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ARTICLE



## Sport policy analysis revisited: the sport policy process as an interlinked chain of legitimating acts

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### ABSTRACT

By providing an analytical framework that draws on a conceptualisation of legitimacy in organisation studies, this paper demonstrates that the sport policy process can be understood as an interlinked chain of legitimating acts. Based on recent suggestions in organisation theory literature on how to approach legitimacy and legitimation, we applied the framework on a small sample of published sport policy studies to demonstrate its utility. By applying the framework, six interweaved and interweaving elements of the legitimating act within sport policy processes were identified: *legitimacy-seeking organisation, subject, source(s), strategy, bases and scenario*. The analysis shows that each of the six elements works by intersecting within each phase of the policy process. The main conclusion is that consequences – often unintended – resulting from legitimating acts in one phase have legitimacy-related implications for the other phases of the policy process. As pressing as pinpointing the use of all elements of the framework is, it is equally important to distinguish each of the elements in order to fulfil the analytical potential of the proposed framework. Since sport policy processes in practice rely primarily on organisations and organisational action, future sport policy research would benefit from this type of framework connecting organisations and organising to policy processes.

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Legitimacy; organisation theory; public policy; unintended consequences

## Introduction

Legitimacy is recognised as an important aspect in many studies that examine the sport policy process (e.g., Kikulis *et al.* 1992, Slack and Hinings 1992, Chalip 1995, Hinings *et al.* 1996, Kikulis 2000, Houlihan and White 2002, Thibault and Babiak 2005, Steen-Johnsen and Hanstad 2008, Andersen and Ronglan 2012, Jedlicka 2012, Macris and Sam 2014, Sam and Macris 2014, Stenling 2014a, Hasselgård and Straume 2015, Ronglan 2015, Sam and Ronglan 2016, Stenling and Fahlén 2016, Stenling and Sam 2017, Strittmatter and Skille 2017, Fahlén 2017a, Strittmatter 2017a). However, research on legitimacy tends to be carried out in two relatively separate streams, each with their own assumptions, theories, and foci. The extensive attention to legitimacy shows that the phenomenon is important to understanding contemporary sport policy processes, but this separation diverts attention from considering the process as a coherent phenomenon in need of a holistic vantage point. One of these streams consists of studies conducted from political science and public administration perspectives, and these tend to emphasise the role of legitimacy in the problem definition and agenda setting phases of the policy process (Hiller 2000, Kellison and

Mondello 2012, Sam and Ronglan 2016, Soebbing and Mason 2009). The other stream consists of studies approaching the policy process from an organisational perspective, which commonly yields a focus on the role of legitimacy in the policy implementation phase (e.g., Karp, Fahlén and Löfgren 2014, Strittmatter and Skille 2017). Beyond this, numerous studies have been conducted on organisational change in sport that utilised theories (e.g., organisational institutionalism, see Washington and Patterson 2011) in which legitimacy is a core theoretical pillar and which studied implementation processes without labelling them as such (e.g., Kikulis *et al.* 1992, 1995, Slack and Hinings 1994). Regardless of which stream frames a study, legitimacy is broadly conceived as related to aspects of ‘appropriateness’ of a policy, a social actor, or action. Nevertheless, the variation in the location of legitimacy and acts of legitimation in various phases of the policy process in these respective streams (e.g., problem formulation vs. implementation), and the lack of communication between them, may give the impression that these processes of legitimacy are not connected. One notable exception is the work of Sam and Ronglan (2016) in which the authors explicitly link policy formulation with policy implementation in their framework of input and output sources of legitimacy. Building on this work, we seek to advance an understanding of the role of legitimacy throughout the policy process and of how acts of legitimation interlink the various phases of this process. This overarching aim is specified in a twofold purpose for this article.

The first part of the purpose is to provide a conceptual framework that puts legitimacy at the forefront in the analysis of sport policy processes. The rationale for this is to bring analytical clarity, coherence, and comparability to the role of legitimacy throughout the sport policy process. With a background in organisation theory, we have recognised the attention paid to sport by governments worldwide (Green 2004, Houlihan *et al.* 2009, Fahlén and Skille 2017) and that the organising of sport is inextricably linked to public sport policy processes. Because sport policy processes rely on organisations, sport policy analyses would benefit from an increased use of theoretical concepts that explain organisations and organising (Stenling 2015, Strittmatter 2017b). In that respect, the conceptual framework that we present draws on conceptualisations of legitimacy in organisation studies (based on Suchman 1995, Deephouse and Suchman 2008, Deephouse *et al.* 2016). The second part of our purpose is to demonstrate – by use of the proposed framework – how legitimacy and legitimation are visible in the whole policy process. The sport policy process is as an interlinked chain of legitimating acts. It occurs as an iterative process where consequences – often unintended – in one phase have implications in other phases of the policy process.

