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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Developing a conceptual framework to analyse professionalization in sport federations

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ABSTRACT

Existing research on sport organizations is imprecise in the use of the concept of 'professionalization'. Furthermore, we do not know if analytical concepts of professionalization correspond with the understanding in practice. This study explores the perceptions of practitioners and proposes a framework to analyse professionalization in national sport federations. Expert interviews were conducted with six key people from Swiss national sport federations and then analysed these for characteristics of professionalization using a hermeneutic approach. The characteristics were divided into three areas: (1) changed management philosophy, (2) functional differentiation and specialization, and (3) application of management tools. However, professionalization is primarily perceived to be a matter of 'professional' attitude that transforms into federation culture. The practitioners disclose an ambivalent view of professionalization, e.g. business-like culture vs. voluntarism, for-profit vs. non-profit orientation, autonomy vs. control. A framework is developed that synthesizes analytical concepts and practitioners' perceptions to support future comprehensive research into causes, forms and consequences of professionalization in national sport federations.

KEYWORDS

Concept; expert interviews; practitioners' view; professionalization; sport organizations

Introduction

In the course of societal development towards modernization and rationalization, environmental pressures have pushed organizations to adapt their structures and practices to new standards, notably to demonstrate modernity, rationality and accountability (e.g. Child & Rodrigues, 2011; for sport organizations: Kikulis, 2000). Meeting expectations of stakeholders using larger management structures and formalization has become essential to the survival of organizations in a dynamic organizational environment. This pressure is observed in public and corporate sectors as well as in non-profit organizations (NPO), and particularly in the sport sector where a response to liability issues is needed to legitimize (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) their activities (Evetts, 2011;

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Kikulis, 2000; Hoyer, 2003; Maier et al., 2014; Maier et al., 2016; Slack & Hinings, 1992). As key actors within a (global) sport system (Stichweh, 2013), international and national sport federations (NSF) are required to justify their social and commercial activities to their stakeholders – state, sponsors, member clubs, media, etc. This pressure has caused profound organizational changes, such as institutionalized management, implementation of standardized instruments in daily practice, and employment of people with specific qualifications. Yet, sport federations as well as sport clubs are characterized by organizational structures that do not fit these developments: they have a federal governance, decisions are made on a delegate basis, their purpose is not economic revenue but satisfying their members, and they operate on a voluntary basis (e.g. Thiel & Mayer, 2009). The organizational adaptation has led to a transformation of sport federations, ‘from a volunteer driven to an increasingly business-like phenomenon’ (Chantelat, 2001; Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011). This development has often been referred to as ‘professionalization’, even though there is no clear definition of the term.

Definitions and dimensions of professionalization

There are few scholars who have defined or attempted to conceptualize ‘professionalization’.

Dowling and colleagues (2014) analyse sociological, managerial and sport management literature on professionalization in sport organizations. Based on their review, they propose a classification into three categories:

1. *Organizational professionalization* means ‘a transition [...] from an amateur and volunteer driven pastime towards increasingly business-like organizational entities’ (523), and has been researched in terms of governance, structure and policy-making;
2. *Systemic professionalization* is ‘an attempt to account for an external factor that is influencing [...] sport organizations within a particular system or organizational field’ (524).
3. *Occupational professionalization* is defined as ‘the transformation of occupations into professions’ and ‘a means to explain the legitimization’ (524; see also Abbott, 1988; Evetts, 2011).

In this paper, we incorporate the first two perspectives, which are directly relevant to organizational development in sport federations. Systemic professionalization directly corresponds with the *institutional approach* discussed. This theoretical concept focuses on the external factors of occupational professionalization, such as field-level pressure, expectations of stakeholders, and legitimization (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Descriptions of organizational professionalization as a process away from ‘amateurism’ (Bailey & Chapelle, 2013; Chantelat, 2001; O’Brien & Slack, 2003, 2004; Salamon, 1987; Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011; Skinner et al., 1999) has these main features: employment of professionals with expert knowledge in the federations, a process towards rationalization, efficiency, project management, and commercialization to ultimately legitimize their activities (Dowling et al., 2014; Hoyer, 2003; O’Brien & Slack, 2003, 2004; Seippel, 2011). These features have also been attributed to ‘being business-like’ (Maier et al., 2014). In the main, most authors reflect on organizational

professionalization from a functional perspective, and issues of organizational culture are rarely discussed.

Legay (2001) and Bayle and Robinson (2007) distinguish three dimensions of organizational professionalization in sport federations:

1. *Professionalization of activities*: A professionalized organization defines goals and develops measures to work towards these goals. These measures are regularly evaluated in terms of efficiency and effectiveness, to ensure constant self-monitoring, and to finally enable potential improvement.
2. *Professionalization of individuals*: This means an increased number of paid employees and higher expectations of the competence of volunteers. The activities of the individuals can be in the field of management of the organization or in sport (e.g. athletes, coaches). The priority between professionalizing the sports department by engaging paid trainers, and increasing administrative staff is often discussed.
3. *Professionalization of processes and structures*: This applies to both centralization and more hierarchical decision-making processes, as well as to specialization and differentiation of roles, the functions and tasks in the organization, such as dealing with external players, ensuring organizational learning and knowledge management, and implementing modern technologies.

