively imported. When imported it is, second, actively treated by individual agents within the receiving organisation to fit into the focal organisation. The treatment includes a translation step. It is this translation, of fitting the imported element into the receiving and focal organisation, which challenges classic neo-institutionalism seeing diffusion as a passive process leading to resemblance and hence homogeneity of organisations within an institutional field (Campbell, 2004). In other words, the overall concept of translation refers to recombination of internal and external institutional elements. According to Czarniawska and Joerges (1996) translation ‘comprises what exists and what is created; the relationship between humans and ideas, ideas and objects, and humans and objects – all needed in order to understand what in shorthand we call “organizational change”’ (p. 24).
Translation not only implies but requires agency in the behaviour of the individual agents representing the receiving and focal organisation. However, individual agency does not equalise randomness, as it is regulated by culture. Cultures vary across contexts; in the focal article, I made this point by utilising Rottenburg’s (1996) ball-game metaphor:

[I]n order to bring an idea into a local cosmos from any part of the outside world, one has to use a cultural code . . . each culture has several mutually contradicting codes which are made available to individual people like alternative repertoires for thought. . . . [I]t is . . . accurate to imagine this process as a kind of ball game. Only if the actors catch the ball and pass it on, i.e. they collaborate, can the game continue. . . in this way, we move from the trans-mission . . . to the trans-formation of a thing.

(pp. 214–215, emphasis original)

When I was searching for a theoretical framework to analyse how Norwegian sport clubs were related to national sport policy, it was important to find a concept that took into account the fact that there were active agents within – individual representatives of – the sport clubs. In that respect, I followed Spyberg (1996) who claimed that, ‘it is important to retain the view of the individual as a human agent routinely engaged in the reproduction of social institutions, but with the capacity to translate them in the course of day-to-day activities’ (p. 189). For example, one objective of the empirical study of Norwegian sport clubs was to analyse if/how the health element of national sport policy influenced the local sport clubs. The point was that:

If the health argument of central sport policy influences the local sport clubs, it relies on the sport club representatives’ interpretation of it; health (or any element of the sport policy) will only be empirically observable as an interpreted and implemented version of that health-as-part-of-sport policy.

(Skille, 2008, p. 193)

On this point I followed Rottenburg (1996) who claimed: ‘Translation aims at the appropriation of the external thing, which is then given another function, an altered meaning and often a new shape in the new context’ (p. 214). Based on the need for a theoretical framework for one specific empirical study, the translation perspective was chosen. Moreover, the translation perspective makes it possible to discuss larger sociological issues, as it takes into account the issue of structure and agency as well as the relationship between the global or national and the local.

With regard to boundary conditions, the framework was developed in order to focus on the local sport clubs as the last link in the chain for delivering sport policies. In that respect, it could be seen as a boundary condition that the framework lacks the possibility for a larger view on the policy process. It should be noted that in Skille (2008), I go through other theories used in sport policy analysis. I judge these as not as appropriate for the analysis of the local sport clubs as the proposed and applied framework. I acknowledge, however, that other theories are fruitful for other sport policy analyses. This is especially true because each level and each context of sport policy analysis is specific; therefore, various theories are better on one level than another (Skille, 2008). For example, the advocacy coalition framework, as employed by Houlihan (2005), is an appropriate framework to apply in analyses of how different actors involved with national level sport policy form coalitions and compete with other coalitions in order to get their arguments through in a decision-making process. A criticism of the translation perspective is ‘that the central policy is conceived as something “out there”, which may be or may not be imported, translated and implemented’ (Skille, 2008, p. 194). The translation perspective does not cover the
complexity and wholeness of a sport policy field where various policy organisations and/or sport organisations negotiate and/or co-operate to influence decision-making processes of sport policy making. (The above mentioned advocacy coalition framework can work for such purposes.)