The paper is structured as follows. Following this introduction, we first present our proposed framework. We thereafter use a sample of the authors’ already published articles to illustrate how the framework assists in identifying legitimating acts in the various phases of the sport policy process. In the concluding discussion, we focus on consequences – intended and unintended – of legitimating acts and on how such consequences affect how sport policy processes unfold.

## **The iterative sport policy process as an interlinked chain of legitimating acts**

Legitimacy is a key concept in the broader field of social science (e.g., Suchman 1995) in which there exists a plethora of definitions in the political science and organisation theory literature.<sup>1</sup> Given our organisational analytical point of departure, we rely on the most recent developments in the legitimacy literature. In doing so, we adopt Deephouse *et al.*’s (Deephouse *et al.* 2016, p. 32) definition of legitimacy as the conceived ‘appropriateness of an organisation to a social system in terms of rules, values, norms, and definitions’. There are many reasons to why being perceived as legitimate is beneficial for organisations, but the value of legitimacy is perhaps best illustrated by a consideration of the consequences of illegitimacy. At the most foundational level, an organisation whose practices or existence are called into question will find it impossible to interact with – and thereby gain resources from – its environment, simply because actors are hesitant to have dealings with such an organisation. Legitimacy is thus inextricably linked to power; to have legitimacy is to

have resources to engage in proper conduct and to be a model for others' conduct. Likewise, to be in a position to grant legitimacy is to be in a position of power to define appropriateness.

In this study, we have constructed an analytical framework that brings together what we see as key elements related to legitimating acts. The framework is based on recent suggestions to approach legitimacy and legitimation in a detailed and comprehensive manner rather than focusing on single aspects (Deephouse *et al.* 2016). In this section, we will describe the six aspects of our framework. Although we have numbered the elements consecutively, this should not be taken as an indication of any sequential or chronological order of their function in a legitimating act. In the closing section of the paper, we will discuss the crucial role of consequences of legitimating acts as linkers of the various phases of the policy process.

Given our organisational outset, the main and first aspect of the framework is the *legitimacy-seeking organisation* (i.e., the actor that conducts the legitimising act). In sport, a number of organisations potentially seek legitimacy (e.g., central, regional, and local authorities, central/national sport organisations, and sport clubs). As organisational actions need to be understood in organisational terms (Deephouse and Suchman 2008) in order to understand how, why, and with what consequences an organisation is conducting a legitimating act, it is vital to consider the focal organisation's identity and institutional context and its position in the sport system (Stenling 2015). A telling example of a legitimacy-seeking organisation is provided by Hiller (2000), who studied the objectives and legitimations of the 2004 Cape Town Olympic bid. In his analyses, Hiller showed how local Olympic steering committees used community consultations to establish legitimacy for their *raison d'être* and thereby for the Olympic bid itself.

Several labels, such as 'object' (Johnson 2004), 'focus' (Suchman 1995), and 'level' (Ruef and Scott 1998), can conceptualise *what* is to be made legitimate through a legitimating act. As it signals the socially constructed nature of legitimacy and legitimation, we follow Deephouse *et al.*'s (2016) proposition to use the term *subject* to denote this second aspect of our framework. The possible *subjects* of legitimation are 'almost innumerable' (Deephouse *et al.* 2016) and can consist of, for example, organisations themselves (e.g., Sam 2011), governance mandates (Sam and Ronglan 2016), and ideas and practices (e.g., Stenling 2014b). Taking a more concrete example, in their study of the National Basketball Association's amateur entry draft lottery, Soebbing and Mason (2009) showed how the draft is used to improve the competitive balance of the league in order to preserve the uncertainty of both game matches and of the series of games that compromise a league schedule. By that, the legitimacy-seeking organisation (NBA) is trying to reinforce the legitimacy of a subject (the league).

Because legitimacy and legitimating acts are relational social evaluation processes, the third aspect of our framework is the imagined internal or external 'audiences' (Suchman 1995) or stakeholders that can grant legitimacy to a *subject* and to which a legitimating act 'appeals'. We again use the parlance of Deephouse *et al.* (2016) and refer to these stakeholders as *sources* in our framework. *Sources* could be 'society-at-large' or other abstractions, but as Deephouse and Suchman (2008) point out, many *sources* are organisations. Moreover, an organisation has different interests and may simultaneously be a conferrer of legitimacy and a legitimacy-seeking organisation (or a *subject*), which speaks to the interdependence of the legitimacy processes. In a sport context, Kellison and Mondello (2012) show how certain voter groups in a referendum on public subsidisations of professional sport arenas can be made into sources of legitimacy by the legitimacy-seeking organisation (e.g., a professional sports team). By showing how such organisations commonly target anticipated no-voters specifically, Kellison and Mondello were in addition able to highlight that sources are not always abstractions such as 'society-at-large' but can be very concretely defined.