Causes and consequences of professionalization

Aside from the conceptualization of professionalization, the researchers have also attempted to grasp the characteristics of stages and sequences, the causes and drivers, in terms of environmental influence as well as internal factors that may trigger or hinder processes of professionalization, and to finally assess the consequences of the organizational changes (e.g. Bayle & Camy, 2004; Dowling et al., 2014; Ferkins et al., 2005; Kikulis et al., 1992; Shilbury, 2001; Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011). Nagel and colleagues (2015) have summarized the current sport management and sport sociological literature and positioned all relevant perspectives into a multi-level framework of forms, causes and consequences of professionalization. There are several internal and external drivers for federations to professionalize: e.g. pressure from the government, expectations of sponsors, media, and umbrella organizations, increased workload, strategic capability of the board and key individuals. Traditional culture (Peachey et al., 2015; Slack & Hinings, 1992) and scarce financial resources can hinder professionalization, whereas international competition and media coverage in certain sports promote professionalization (for more details see Nagel et al., 2015).

The influence of the environment, and adaption to common expectations of other institutions (e.g. umbrella organizations, member organizations, and policy makers), is often explained using institutional theory (Horch & Schütte, 2009; Kikulis, 2000; O'Brien & Slack, 2004; Slack & Hinings, 1992; Washington & Patterson, 2011). Our study approaches professionalization with a 'theoretically open mind'; professionalization is multifaceted and by maintaining an openness in theory and by accessing multiple approaches we may better understand different aspects of the phenomenon (Abbott, 1988; Horch & Schütte, 2009; Peachey et al., 2015; Slack, 2014; Slack & Hinings, 1992).

Outline of the present study

Despite increasing research interest and many attempts to systemize the phenomenon of professionalization, there is still no comprehensively applicable concept. According to Dowling and colleagues (2014), 'the exact manner by which the concept is operationalized is often ambiguous, unclear, implicit or omitted entirely.' (2). A more profound concept that provides a common understanding of the phenomenon would assist the analysis of professionalization in sport federations as a holistic phenomenon and enable comparison of different forms of organizational transformation.

As well as maintaining conceptual ambivalence, it is particularly unclear if the concepts used in the literature correspond to the understanding of professionalization in practice. To date, we do not know whether the concepts applied by scholars mirror the perception of practitioners in the federations. However, valid research necessitates practitioners to have a common understanding when using the term professionalization, e.g. when they write documents or take part in academic research. The perceptions of practitioners in the field are essential to validate the theoretical concepts of professionalization (Slack, 2014; Van der Roest et al., 2015). The integration of practitioners' perspectives into a framework would also increase the reliability and applicability in the analysis of a particular sport federation.

The main focus of this paper is to better understand professionalization in sport federations. For this purpose, this study explores professionalization in the context of Swiss NSF. Specifically, we (1) ask how experts from the field of Swiss NSF perceive professionalization, (2) compare their perceptions with concepts of professionalization that have been used in the literature and (3) propose a conceptual framework for professionalization.

Considering both the perspectives of researchers and practitioners, we can establish the basis of a comprehensive conceptual framework that could be used to analyse forms of professionalization in sport federations. Such a framework would also help sport federations to develop adequate management and governance concepts and ultimately result in an increased strategic capability (Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011).

Method

Hermeneutical approach

A hermeneutic approach has been selected. To date hermeneutic phenomenology has not had much attention in sport management research (Edwards & Skinner, 2009; Shilbury et al., 2014; Skille, 2013). However, when attempting 'to grasp the everyday world, and draw insight and meaning from it' (Shilbury et al., 2014, 350), hermeneutics is a fruitful method, as its strength lies in the understanding of the meaning of context. To this end the researcher observes an observer (second order observation) and reconstructs the subjective view and interpretation that the first order observer has of a phenomenon.

Expert interviews

Qualitative expert interviews are an eligible instrument for a hermeneutic analysis of perceptions of real-life phenomena. Such experts can be seen as specialists in specific

Table 1. The experts

Experts	
The Vice Executive Director of SO (for 2 years) Responsible for federation development Several years at SO in various leading positions	The Head of Ethic and Education Department of SO (for 8 years) Responsible for club and federation development Several years in sport management at SO
Counsellor for NSF/NPO (for nearly 20 years) Lecturer in Education (offered by national umbrella federations) involved in promotion of leisure, tourism & sport, together with public sector	The Chief of the Resort Sport and Society at the Federal University of Sports (for 9 years) Leading position in a large NSF Several years in a large NSF in various leading positions
The President of one of the largest NSF (for 8 years) A board member of foundations and associations for sport and health system promotion	The Executive Director of the Cantonal Federation of Sport Zurich (for 3 years) (umbrella organization of the sport federations of Canton Zurich)

constellations (Mayring, 2000), because they possess not only technical information (data and facts) and process information (e.g. about interactions), but also information about contexts and meanings. Through the first set of information they are able to refer to fields where they are not actors themselves, whereas the latter set refers to the views, interpretations and perceptions, the experts have been able to create about the phenomenon (Gibbs, 2007; Lindseth & Norberg, 2004; Petty et al., 2012). Therefore, in this study the experts are expected to have knowledge beyond any single sport federation, and to be familiar with the environment of the federations, such as political institutions. Being able then to understand the context in which professionalization is taking place, the experts are expected to be able to relate information and thus be able to interpret and build a view of their observation.