As the above article was the theoretical part of a larger, empirically based study into Norwegian sport clubs, the framework has been cited in several empirical articles (Skille, 2009, 2010a, 2011a) and one book (Skille, 2010b). In the first of the empirical articles (Skille, 2009), I reflect upon the sport clubs’ role and sport clubs representatives’ experiences in a specific sport programme (Skille, 2005c; see more about the programme and the research in the following sections). Applying both the isomorphic and the translation perspectives of neo-institutionalism, it was shown that sport clubs on the one hand resemble the (universal) competitive logic of sport; on the other hand, representatives of sport clubs translate the social policy incentives of the programme (made in the state sport policy) and combine these with responses to perceived requirements in their local communities when implementing their programme activities.

In another empirical project, I studied three ordinary sport clubs. Ordinary sport takes place during leisure time, it is voluntarily conducted, competitively oriented, and participation is based on membership in a sport club that is organisationally linked to the central policy through the Norwegian confederation of sports (NIF) system. The study’s focus was on if/how the health elements of national sport policy influence local sport clubs. It identified processes going on in the sport clubs, where sport club representatives were concerned with recombining existinginstitutional elements. This process is the bricolage referred to earlier (Campbell, 2004; Skille, 2010a). Treating the question about how different, and apparently contradictory, elements such as competitiveness and healthy upbringing were integrated parts of the sport clubs’ institutional context, I turned to the distinction between substantive and symbolic bricolage (Campbell, 2004; Skille, 2010a). I elaborate by citing from one of the empirical articles:

Substantive bricolage is applied in order to find solutions to specific problems, ‘... and thus follows a logic of instrumentality’ (Campbell, 2004: 63). Specific problems here refer to issues related to how achievement in sport competitions should be improved. In the case of the football club, this is manifested in the sport development plan which provides a guideline on how to train, and what to focus upon regarding certain skills levels and for the various age groups. Following this logic, competitiveness and sport development seem to be substantive elements because they refer to the practice of the sport club. Second, symbolic bricolage basis on ‘... a logic of appropriateness’ and that ‘... the solutions that actors devise must be acceptable and legitimate within the broad social environment’ (Campbell, 2004: 70). Thus, arguments related to sport clubs’ role in the upbringing of young people to enjoy healthy lifestyles may be considered as a symbolic element: it is utilized for legislative purposes in a broader societal setting. Sport club representatives emphasised the possible positive outcome of sport provision in order to gain symbolic and financial support from the public sector. Because everybody agrees on the positive connotations of the concept of health (St. meld. nr. 14, 1999–2000), the link between sport and health may be considered as a ‘... utilization of symbolic language, rhetorical devices, lofty and culturally accepted principles ...’ (Campbell, 2004: 70).

(Skille, 2010a, p. 81)

In the third empirical article (Skille, 2011a), I studied one single sport club (a football/soccer club) by considering it as a mixture of rational, natural and open systems (Scott, 2001) and by
employing the perspective of translation from neo-institutionalism. When change took place in the soccer club it was based on an interaction between pressure from external sources and discussions about strategy within the club. For example, if the ‘club should develop a model for development of players, aiming at taking into account both elite orientation and mass participation, the solution was found by mimicking ideas from other organisations in the institutional field (Skille, 2011a, p. 79). Hence, the specific empirical case shows how the real world consists of reproduction – as described by classic neo-institutionalism – as well as change – described by modern neo-institutionalism. The isomorphic processes described in classic neo-institutionalism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) were explained by translation as suggested by updated and agency-oriented neo-institutionalism (Campbell, 2004). To be specific, it is shown that representatives of a soccer club’s board are inspired by ideas stemming from other soccer clubs that are conceived as successful in the regional institutional field. In that respect, something that, from the outside, can be observed as pure mimicking, was actually an institutional idea that is actively imported, treated and implemented (Skille, 2011a).

Process

The process that spurred my interest in the topic was simply a continuation or a follow up of former research. In my dissertation (Skille, 2005c), I studied a specific sports programme that was initiated in a state sport policy document (St. meld. nr. 41, 1991–1992), organised through the Norwegian confederation of sports (NIF) and aimed at adolescents who were not active in ordinary sport (leisure time, organised, competitive sport activities in local sport clubs). When studying such a programme I focused, first, on the policymaking and its organisation at the national level; this was done by document analysis, observation in meetings and interviews by key personnel in the state’s sport bureaucracy and in the NIF (Skille, 2004a, 2004b). Second, I measured the outcome of the programme on an individual adolescent level; I measured participation in programme activities compared with participation in ordinary sports in specific geographical areas (Skille, 2005a) and preferences for participation in programme activities compared with ordinary sport (Skille, 2005b). Both were conducted with a quantitative survey. In addition, I studied adolescents’ experiences of participation in programme activities, with qualitative interviews with sport programme participants and observations at strategically sampled programme sites (Skille, 2007; Skille and Waddington, 2006).