The fourth aspect of our framework embeds the question of how a *legitimacy-seeking organisation* conducts legitimating acts for a particular *subject*. We label this aspect *legitimizing strategy*, recognising that legitimation is an active and purposive process, albeit highly institutionalised (Suchman 1995). Actions, techniques, and activities (Sam and Ronglan 2016) are used in

legitimizing efforts with various legitimating means such as institutional work (Lawrence *et al.* 2011, see Dowling and Smith 2016, Edwards and Washington 2015, for sport-related examples), theorisation (Greenwood *et al.* 2002, see Stenling 2014b, for sport-related examples), or isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, see Slack and Hinings 1992, for sport-related examples). We follow Ashforth and Gibbs (1990) by proposing two broad types of legitimating approaches: symbolic and substantive. Through symbolic *strategies*, 'the organisation might simply portray – or symbolically manage' (Ashforth and Gibbs 1990, p. 180) the *subject* so it appears consistent with *sources'* evaluative criteria. The world of sport offers many examples of such symbolic behaviour. For instance, a name change or other public-relations-type activity such as the symbolic or rhetorical linking of an organisation with a 'cause' or movement can be seen as symbolic *strategy*. The name change of the former International Federation for Roller Sports into World Skate in 2017 was made in order to sound more attractive to a young audience (World Skate 2017). Substantive *strategies* instead involve 'real, material change in organisational goals, structures, and processes or socially institutionalised practices' (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990). For instance, most countries have a national anti-doping organisation that can be thought of as a substantive strategy, even though their substantive function can be limited (Hanstad *et al.* 2010).

Regardless of the type of *strategy* that is employed, various 'criteria' (Deephouse *et al.* 2016), 'dimensions' (Suchman 1995), or *bases* (Scott 2014), as we prefer to call them, are invoked in the legitimating act. This fifth aspect of our framework captures the cultural content used in legitimating acts. Suchman's (1995) notion of pragmatic, moral, and cognitive types of legitimacy is arguably the best-known and used categorisation in this regard. Keeping with the latest developments in the area, we use Deephouse *et al.*'s (2016) distinction between regulatory, pragmatic, moral, and cultural-cognitive *bases* for legitimacy, while simultaneously acknowledging the existence of sector- and/or context-specific legitimacy *bases* (e.g., Stenling and Sam 2017). An illustrative and recent sport-specific example of how various cultural contents are used in legitimating acts is provided by Sam and Ronglan (2016). In their analysis of how central sport agencies in Norway and New Zealand create, build, or sustain legitimacy, they show how the former employs its representative membership structures and status as a social movement – a cultural-cognitive base – to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of political authorisers, stakeholders, network partners and members. The latter, Sport New Zealand, instead claims legitimacy on the basis of achieving targets and outputs, which in our proposed framework would be considered a very pragmatic base of legitimacy.

As pointedly phrased by Deephouse *et al.* (2016, p. 41), 'managing legitimacy is important at all times, but different times call for different types of legitimization activities.' Therefore, the sixth aspect of our framework is the *scenario* (Deephouse *et al.* 2016) in which legitimating acts occur (other possible labels are 'challenges' [Suchman 1995] and 'purposes' [Ashforth and Gibbs 1990]). The concept of a *scenario* allows us to incorporate the views of both the *legitimacy-seeking organisation* and the *sources* in the analysis (Deephouse *et al.* 2016). As we seek to recognise recent theoretical developments which see legitimization as a process where organisational actors are 'not passive recipients' but 'active participants in the interpretive work' (Stenling 2014b, p. 518) needed to legitimise a *subject*, we follow Deephouse *et al.*'s (2016) outline of five *scenarios*: gaining, maintaining, challenged by, responding, and institutionally innovating. The last *scenario* reflects how new ideas and practices may be created through legitimating processes (cf. Edwards and Washington 2015). Waugh *et al.* (2014) offer a potent and sport-related example of the scenario aspect of our framework. In their study of the impact of member disaffiliation on the internal legitimacy of a federated network, they show how the legitimacy of the Oceania Football Confederation (OFC) was challenged by member disaffiliation. More specifically, Waugh *et al.* highlight how the disaffiliation of Football Federation Australia not only challenged the legitimacy of the OFC but also exacerbated a number of pre-existing OFC legitimacy deficiencies such as low quality of play, small number of prominent members, and low qualification standards for FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) tournaments.



## Theorising legitimating processes in sport policy processes

In this section, we apply the proposed analytical framework and to demonstrate its utility we draw on a selection of the authors' already published studies. These studies had purposes and theoretical points of departure that were different from the one proposed here. However, as we conducted the studies, we noticed that legitimating processes were a shared theme between them. Each of the papers dealt with different aspects of the policy process, which alerted us to the cross-phase character of processes of legitimacy. As we revisited the articles, we also observed how legitimating acts performed during one phase (e.g., the implementation phase) had implications for other phases. These observations were taken as indications of the sport policy process being an interwoven process, thereby providing the point of departure for constructing the analytical framework proposed in this paper.<sup>2</sup> As demonstrated by the examples provided in the previous section (e.g., Hiller 2000, Soebbing and Mason 2009, Hanstad *et al.* 2010, Kellison and Mondello 2012, Waugh *et al.* 2014, Sam and Ronglan 2016), other articles could have been used to illustrate the framework. However, for obvious reasons we are most familiar with and feel most comfortable using our previous work. Because of this, and because the framework is ultimately meant to be used in future studies, we made the pragmatic decision to use our previously published papers as illustration.