Data collection

Interviews were conducted with six people with diverse backgrounds in the field of Swiss sport (Table 1). After five interviews, the material appeared saturated, this was confirmed by a sixth interview. The interviews were conducted face-to-face by a minimum of two of the authors and guided by these main research questions: What does the interviewee understand by 'professionalization in sport federations'? What characterizes professionalization? How does a professionalized sport federation differ from a less professionalized one? Following additional objectives of the study, the interview guide also included questions about causes, influencing factors, and the consequences of professionalization. The topics of the interviews were set by the literature review, which is the basis of Nagel and colleagues' (2015) multi-level framework for analysing forms, causes and consequences of professionalization. In this paper, we focus only on the responses related to forms of professionalization. The interviews took place between October 2014 and January 2015, were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. The average duration was about one hour.

Swiss sport system

In Switzerland, sport politics work on three levels (e.g. Kempf & Lichtsteiner, 2015): federal, cantonal and municipal, and sport is organized by public and private corporations. Public bodies are responsible for sports-for-all and college sport, whereas the umbrella

federation Swiss Olympic Association (SO), its 86 NSF that represent 20,000 clubs, organise grassroots and top-level sport. Compared to other European countries, the Swiss sport system is funded to a small extent by the Federal Office of Sport (BASPO) that mainly supports the action of the cantons, municipals and private organizations (Chappelet, 2010; Kempf & Lichtsteiner, 2015). The sport federations and their clubs hold a central position in the Swiss sport system and play an important role in sport activities, e.g. 25% of the population is member of a sport club and its sport federation (Stamm & Lamprecht, 2011; Stamm et al., 2015). Currently, the federations in particular are in a process of professionalization leading to an obvious increase in paid staff. One reason for this is the requirements of SO for funding, such as strategic concepts and management structures.

Experts

In their previous and current functions, the selected experts have been associated with the process and development of several Swiss NSF (Table 1). The sample contains representatives of different parts of Swiss sport system: public sector (BASPO and a cantonal umbrella federation), private sector (SO and NSF), and persons in (formerly) voluntary as well as in paid positions. Some of the experts hold or have held positions “between” SO and the NSF. The organizations where our experts work and have worked are all involved in the process of professionalization, and the experts operate as actors in the development of Swiss sport system. In their various positions they deal with the challenges the federations face today, address these with the federations, and represent the interests of sport in politics. As they work with several NSF, they are able to compare their development and thus to better reflect on different procedures. In the results section, we refer to the interviewees using letters (Interviewee (I) A-F), which *do not correspond* to the order of the persons in Table 1.

Data analysis

The interviews were screened line by line for characteristics and units of meaning of professionalization by two researchers independently. Researchers’ notes and the units were then compared, discussed and divergences synchronized, after which each interview was coded electronically. In this phase, the codes were kept close to the material to avoid losing any information. In the next step, the coded segments of all interviews were checked for their commonalities and discrepancies, grouped accordingly, and named inductively by consensus. For data management, we used the software Atlas.ti. Finally, the codes were printed out, spread on a table and grouped by four researchers. In the following, we refer to these groups as characteristics of professionalization.

Results

The characteristics of professionalization that we identified in the expert interviews could be inductively assigned into three groups: (1) changed management philosophy, i.e. for-profit orientation, service and customer orientation, quality improvement, rationality and efficiency orientation, and strategic planning; (2) functional differentiation and specialization, i.e. differentiation of positions, balanced governance, competence

orientation and paid staff; and (3) application of management tools, i.e. controlling, administration and communication tools. The results are elaborated in the following sections.

Changed management philosophy

A prominent issue in the experts' views of professionalization was a shift in the federations' philosophy towards 'business-like', service-orientated organization, due to the focus on economic performance, investment and capital reserves. Where a sport federation traditionally and legally operates on a non-profit basis, today, they seem to adopt practices from FPO. Interviewee D described professionalization as 'economization', and even found:

The for-profit orientated part [of a federation] becomes bigger and bigger, investment is an issue, and federations expect revenue, not non-profit (I-D)

Nevertheless, as the other interviewees, also interviewee D emphasized that the increasing orientation at practices and activities that are common in FPO does not result in a shift towards FPO, as the fundamental non-profit logic, i.e. voluntarism and representation of members' interests, remains central.