The point is, as stated in the concluding remarks of my dissertation, that ‘more research is needed’ that, among other things, addresses ‘how the leaders and coaches of sport clubs perceive public incentives like program funding for defined target groups’ (Skille, 2005c, p. 56). When defining a new research project, the level of sport clubs appeared as a clearly needed focus as this was identified as a missing link in my earlier research and in sport management research in general. Moreover, I moved on from focusing particularly on programme sport. Programme sport refers to sport with specific policy aims (for example social integration) for specific target groups (for example immigrants) followed by specific funding in order to provide alternatives to ordinary sports (for example demand less volunteering from parents, make it less competitive, and fewer membership demands). In other words, I took a more general sport organisational perspective when studying ordinary sport clubs.

Thus, the manner in which I thought about and developed the theoretical tenets and relationships among constructs was based on a clear idea of having the acting organisation as the point of departure for analysis. The ‘acting organisation’ refers to where the sport activity takes place; it is the context where policy is put into practice. Regarding practice, it refers to sport activity and provision of sport activity. With the exception of national teams and regional
teams in various sports, sport activity takes place solely in sport clubs. In that respect, I found representatives of sport clubs to be the ultimate interviewees, as they can say something about internal and external elements of the acting organisation. These elements include how or whether the sport club is informed by sport policy from above in any respect. Considering the sport club as both a formal organisation as part of an institutional field and as a unit with or collection of individuals of whom each has a free will, I needed what I felt was a relatively complete theory. A complete theory here refers to a framework taking into account stability and change, as well as structure and agency. In that respect, the stability and reproduction part is taken care of by the institutional field level where resemblance can be discovered (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer and Rowan, 1977); the part about agency and individuals with a free will and their desire and ability to make change is covered by what I call an updated and agency-oriented version of neo-institutionalism (Campbell, 2004; Sahlin and Wedlin, 2008).

The felt need to have a more nuanced theory stems, first, from earlier research where the isomorphic processes were highlighted (Skille, 2004b). With a theoretical focus upon isomorphic processes, it is easy to get into an empirical trap of only finding what you are looking for; namely, actors in compliance with an institutional field’s norms (competitiveness within the sport organisational field) and organisations resembling each other so that the field as such (understood as the aggregation of organisations) becomes homogenous. Second, the need for a more nuanced theory stems from the simple observation that organisations in the sport field differ and change. Why is that? The assumption was that there were active agents in the sport clubs.

**Extensions and applications**

Alterations I have made to the theory since its first iteration can be summed up as follows: I have added a concept to describe the consequences of agency and hence more change. With Bodemar I have added two elements from neo-institutional literature to the above-mentioned translation perspective (see Bodemar and Skille, 2014). The first is another step in the direction of acknowledging agency in organisations: namely, the concept of institutional entrepreneurship (Hardy and Maguire, 2008; Maguire, Hardy and Lawrence, 2004). The other is more about pinpointing that a consequence of change in organisations is actually pluralism (Kraatz and Block, 2008); this is contrary to resemblance and homogeneity as proposed as a consequence of isomorphism in classic neo-institutionalism.

Institutional entrepreneurship deals with how individual players are able to change the institutional field through innovation of new institutional elements (Hardy and Maguire, 2008). Institutional entrepreneurship is often defined as ‘activities of actors who have interest in particular institutional arrangements and who leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones’ (Maguire *et al.*, 2004, p. 657). The introduction of the concept of institutional entrepreneurship can be seen as a response to critics of the focus on static and reproductive elements of organisational fields found in classic neo-institutionalism. A main aspect of this solution is thus to reintroduce ‘considerations of agency, power and interests into analyses of institutional fields’ (Hardy and Maguire, 2008, p. 198). Most 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 and interest in the analysis of the institutional field. However, there are disagreements in the literature about how much power the individual entrepreneur actually has to possess in order to implement institutional changes (Hardy and Maguire, 2008).