The application of the framework involves answering six questions, each relating to a specific element or aspect of a legitimating act: 1. What organisation is seeking legitimacy? 2. What is the subject of the legitimating act? 3. Which legitimating source(s) may confer/be perceived to confer legitimacy to this subject? 4. Which legitimating strategy is used? 5. Which base(s) of legitimacy is/are invoked? 6. In which scenario does the legitimating act take place? For the purpose of theorising how legitimating processes intersect between phases, we draw on empirical insights from studies focusing on four phases of the sport policy process: 1. problem definition/agenda setting; 2. policy formulation; 3. policy implementation; and 4. policy evaluation (Table 1 summarises how the empirical examples refer to the six elements and the four phases). In doing so, we provide a basis for a discussion on what links legitimisation processes to each other and interweaves policy processes. From this, we seek to illustrate – through our framework – how legitimacy and legitimisation are not confined to the initial phases of the policy process. As we seek to convey in the Concluding Discussion, the sport policy process could rather be viewed as an interlinked chain of legitimating acts, an iterative process where consequences – often unintended – in one phase of the policy process have legitimacy-related implications in other phases.

### 1. Problem Definition and Agenda Setting

To illustrate legitimating acts in the problem definition and agenda setting phases, we use 'Tensions and Contradictions in Sport's Quest for Legitimacy as a Political Actor: The Politics of Swedish Public Sport Policy Hearings' by Stenling and Sam (2017), which examined strategic representations in sport policy advocacy processes. By using public hearings with representatives of six parliamentary parties arranged by the Swedish Sports Confederation (SSC) prior to the 2014 election to the Swedish parliament, the authors understood the emergence of these hearings as indicative of wider transformations in the institutional conditions of sport.

Specifically, Stenling and Sam (2017) explained how it is commonly acknowledged that legitimating acts are an important element of the problem definition and agenda setting phases of the policy process (e.g., Matland 1995). Problem definition and agenda setting are indeed socially constructed political processes in which the validity (i.e., legitimacy) of a particular worldview is advanced. Because policy problems are framed by individuals, groups, and organisations, multiple interpretations of 'what the problem is' (Jackson and Sam 2007) always exist. By studying the advancement of worldviews in policy problem formulation processes, Stenling and Sam (2017) showed how the current instrumentalisation of sport by governments' all over the world



**Table 1.** Theoretical framework: The iterative sport policy process as an interlinked chain of legitimating acts.

Policy phase	Problem definition & agenda setting	Policy formulation	Policy implementation	Policy evaluation
Study	Stenling and Sam (2017)	Strittmatter (2016)	Waldahl and Skille (2016)	Fahlén (2017b)
Element				
1. Legitimacy-seeking organisation	- The Swedish Sport Confederation (SSC)	- Norwegian Olympic Committee and Confederation of Sport (NIF) - The Lillehammer 2016 bid committee	- NIF	- Local authorities' (LA) sport and leisure administrative units
2. Subject	- The SSC as a political actor - Changes in public sport policy	- 2016 Lillehammer bid	- Youth self-determination in sport	- LA support of sport - The performance measurement system
3. Source/s	- The government - (Member organisations)	- Society-at-large - The government - NSOs	- NIF - Youth? - The government - Society at large	- Society-at-large - Other LA departments - Sport clubs
4. Strategy	- Establishment of public hearings - Production of legitimising accounts	- Youth sport policy as legitimising tool	- Youth committee - Network model	- The performance measurement system - Increased resource efficiency
5. Bases	- Regulatory - Pragmatic - Moral - Cultural-cognitive	- Pragmatic	- Regulatory - Normative	- Regulatory - Moral
6. Scenario	- Gain	- Institutionally innovating	- Responding - Institutionally innovating	- Maintain? - Institutionally innovating?
7. Consequences	- Need for internal legitimacy creation	- Institutional contamination of rhetorical expression	- Rhetoric tick-off - Youth influence?	- Perceived breach of implicit contract

paradoxically both circumscribes the autonomy of sport organisations and makes it imperative for sport organisations to exercise strategic legitimating activities. Applying the proposed conceptual framework, many sport organisations are currently faced with a *scenario* that requires them to gain legitimacy for two types of *subjects*: themselves as political actors whose expert advice is taken seriously in policy processes and the problem definitions and solutions they propose. Stenling and Sam's article provides insights into how the SSC – as a *legitimacy-seeking organisation* – attempts to gain acceptance for these two *subjects*, with the government as the primary *source* of this legitimacy. Two primary *strategies*, one substantive and one symbolic, can be distinguished as parts of this legitimating act. The substantive *strategy* of establishing public hearings with the leaders from all parties in the Swedish parliament can be seen as part of the SSC's efforts to gain legitimacy as a political actor. During these hearings, the symbolic *strategy* of conveying legitimising accounts was exploited by the SSC to gain legitimacy for public sport policy changes.