In accordance with FPO orientation, most experts observed that Swiss sport federations see themselves more and more as *service providers*. Using attractive events and well-known athletes, federations can 'create a selling product that the sponsors will market in return' (I-D). This implies that, in contrast to representing members' interests, the market analysis of supply and demand gains importance, and promoting their own 'product' for multiple stakeholders becomes one of the core tasks of the federations. A negative consequence of a customer-service provider relationship can be that:

The demands increase, because consumer-service provider relationship automatically means higher expectations, people don't accept any failures. [...] That means that the remaining voluntary work becomes more and more challenging. (I-F)

Some interviewees related professionalization to the intention to *improve the quality* of the federation's performance, e.g. by developing their 'product' and their services. As interviewee E stated:

Professionalization always comes into play when things go wrong. [...] It's basically all about getting better. The athletes, the coaches, the federation itself. We want to be better, meaning qualitative development. (I-E)

Later in the interview, interviewee E pointed out that professionalization does not guarantee the improvement in the federation's performance.

For the experts, optimizing organizational performance means more *rationality and efficiency* of the processes. All of them have observed that Swiss sport federations are struggling with limited resources and capacities (personnel and financial), but also with ineffective allocation of scarce resources. This prompts the NSF to optimize the day-to-day processes in order to operate efficiently. For interviewee A, this means 'not to turn everything upside down all at once', professionalization needs to aspire to 'a certain modesty' – not to conflict with the interests and benefits of member clubs. In the end, it is the members that evaluate the quality of the performance and services of a federation.

To characterize professionalization, the experts consistently contrasted unplanned muddling-through (Schimank, 2005) with *long-term strategy*:

Strategic way of thinking and concepts behind, analysis and systematic actions, that's professionalization. (I-E)

The professionalized federations put effort into self-reflection, analysis of their environment, and documentation of policy and knowledge, where they can configure long-term concepts – 'not that you start all over again with every change in staff' (I-A). Interviewee F emphasized the importance of a vision: a federation should first pursue a vision 'to give the strategy a direction' (I-F).

The interviews indicate that the shift in management philosophy towards 'business-like' organizations is challenging the NSF. Because of the relationships with different stakeholders, whose expectations may differ from each other, the federations have to follow diverse goals or their ultimate goal may even not be clear. Without clearly defined goals then, it is difficult to determine measurements for quality, efficiency, and long-term strategy, or to define achievement and success. Interviewee E raised a related and conflicting issue: because 'a lot is done in an informal manner [which] is more difficult to measure', 'looking at formalities, whether the federation has this and that, how the financial control works' does not reflect the real performance and how the federation 'works in reality' (I-E). Interviewees questioned the application of financial control tools commonly used in public offices and the associated economic reckoning.

Finally, the majority of the interviewees pointed out that the shift in management philosophy, as it is described above, does not solely concern sport federations, but is the spirit of time, 'the trend' (I-F):

It has to do with current phenomena of the society, it's in the culture. We used to clean our homes by ourselves, voluntarily, and today we employ a cleaner. (I-E)

Functional differentiation and specialization

The interviewees further characterized professionalization through changes in organizational structures and adaptations in personal policy, particularly in terms of differentiation and specialization of functions and roles. Sport federations differentiate and establish (new) positions and further specify tasks. According to the experts, without specialization of the staff, the NSF would be overwhelmed by the increasing complexity of their activities. Interviewee C clearly stated: 'you can already grasp the level of professionalization of a federation through certain forms: when you see three people taking up 20 functions the federation is about to collapse'. All interviewees pointed out that paid staff needs a differentiation of functions and specialization of roles, and their employment is reliant on financial resources. According to interviewee B, this is not the only solution, particularly for small federations:

It also depends on the person – some people are happy when they have different kinds of tasks to do. (I-B)

All but one interviewee explicitly stated professionalization in NSF is characterized by a clear differentiation between the Executive Board and the Executive Office, meaning that the decision-making competences – who is responsible for strategic issues, who has the competence for daily affairs – are clearly defined, so that 'everyone,

whether a volunteer or a paid employee, has his/her position and task in the system as a whole' (I-B). In accordance with interviewee B, for several experts it seems that at the moment that the Board still 'has to *learn* to differentiate between Executive and Operative' (I-B) (emphasized by the interviewee). But then again, 'the paid operative body should also have the non-profit way of thinking, and appreciate collaboration with volunteers' (I-A). As *balanced governance* (cf. Auld & Godbey, 1998), the interviewees observed various solutions and constellations in the Swiss NSF. They did not suggest any specific constellation as *the* professionalized governance, but emphasized the meaning of a balance between the mutual complement of a strategic Board and an operative Executive Office, that often corresponds to voluntary (the Board) and paid (the Executive Office) work. Characteristic for professionalization would be to entrust strategic development to the volunteers, which would then be put in action by the paid staff to finally follow the vision of the federation.

A further characteristic of professionalization that was identified in the interviews was *competence orientation*. Related to the idea of differentiation of structures and positions, federations today prefer a work force with specific qualifications and knowledge – instead of choosing just anybody, positions are increasingly occupied by specialized 'experts'. From the perspective of the interviewees, such competence orientation does not only apply to paid staff, the federations may also consider occupying voluntary positions, for example in the Executive Board, with 'professional volunteers' (I-B):

Someone who is an accountant or a banker could quite easily take up a voluntary job as chief of finances. So the volunteer would work in his profession and bring in his know-how in addition to his heart for the sport. (I-B)

Hence, professionalization means profit of the respective *know-how, expertise and experience* where it is needed. Correspondingly, the federation benefits not (only) from the conventional long-term commitment of the volunteers but also from the knowledge and experience that the people in the federation bring with them.