The result of processes of change, regardless of being bricolage, translation or entrepreneurship, is a pluralisation of the institutional field (Kraatz and Block, 2008); hence pluralisation
is a framework that analyses the results of the changes and refers to how new institutional elements are created. If many people are supporters of new approaches or viewpoints, this will have a different impact or focus as opposed to if there were no majority for new solutions. I have used the pluralisation idea offered by Kraatz and Block (2008) in a fourth empirical article from the mentioned project into sport clubs, together with Enjolras’ (2006) ideas of institutional regimes. The idea of institutional regimes has clear similarities to the idea of institutional pluralism; institutional regimes refer to arrangements where there are several actors and several conventions. For example, with different institutional regimes, some people within organisations, such as sport clubs, may idolise competitiveness as the main convention while others may cultivate a sport for health convention (Skille, 2011b).

Ways in which others have applied and revised the theory in their research are always interesting. Donaldson and various colleagues have used a similar approach to mine, and cited the focal article on several occasions (e.g., Donaldson and Poulus, 2014; Poulus and Donaldson, 2012) when studying sport policy implementation in Australia, as have Vos et al. (2011) in the study of sport policy implementation in Flanders (a region in Belgium). More specifically, Donaldson and colleagues referred to Skille (2008) when they studied how local sport club representatives in Australian football interpret central trainer policy developed by the Australian Football League; in that respect they claim that: ‘The way from national policy development to local implementation is “long and uneasy” (Skille, 2008: 181), requiring implementers (e.g., community sports clubs) to interpret and modify the centrally developed policy to suit their local context’ (Donaldson, Leggett and Finch, 2011, p. 744). Moreover, in a study of implementation and translation of sport policy, Donaldson and Finch (2012) conclude that it is important to understand the end users: ‘sports participants, volunteer administrators and coaches respond first and foremost to their own needs and the needs of those they are responsible for’, as these local actors ‘interpret and implement centrally or top–down developed sports policy within the context of their daily experience and local environment’ (p. 307).

Vos and colleagues (2011) clearly apply the same perspective as I advocated in Skille (2008), employing neo-institutional theory (but not the complete theoretical framework as sketched above); they, for example, emphasised how the relationship between state sport policymaking and grassroots implementing is influenced by ‘the autonomy of voluntary sport clubs’, which in turn ‘is reinforced by the strong dependence on volunteers (Skille, 2008)’ (Vos et al., 2011, p. 273). They conclude that state subsidies as a coercive mechanism to executes pressure from the state on the local sport clubs is low, indicating that processes in the local sport clubs and their immediate context are of much higher importance for local sport clubs’ work than governmental pressure via subsidies. The perspective of local sport clubs as the point of departure for policy implementation can, of course, be taken with the application of the Skille (2008) theoretical framework, but can also be taken with the (further) application of, for example, symbolic interactionism, as applied by Donaldson et al. (2011). In sum, the overall perspective permeated in Skille (2008) can also be seen in other theories.

I use the theoretical framework in my teaching of public health as well. I find the framework especially interesting when asking the students to compare the public sector’s health service and the voluntary sport sector with a focus upon the implementing process. The students have various approaches to the study of public health at the graduate level: health professions (such as nursing, physiotherapy), school professions (general teacher, PE teacher) and bachelor of sport and bachelor of public health. When they start they share a belief in the role they will have as public health actors, usually seen as agents for change in society (e.g., changing deviant habits among people). It is therefore interesting to observe their discussions, across backgrounds and professions, when they reflect upon the institutionalised environment their specific contexts
represent. A common outcome is, interestingly, that they see the need for co-operation across sectors (when, for example, analysing how physical activity levels could be raised); it seems as if they want to eliminate institutional barriers in one sector by adding another sector.6

Future directions

Theoretical or empirical extensions of this theory or the general phenomena of interest are huge topics. Theoretically, I want to make two interrelated emphases. First, in general, sport management researchers should be up to date on the institutional theory field (and other theories). In that respect, I want to mention an emerging academic at the University of Utah, Patricia Bromley. She has written much lately with colleagues, among others, John Meyer and Walter Powell (Bromley and Powell, 2012; Meyer and Bromley, 2013). After reading her work, I have generated new ideas for research into my own field, sport policy. Second, moving on more systematically in my own research, I plan a comparison between the public sector’s health service and the voluntary sector’s sport system in order to extend the knowledge into the public health and sport relationship (which seems to be overwhelmingly on a political level these days). I think organisational sociologists and sport management researchers have something to contribute in that respect.