Four contradictory legitimising accounts were identified by Stenling and Sam. From the perspective advanced here, these can be understood as respectively having a regulatory (e.g., civil society legislation), pragmatic (e.g., sport's contribution to reducing societal costs), moral (e.g., the inclusion of organised sport in the rights-based, general welfare system), and a cultural-cognitive (e.g., sport as a popular movement) *base*.

## 2. Policy Formulation

Less attention has been paid to the legitimating act as an element in policy formulation, the phase in which policy objectives are set and solutions and policy instruments are selected. One exception in a sport policy context is Strittmatter's (2016) analysis of the Norwegian confederation of sports' (NIF) youth sport policy (YSP). Employing discourse analysis, Strittmatter showed how NIF used the development of youth sport as a convenient rationale to bid for the Youth Olympic Games (YOG) in order to secure legitimacy from two of its main stakeholders – the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Norwegian government.

Strittmatter described how – since the early 1990s – the YSP has been concerned with the decline of youth involvement in sport, both in terms of participation (i.e., dropout) and in their commitment to roles such as volunteers, leaders, and coaches. Strittmatter's (2016) study showed how the YSP became an important tool when formulating the bid for the 2016 winter YOG in Lillehammer. While the bid committee needed to trigger support from the public, Strittmatter showed how the committee focused on formulating goals for the YOG according to the government's requirements, such as increasing the number of youths participating and volunteering in sport. This also happened to align with NIF's YSP, thereby expressing the needs and wishes of the National Sport Organisations (NSOs) affiliated with NIF. As Strittmatter argued, rather than responding to the youth sport participation (or drop-out) problem, NIF used the development of youth sport to justify the bid for the YOG and secure legitimacy from its main stakeholders, including the IOC, the Norwegian government, and its affiliated NSOs.

The proposed conceptual framework enables us to see how NIF was a *legitimacy-seeking organisation* which sought legitimacy for the YOG (the *subject*) from three *sources*: the IOC (ultimately accepting or rejecting the bid), the government (since the bid needed financial guarantees), and the NSOs affiliated with NIF (NIF being a democratically governed organisation depending on a majority vote for the bid).

Framing the event to fit NIF's YSP can be understood as a symbolic *strategy* exploiting the YSP to legitimatise the bid. To avoid opposition, NIF argued that the YOG would be beneficial for all key stakeholders, thereby invoking pragmatic *bases* for justification. To make their arguments plausible it appeared necessary to portray the YOG as a new idea and practice brought to Norwegian sport in order to boost youth sport. The *scenario* in which these acts of legitimation took place can be seen as institutionally innovating, reflecting how new ideas and practices may be created through legitimating processes by using catchphrases such as YOG being an 'opportunity', 'driving force', or 'milestone' for youth sport in Norway.

## 3. Policy Implementation

Moving on to the policy implementation phase, we use 'Youth co-determination in Norwegian sport' by Waldahl and Skille (2016) as an illustration. Waldahl and Skille (2016) examined co-determination processes in NIF 1992–2013, and by using document analysis and interviews with key persons, they uncovered two phases with different models of implementation for co-determination: a corporatist committee model (1992–2004) and a network-based organisation model (2004–2013).

Waldahl and Skille (2016) showed how NIF has implemented two initiatives seeking to increase youth participation and self-determination in sport. Consequently, NIF can be understood as the *legitimacy-seeking organisation*, and youth influence or youth self-determination can be understood as the *subject*. The *sources* sought credit from in order to legitimate the youth self-determination are complex. First, because NIF's claim to be the largest youth organisation in Norway is central to their legitimacy (and the extensive public resources and normative support that follows from it) in the eyes of the government and society at large, they needed to show these sources that they prioritise youth influence. However, NIF is not only a legitimacy-seeking organisation. NIF may also be considered a *source* of legitimacy in that the organisation was in a position to confer legitimacy

to the member organisations in relation to the issue of youth co-determination. In terms of *strategies*, which can be interpreted as both substantive but mostly symbolic, Waldahl and Skille (2016) showed how a specific youth committee was first introduced (1992–2004), followed by a youth network (2004–2013). This introduction was substantive insofar as the committee and network were actually established. Waldahl and Skille, however, showed how the implementation of these initiatives were limited to a rhetoric box-ticking exercise aimed at proving that NIF actually responded to the issue of youth participation and dropout.