Considering these tendencies to expertise, the Swiss experts perceived professionalization as 'a transformation from volunteering to professional paid work' (I-D) – a prominent aspect that is known from several previous studies and concepts. Professionalization of NSF, however, does not mean an enterprise-to-be that operates exclusively with paid employees: five interviewees explicitly stated that 'volunteers remain the basis' (I-C). The role of the *paid staff* should rather be considered as a support to 'relieve the volunteers from certain [daily] tasks, to allow the volunteers to do what they can and want' (I-C). Nevertheless, the activities and events of sport federations often take place in the evening and at weekends, favoring voluntary engagement and not corresponding with common working hours. Thus, professionalizing federations need to be capable of considering the paid staff as 'remunerated employees, who may be committed voluntarily somewhere else' (I-B). In contrast to voluntary commitment, contract-based commitment 'allows [the federations] more control' (I-E) over the work.

The experts distinguish between on and off the field professionalization. The objective of the first includes aspects of sport 'on the field', e.g. athletes and coaches, whereas 'off the field' refers to structural and managerial changes. The central interview

Table 2. Expert interviews: Characteristics of professionalization

Changed management philosophy	Functional differentiation and specialization	Application of management tools
For-profit orientation	Balanced governance	Control tools
Service and customer orientation	Differentiation of positions	Administration tools
Quality improvement	Competence orientation	Communication tools
Rationality and efficiency orientation (performance optimizing)	Paid staff	
Strategic planning		

issue was the choice between trainers or administration as the first concern in professionalization. Five interviewees considered the issue more deeply. They all agreed that for high-level sport, investment in paid trainers is a prerequisite, and that the job of these trainers is only to train athletes. Some interviewees observed that as soon as a trainer is paid, 'he's burdened with all administrative work' (I-C), although 'protocols can be shared, there's always someone who will write them' (I-E).

In line with the differentiation of functions, competence orientation and an increase in paid staff, the Swiss experts saw professionalization characterized by a shift in the relations between the people working in a federation. Interviewee F put it the following way:

The human, private sense may suffer a little. [...] Among volunteers the relationship is more like a friendship, you are companions. Professionalization is somehow a move from a chummy to a formal relationship. (I-F)

Application of management tools

The interviewees further referred to professionalization in NSF as the increased application of different tools, whether in the federation's controlling system (e.g. 'particularly financial reporting, Swiss SportGAAP is the classic example' [I-F]), in administration (e.g. digitalized documentation), or in communication, for example, 'the whole social media has become a component for success' (I-F). It should be noted that many of the instruments that sport federations apply in the course of professionalization have their origins in FPO.

The establishment of different tools for monitoring federation's performance goes hand-in-hand with the effort to achieve rationality and efficiency. In the eyes of the experts, using such control, management and analysis tools, NSF orientate at practices in FPO, and aim to standardize activities and processes, and to demonstrate rationality and transparency to their members and stakeholders. From the implementation of such classic economic instruments they hope to better fulfil their adapted role as efficient, long-term planning, customer-oriented service providers. However, as illustrated above, despite the increased application of tools and controlling instruments, what should be measured in terms of goal achievement is not as clear in sport federations as it is in FPO.

To summarise the results of the interviews, [Table 2](#) provides an overview of the detected characteristics of professionalization from the practitioners' perspective.

Professionalization as part of organizational culture

It is worth emphasizing that five experts thought that despite the alteration and processes towards 'business-like' and for-profit-organizations, *voluntary work remains the*

basis for sport federations (Seippel, 2002). Almost all also stated that *professionalization is a matter of professional attitude* and not only of paid employment. To exemplify this, they contrasted NSF that are not professionalized, despite a paid, qualified management, with federations that operate exclusively with volunteers and can nevertheless be seen as highly professionalized.

When considering these characteristics, it becomes apparent that from the perspective of the Swiss experts the course of professionalization in NSF does not aim to replace, but to work with and build on the existing systems, thus progressively optimizing them. This is reflected in the ideal complementary relationship between 'professional volunteers' and 'volunteer professionals'. 'Professional volunteers' make effort and are willing to work 'professionally', for example, by being open to new ideas and tools, to question efficiency of daily processes, and, in case of boards, to commit their strategic decisions to the Executive Office that puts the decisions into practice. In addition, similar to paid staff, 'professional volunteers' take over functions that correspond to their individual competences and expertise, and the qualities of their remunerated work. Similarly, to work 'professionally', paid staff are not only supposed to bring specific credentials, but also have a heart for working for the sport, as well as an understanding for voluntarism and volunteers. To adequately support the volunteers and to facilitate cooperation, commitment beyond common office hours is expected. However, paid staff – and volunteers – needs to ensure that paid staff do not 'volunteer' in their paid occupation.