Notes

1 This chapter is a reflection on Skille (2008) and the work related to it.
2 In Bodemar and Skille (2014), a totally different theory was combined with neo-institutionalism to account for the individual and agency element of leadership.
3 The book is in the Norwegian language.
4 Further descriptions of the programme are not given, as the point here is the policy and organisation levels studied, in order to explain why I developed the framework in the focal article. For those interested, see Skille (2004a, 2004b, 2005c).
5 An important exception is Heinemann’s (1999) Sport Clubs in Various European Countries. It should also be mentioned that there is a new book on sport clubs in Europe in process (eds: van der Werff et al., 2015).
6 These are just a teacher’s observations during class discussions. Research is needed in order to say more about the exemplified issues.

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Applying a neo-institutional translational theory of policy implementation

Alex Donaldson

I became aware of Eivind Skille’s (2008) theoretical framework in 2009 while developing the protocol for, and conducting a study of, how Australian community football clubs interpret safety policy developed by the central governing body for their sport (the Australian Football League – AFL). The AFL had commissioned me to develop a first aid policy for community Australian football that was both evidence-based and implementable by their affiliated community clubs. Completing the first part of this brief was relatively straightforward and involved reviewing the available community-level Australian football-related injury epidemiological data, consulting with relevant experts, and examining the contents of existing sports’ first aid training courses (Donaldson and Finch, 2012a). It was while designing and conducting the more challenging second part of the brief that I came across Skille’s theoretical framework. What attracted me to this framework was that it addressed the issue of sports policy implementation from the perspective of the community clubs that actually do the implementing, and it placed understanding the complex implementation context at the centre of the implementation challenge. Skille also acknowledged that sport policy outcomes depend heavily on the volunteers who run community sports clubs. These volunteers have an overriding allegiance to their local environment, and they interpret centrally developed policy through the filters of the local context, organisational characteristics and their personal experiences. In addition, Skille’s framework was developed to interpret sport policy implementation within the Nordic model of sport, which is very similar to the Australian federated model. Finally, Skille’s framework expanded on Stage 5 (‘Describe intervention context to inform implementation strategies’) of the Translating Research into Injury Prevention Practice (TRIPP) framework (Finch, 2006) and complemented Step 5 of the Intervention Mapping health promotion programme planning protocol (Bartholomew et al., 2011) I had previously used to guide much of my research.

I have used Skille’s theoretical framework in my research to assist me to establish the significance of understanding the end-users’ perspective of centrally developed sports policy as a critical factor to policy implementation success (Donaldson and Finch, 2012b). Most Australian sports governing bodies operate under a hierarchical structure using a centralised model of policy development and a top-down, directed implementation process. This often results in the development of safety policies and programmes that do not reflect the needs, motivations or capacities of the community sports clubs that eventually become the policy and programme implementers and agents of change. As a consequence, safety policies and programmes are
frequently poorly implemented and rarely complied with at the community level (Hollis et al.,
2012; Poulos and Donaldson, 2012). Skille’s framework has been particularly useful for me when
working in partnership with national sporting organisations on policy development and
implementation-related projects specifically when negotiating with these organisations to invest
in time consuming research that requires engagement and consultation with community sports
club stakeholders (administrators, coaches, athletes, etc.) (Donaldson and Poulos, 2014). To assist
those tasked with facilitating the implementation of sports policy in the community sports set-
ing, it would now be helpful if Skille’s framework were extended to describe and empirically
measure the nature and strength of the major influences on the sports policy implementation
actions of community sports clubs.

Note
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