The *bases* for the legitimating acts are primarily regulative but also partly normative. They are normative in the sense that the surrounding society considers youth dropout from sport a problem, not only for sport but also for society as a whole. However, it is primarily important to show youth, the rest of NIF, including national federations, and the government that regulatory actions are set in place to give the youth a voice in the organisation. The implementation of the youth committee and the youth network both took place in *scenarios* characterised by a declining youth participation and dropout, as identified by NIF and its surroundings members.

#### 4. Policy Evaluation

Concluding our search for legitimating acts and ending in the policy evaluation phase, we illustrate our point with ‘The trust–mistrust dynamic in the public governance of sport: Exploring the legitimacy of performance measurement systems through end-users’ perceptions’ by Fahlén (2017b). In this study, Fahlén showed how audits and measurements result in pervasive alteration of the targeted organisations’ club sport practices. By interviewing 43 end-users, Fahlén showed how the system under study (i.e., a database and a digital interface for the reporting of non-profit, voluntary, and membership-based clubs’ activities, which in Sweden partially form the base for clubs’ public funding) lead to: (a) an alteration of sport clubs’ activities to maximise performance measures, (b) a centralisation of work associated with measurement within the club, and (c) an undermining of trust between the voluntary and public sectors.

When applying the proposed conceptual framework to Fahlén’s findings, it is clear that the local authorities issuing the system were actively seeking legitimacy for its distribution of public resources to sport clubs. The local authorities are thereby *legitimacy-seeking organisations*, whose *subject* is the distribution of resources. It is also possible to see how the system itself is used as both a substantive and a symbolic *strategy* in attaining such legitimacy. In its substantive version, this legitimating act is carried out in a *scenario* in which it is perceived necessary to maintain and partially repair the legitimacy of the actual use of public resources to sport clubs and their distribution. In doing so, the local authorities appeal to three *sources*: the society at large (e.g., questioning public spending on sport in an era of cutbacks), other local authority-departments (e.g., claiming that resources are more needed elsewhere), and sport clubs (e.g., asking for ‘fair’ distribution and righteous distribution criteria). While certainly substantial in the eyes of the actors involved, the *strategy* employed is also symbolic insofar as the system is clad in a rhetoric of increased resource efficiency for both the local authorities and club administrations (by way of minimising manual handling).

In its symbolic version, the *strategy* draws on a very pragmatic type of legitimacy. In other words, ‘this is the most efficient way of doing this’. In its substantial version, the *strategy* instead calls upon both regulatory (local authority auditors determined that the previous manual system lacked accountability and transparency and was not fit for the exercise of public authority) and moral *bases*; hence, it was suspected that funds were distributed to clubs on faulty grounds because the previous system did not allow for control of so-called double reporting (i.e., that one or more participants were reported as participating in more than one activity at the same time).

## Concluding discussion

The purpose of this paper was twofold. First, we sought to outline and illustrate an analytical framework that unpacks the various elements of the concept of legitimacy. Secondly, we aimed to illustrate how employing this framework highlights the role of legitimacy and legitimating acts in policy processes. In this section, we build on the preceding analysis to discuss our proposed framework and its limitations. As emphasised throughout, we propose to see legitimacy and legitimating acts as key to all phases of the sport policy process. As such, legitimating acts connect the last phase of the policy process with the first in a cyclical manner. One reason for this is that the targets of policy interventions (at least public policy interventions) are most often also taxpayers and voters (or voters' children). Beyond this, however, legitimating acts connect all other policy phases, too, making them interdependent. Legitimating acts are thus both interconnected and interconnecting the various policy phases. Importantly, legitimating acts are interconnected and interconnecting in an iterative, *asymmetrical*, and *nonlinear* way. Consequently, we argue that policy processes can be thought of as a network in which legitimating acts are nodes that simultaneously bind the policy phases together and blur the distinction between them. The simple reason for this, we claim, is that legitimating acts have consequences and that these consequences may be understood in legitimacy terms. Thus, to the six questions previously presented as a guide in the application of the framework, a seventh question must be added: what are the consequences of the particular legitimating act? 'Consequences', in this context, refers to the intended effects of legitimating acts, such as a *legitimacy-seeking organisation* gaining access to the positive effects of legitimacy because they have succeeded in legitimating a particular *subject*. Consequences, however, can, in addition, be both unintended and potentially undesirable (cf. Suchman 1995, Sam 2011, Stenling 2015, and Waddington 2016). Table 1 highlights the fact that consequences come in many forms and may be both intended and unintended. Regardless of specific form, however, a fundamental effect of many consequences, we argue, is that they initiate and nurture additional legitimating acts. Acts of legitimation beget acts of legitimation, so to speak. From the perspective proposed in this paper, this is because any given organisation is likely to be (1) involved in multiple – simultaneous and often overlapping – sport policy processes, (2) an actor in multiple policy phases, (3) both a seeker and a source of legitimacy in policy processes, and (4) reliant on several sources of legitimacy. Finally, we discuss (5) how a legitimacy-seeking organisation may also be a subject in need of legitimacy and that a strategy at times can be a subject. In the following pages, we discuss each of these points and thereby expand on the proposition that, due to their consequences, legitimating acts are both interconnected to and interconnect the various policy phases.