Critical aspects of professionalization in NSF

Almost all interviewees also remarked that professionalization does not automatically mean positive development '[or] does it equal quality' (I-E), and sometimes may be questioned. The main concern are priorities in the allocation of scarce resources of a federation: Does the best costs-benefit result come from paying trainers, investing in young talent, or increasing paid administrative staff? Should that be a highly qualified manager, extensive marketing, or something else?

'One of my main concerns is the extent the sport and all of the rest benefit from professionalization' (I-D)

Despite limited financial resources, increasing means from sponsorship was not only positively assessed: it was also suggested that professionalization in NSF results in a zero-sum situation, as sponsors' expectations increase they determine exactly what the money is for.

They dictate, we deliver. We are not allowed to spend the money elsewhere. We can then decorate the stadium, but won't have more success in sport. (I-E)

Sponsorship may backfire for the federation when it has to spend scarce resources on tasks that are demanded by stakeholders – and not spend where the money is most needed.

Other professionalization concerns lie in the relationship between volunteers and paid employees, and that when 'the acknowledgment of voluntary work gets lost, the fire [for the work] may really get lost' (I-B), for 'an employee doesn't have a

relationship to the work' (I-E), 'he just does his job' (I-F). Some experts directly questioned, and others inferred, how much and how long NSF can sustain professionalization:

In the long-run, the management of [a NSF] can't orientate towards FPO, but need to make concessions and gifts. You can never rearrange [NSF] according to economic logic, because in the end [in a NSF] you always hold political responsibility. (I-D)

Discussion

This study aims to conceptualize professionalization by synthesizing the perceptions of six practitioners from the field of Swiss NSF with concepts from existing literature. The characteristics of professionalization found in expert interviews were grouped into three topics: 1) changed management philosophy, 2) functional differentiation and specialization, and 3) application of management tools. These aspects largely correspond with previous research on sport federations (for an overview, Dowling et al., 2014). However, the interviews with practitioners uncovered characteristics that supplement the current understanding of professionalization, and these will need to be more carefully considered in future research.

Our expert interviews confirm the development from mainly voluntary federations to more business-like organizations, and the tendency towards more paid staff (Bailly & Chapelle, 2013; Dowling et al., 2014; Emrich et al., 2001; Hwang & Powell, 2009; O'Brien & Slack, 2003, 2004). The idea of professionalization as the establishment of tasks and positions, and the specialization of the work force, was also in line with other studies (Dowling et al., 2014; Emrich et al., 2001; Legay, 2001; Winand et al., 2010). Business-like behaviour, orientation towards FPO, rationalization and accountability, market orientation, and orientation towards 'commercial forces' (Shilbury et al., 2014), all explored in several previous studies – and sometimes vaguely referred to – were also identified by our experts. However, 'professionalism', which has been applied to similar transitions (e.g. Hwang & Powell, 2009; O'Brien & Slack, 2003, 2004; Skinner et al., 1999), was found by the experts to be a matter of attitude and not necessarily linked to remunerated positions nor to the occupation (similar to Chantelat's [2001] findings in NPO in general). In this way, features that commonly are related to FPO, such as openness to innovative management tools, efficiency orientation, identification as a service provider, a sense of long-term strategy, and the separation between strategic and operative instances, etc., are characteristics that in the course of professionalization can apply also to volunteers and voluntary sport federations. Clear concepts and long-term strategy, which the practitioners saw as central elements of professionalization, have not received much attention in previous research (Ferkins et al., 2005; cf. Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011).

The practitioners did not view professionalization in NSF only positively and questioned the extent to which this occurs. Some authors have discussed negative consequences of professionalization (for an overview, Nagel et al., 2015). These concerns have mostly focussed on conflict between volunteers and paid staff, the transition of values (e.g. Auld et al., 1997; Cuskelly et al., 1999; Seippel, 2002), debt, and volunteer