We begin by first stating what is perhaps obvious: organisations are involved in multiple sport policy processes simultaneously; these processes often overlap. This is even more the case as sport organisations are made relevant for and integrated in the delivery of more and increasingly diverse public policy objectives (see Friis Thing and Ottessen 2010, for public health, Wickman 2011, for equal opportunity; Theeboom *et al.* 2012, for integration, Morgan 2013, for democracy, Mutz and Baur 2009, for criminality, Grix and Carmichael 2012, for national identity, and Thorpe 2014, for individual identity).

Due mainly to their involvement in multiple policy processes, organisations commonly also seek legitimacy in several phases, albeit in different policy processes. This second point is illustrated by reading Table 1 across a row. In the example building in Stenling and Sam (2017), the SSC sought legitimacy during the problem definition and agenda setting phase. From Fahlén *et al.* (2015), for example, we know that the SSC simultaneously seeks legitimacy in the policy evaluation phase. Similarly, our illustrations on the policy formulation (Strittmatter 2016) and policy implementation (Waldahl and Skille 2016) phases together show how the same organisation (NIF) seeks legitimacy in different phases. Finally, as our example building on Fahlén (2017b) demonstrates, local authorities (LAs) seek legitimacy in the policy evaluation phase. However, one unintended yet likely

consequence for the LAs under study is that in future problem definition and agenda setting phases, they will need to repair their tarnished legitimacy in the eyes of sport clubs.

The preceding examples place focus on our third point of discussion, which is that organisations are simultaneously seekers and sources of legitimacy. The main legitimacy-seeking organisations in our four illustrations may again serve as good examples of this. To start, LAs, due to the funding relations they have with sport clubs, are in the position to accept or reject clubs' legitimate positions as recipients of public funding (Fahlén 2017b). Similarly, The SSC and NIF, both umbrella organisations in their respective countries' sport systems, are important sources of legitimacy by virtue of their positions as umbrella organisations. The regional governing bodies and clubs federated under the SSC and NIF gain their legitimate standing from them and may have it revoked by them, as well. The umbrella organisations are both *sources* by being the instruments for implementation of the states' sport policies and vice versa (the state is a source for the umbrella organisations' legitimate domination of the sports field); there is a mutual dependency. There is thus a clash between bottom-up and top-down governance principles in the Swedish and Norwegian sport systems, and this clash has far-reaching implications on their policy processes. In particular, the SSC and the NIF, because they do not deliver actual sport activities, are dependent on their federated yet relatively autonomous and self-governing organisations to implement policy, many of which in turn originate from the government. On the other hand, should federated organisations not comply with – and implement – policies mandated by the SSC and the NIF, they risk facing sanctions. We therefore suggest that organisations' positions as seekers and sources of legitimacy are exacerbated in sport systems characterised by this type of clash between bottom-up and top-down governance principles. Although our examples are taken from the Scandinavian countries, such systems may indeed be found outside of this context (c.f. Houlihan 2002, Coalter 2007, Ferkins and Shilbury 2015).

Our fourth point is related to our intentional use of the plural form *sources*. Arguably, our empirical examples point to the necessity to recognise how several *sources* might confer (or not) legitimacy to the same *subject* and how the set of *sources* varies between *subjects* and across policy phases. In other words, a *subject* or organisation considered legitimate by one *source* in one phase of a particular policy process may be deemed illegitimate by another source in the same policy process or in another phase of a different policy process. At its extreme, a *subject* that is deemed not only worthwhile but necessary to one *source* may be considered illegitimate by another. The introduction of an accountability system, outlined in our example in the policy evaluation phase, is illustrative of this. In order to appear legitimate in the context of a neo-liberalised governance system and in the eyes of taxpayers, local authorities' administrative units need to implement accountability systems (Wijkström and Einarsson 2006). However, these systems are simultaneously conceived to be illegitimate by their end-users (i.e., the clubs) because they violate the implicit contract, according to which clubs should retain their autonomy in spite of being publicly funded (Fahlén 2017b). This is a circumstance which we argue is more valid in the sport sector than in other sectors. Sport organisations are frequently reliant on the conferring of legitimacy from a diverse set of organisations (e.g., the government, sponsors, members, and governing bodies), each of which has a different perception of the legitimacy of a *subject* and/or of the *legitimacy-seeking organisation*. Sport organisations are thus situated in a nexus of contradictory rules, values, norms, and definitions of appropriateness, something that further complicates the analysis of both legitimacy and legitimation, not to say the practical management of legitimacy (cf. Stenling and Fahlén 2009, Gammelsæter 2010). To continue to draw on our illustrations, both the SSC and the NIF need to gain social approval from several *sources*, all of which might apply a different set of evaluative criteria. We propose that there are at least three dimensions along which an organisation's set of *sources* might vary.