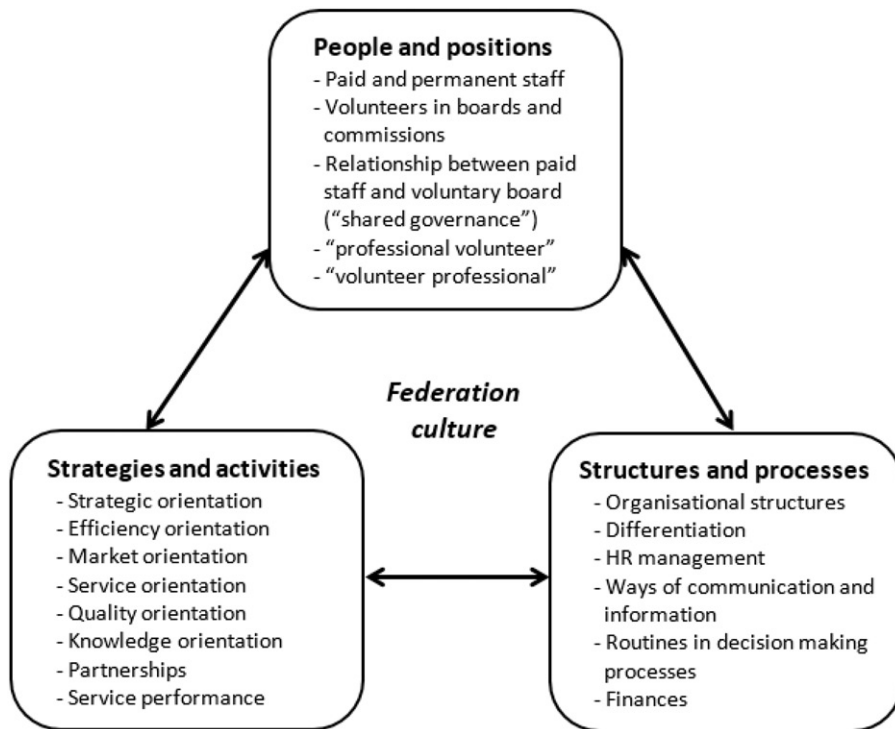


Figure 1. A framework to analyse professionalization in sport federations

roles as an oxymoron, as their responsibilities assume genuine director characteristics (Shilbury, 2001).

Synthesis of scientific concepts and the practitioners' views of professionalization

To assist with the conceptualization of professionalization in NSF we have synthesized previous concepts and the perception of practitioners into an analytical framework (Figure 1). In doing so, we build on Legay's (2001), and Bayle and Robinson's (2007) dimensions of professionalization, i.e. the professionalization of activities, individuals, and processes and structures.

Strategies and activities

Many of the characteristics allocated to strategies and activities have been used by scholars to describe 'business-like' or 'for-profit-like' organizations and correspond to the 'changed management philosophy' found in our expert interviews. To date, researchers have placed little focus on the strategic orientation and goals of the federations (Ferkins et al., 2005). In the expert interviewees, long-term strategy was a frequent issue. The (diverse) goals and the strategies for achieving the goals are worth addressing, and whether or not there is a strategic plan in the first place. We could consider the main goal of a NSF, and whether the organization needs to develop diverse,

perhaps contradictory strategies to meet different goals, for example, service agreements, or the needs of member clubs. Professionalization can be studied, for example, in terms of federations' management philosophy towards FPO, and how this is reflected in their strategies and activities. We may look at how federations' endeavour to ensure efficiency, such as financial control instruments and service agreements (efficiency orientation), or whether it applies external knowledge and counselling, and to what extent it educates the management of the member clubs (knowledge orientation). It would also be interesting to study the criteria applied to developing cooperative partners, and whether the partnerships of a federation are aligned with its targets and goals (partnerships). Further indicators that could be applied when examining strategic orientation and activities of NSF might be the share of spending on marketing (market orientation) and the support it offers to its members to optimize their performance (service orientation).

People and positions

Here, we address professionalization in terms of the characteristics of individuals, allocation of competences, as well as the relationship between individuals and between positions. Firstly, we could investigate to what extent a NSF employs paid staff, and secondly, to what extent employees are attached to particular tasks. From the experts' point of view, the relationship between Executive Board and Executive Office is relevant to shared decision-making competences ('balanced governance', Auld & Godbey, 1998), but also with regard to the positions taken by paid and volunteer employees. Here an important question regarding professionalization is whether responsibilities and competences are clearly defined and if they are the main criteria for the selection of people for positions.

It would be reasonable to look at responsibilities, competences and qualifications of the voluntary board and commission members compared to the permanent staff. (Possibly required) formal and informal qualifications of volunteers would indicate the level of functional differentiation and specialization independent of the paid staff. In addition, the extent professionalism in management practices is related to paid positions, and the allocation of decision-making competences between these two bodies should be considered. It would be interesting to analyse shifts in decision-making competences and responsibilities between paid and voluntary positions. As personal and informal relationships are also important to the functioning of NSF, formal and informal decision-making routines, and communication and information practices could be analysed. This would give an insight into the reciprocal understanding, as well as the means and practices for managing divergent interests and conflicts between the federation's staff in general.

Structures and processes

Structural differentiation (e.g. into departments, functions, outsourcing) has been related to professionalization in NSF. It is, however, not the only aspect of structures and processes that should be addressed when analysing professionalization. Beside the governance structure, routines in decision-making, e.g. frequency of meetings of the

relevant actors, or the existing regulations for decision-making processes, could shed light on professionalization efforts of NSF. Finances, for example, are widely considered in the literature, as well as by the practitioners in this study. Financial resources have been observed as a factor that influences professionalization processes. An indicator of the shift in management philosophy of a NSF could be, for example, the proportion of member fees compared to sponsorship income in the federation's annual budget. Communication and information could be analysed through noting if there is a formal concept for communication, how the internal and external communication works in reality, and where and what information becomes available.

When considering the apparent central role of qualifications, competences, roles and relationships of people and their positions, it would be worth investigating how NSF manage their human resources (HR), and whether they have a HR concept. Professionalization embraces various mechanisms for organizing and controlling work. The issue is how well these are suited to the voluntary culture of NSF.

Federation culture

A new perspective on professionalization was the idea that 'professionalism' is an attitude of individuals to do a good ('professional') job. As a consequence, professionalization becomes a matter of organizational culture. The practitioners in our study also think that despite professionalization, voluntarism – a central feature of NSF – remains the basis of its operation. Consequently, when studying professionalization we should focus more on volunteers, i.e. their positions, differentiation of functions, qualifications, internal relationships (with other volunteers and with permanent staff), external relationships (networking), balance of governance. Observing the organizational structure of a NSF may not say a lot about the federation's professionalization, if the position, for example, of the voluntary board and its relation to the structure is overlooked. When studying professionalization in a NSF it is valuable to consider the opinion of the volunteers.

If the people working for a NSF do not have the appropriate attitude and the willingness to do a good job, the adaptations that the federations undertake, may harm the federation, particularly its image and performance as an agent of its members.

Critical discourse on professionalization in NSF

Several characteristics of professionalization in sport federations appear to be in contradiction. On the one hand, it was described as a tendency towards 'business-like' culture, on the other hand, volunteer culture was emphasized as a fundamental element, for the paid staff as well. Occupation as a 'professional' paid employee is also conventionally characterized by autonomy, as the person is employed on the basis of his/her credentials and expertise. However, professionalization embraces various mechanisms for controlling work. With increasing organization of working processes, for example through bureaucratization and standardization, the specific qualifications that initially provide trustworthiness and autonomy for the professionals lose their meaning and lead to a movement towards de-professionalization (Evetts, 2009; 2011). Furthermore, in the course of professionalization, federations implement management tools and

adapt their structures and processes to those of FPO, which do not appear applicable to NSF that follow goals other than making profit (cf. Thiel & Mayer, 2009; Van der Roest et al., 2015): they tend to have multiple objectives and their ultimate goal may not be clear. Therefore, it is not obvious how performance and efficiency should be measured.

Interestingly, the practitioners working with Swiss sport organizations and involved in the development of the Swiss sport policy pointed out that professionalization does not necessarily mean positive organizational development. They were also concerned about the extent NSF can be professionalized given the direction development is now taking. As these experts are involved in the core of the federations' development, one could expect them to find solutions to reduce the negative consequences. It appears that for the practitioners, the aim in the course of professionalization should not be to replace but rather to complement existing practices of the federations. Strong self-reflection and long-term strategies were emphasized in the interviews, and could be a way to determine beneficial changes for each federation, to prepare them with means to meet secondary effects.

Limitations and future research

All our experts were from Switzerland, which may limit the general application of the views. We should also bear in mind that the common standards, practices and tools Swiss NSF are exposed to may be grounded on some theoretical frameworks. It is also worth mentioning that the experts only deal with national sport federations. Thus, experts who work with international federations could reveal additional knowledge for such a framework, as they may face additional challenges and show specific characteristics when dealing with professionalization issues. In an ongoing project, a preliminary analysis of expert interviews from international federations has revealed many congruent perceptions of professionalization with this study. However, these experts have also referred to professionalization with legal affairs, which we did not detect in this analysis. Studies on NSF in other countries may also contribute to the concept, as the perception of professionalization may vary due to different institutional systems, different roles of NSF, and meeting other requirements. However, we did not observe characteristics of professionalization directly related to the specific features of the Swiss political system. Furthermore, the findings are largely in line with existing literature that involves studies of professionalization in different countries. Our understanding of professionalization is enhanced through the notion of professionalization as an attitude of people and as a federation culture. Future research should consider these aspects for a comprehensive picture of forms of professionalization in NSF.

Further qualitative case studies would be an excellent method to validate the framework for analysing professionalization. Its applicability should be tested by selecting NSF that differ in size, staff, sports, governance etc., but also more broadly selecting international sport federations and sport federations in other countries. The framework could then be used to study forms, causes and consequences of professionalization in NSF (Nagel et al., 2015).

Some aspects of the framework may be quantifiable. We may think of, for example, shares of competences of the Executive Board and Executive Office in decision-making,

or specified tasks per position as indicators for professionalization. Considering the comprehensiveness of the phenomenon and the concerns raised by the interviewed practitioners about the process, rating some indicators of the framework higher than others should be questioned. We would not claim that, for example, available HR concepts indicate more or better professionalization than a widespread differentiation of the General Secretary. In terms of 'more', we have to keep the limits of professionalization in mind before the development converts into disadvantage for NSF. Common turning points, where professionalization shifts to organizational de-professionalization (cf. Evetts, 2009; 2011) could be discovered through future research.

The purpose of our concept is to encourage comprehensive research and analysis of causes, forms and consequences of professionalization in sport federations using case studies or quantitative research strategies. Furthermore, NSF could use the framework as a tool to analyse and reflect the progress of professionalization. It could also be used by practitioners and researchers for developing questionnaires to survey people's attitudes towards the current form and progress of a federation, and also their commitment to the organization. It would assist in comparability of NSF, as well as for compatibility of analyses and action plans, if NSF and researchers use a similar framework for analysing forms, causes and consequences of professionalization. The knowledge gained can then be applied for further development of the federations' practices.

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Disclosure statement

The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of this article.

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