Depending on the organisation's position in an organisational system and the policy processes and policy phase/s it is currently involved in, there will first be a variation in the *number* of actual or potential *sources* of legitimacy. Secondly, the extent to which various *sources* are *heterogeneous* in

terms of the *bases* of legitimacy in play will vary between organisations. Thirdly, an organisation's position in an organisational system will also impact the *hierarchy of importance* among these *sources*. Therefore, NIF or the SSC (as monopolistic umbrella sport organisations) typically have numerous and heterogeneous sets of *sources* compared to small self-funded single-sport clubs. Umbrella organisations value the approval of the same *sources* (e.g., the government) more than the sport clubs do (Fahlén *et al.* 2015). In that sense, how much and what is at stake in legitimacy dynamics will vary among organisations in the same system and across policy issues. Empirical work conducted using both stakeholder theory (Mitchell *et al.* 1997, see Kristiansen *et al.* 2016, for applications in the context of sport) and competing logics approach (e.g., Thornton *et al.* 2012, see Stenling and Fahlén 2009, Gammelsæter 2010, for applications in the context of sport) validates the importance of these three dimensions. We suggest that the risk of having a *subject* deemed both legitimate and illegitimate, as was the case in the above example with LAs' introduction of an accountability system, is greater for organisations whose set of *sources* is heterogeneous. Operating in such institutional complexity implies that trade-offs are made in legitimacy dynamics. You cannot, so to speak, win them all, and trade-offs are likely to be made against the background of a focal organisation's conception of the hierarchy among their *sources*. The need for the SSC to internally legitimise promises implicitly made in a sport policy advocacy context, as outlined in the example provided for the problem definition and agenda setting phase, is but one illustration of this argument.

Our fifth and final point of discussion relates to the difficulty of trying to separate between the *legitimacy-seeking organisation* and the *subject* and between *subjects* and *strategies*. Starting with the former, the ultimate goal of a legitimating act is often to garner legitimacy for the organisation itself. A second look at the column *subject* in Table 1 highlights this aspect. For example, because providing support to sport is a core task of LAs' sport administrative units, the need to legitimise that support, as illustrated by our policy evaluation phase example (Fahlén 2017b), relates to the need to legitimise these units themselves. Similarly, in the example provided of the policy implementation phase (Waldahl and Skille 2016), one could interpret the claim for the legitimacy of youth self-determination as reflective of the need for NIF to gain legitimacy for their very existence and continued operations. Analytically separating *subjects* from *strategies* may also be challenging. This challenge relates to the empirical overlap between these two elements. Such overlap is evident in instances in which the *strategy* itself is the very construction of the *subject*. The *strategies* used by NIF in the case provided as an example of the policy implementation phase (Waldahl and Skille 2016) and the performance measurement system used by local authorities in the policy evaluation phase (Fahlén 2017b) are both examples of this phenomenon. Arguably, in instances in which such substantial *strategies* are coupled with or embedded in symbolic *strategies*, the risk for so-called ceremonial conformity decoupling (Meyer and Rowan 1977) would be immanent. The preceding discussion is an attempt to elaborate on how legitimating acts are interconnected and interconnect in an asymmetrical and nonlinear way and how such acts and their consequences bind policy phases and even policy processes.

To this end, we have provided a tool for researchers who wish to explore the meaning and impact of legitimacy in sport policy processes. We started out by presenting a framework that makes such exploration possible, and we thereafter used a sample of our own work to illustrate the framework. In this, the final section of the paper, we went on to discuss how in addition to using the framework to identify the various elements of a legitimating act, the analysts must attend to the consequences, intended or unintended, of such an act, and how they may work to interconnect policy phases. More specifically, when proposing a theoretical framework for analysing legitimacy and legitimisation acts in the sports policy process as a whole, we have offered a set of concepts for such an analysis and illustrated the use of them. As in any theoretical framework, there are number of concepts, and some are more useful in given situations than others. We would therefore like to encourage further application and testing of the framework in order to validate and/or refine its applicability. In addition, we would like to emphasize that more research that makes use of a cross-



fertilisation of sport policy research and sport organisation is needed. As one limitation of this study is that we propose a framework for the complete policy process and only sprinkle the study with examples, we specifically call for research focusing on the legitimacy of sport policy throughout the entire policy process, from agenda setting, via policy-making and policy implementation, to evaluation. In that respect, the framework proposed here could be a key tool. For example, when sport organisations seek new representatives (including board members), how do they legitimate the choices they make? Choices of inclusion and exclusion of candidates influences the composition of the board and thus the governance, orientation and management of organisational life within sport organisations. Studying how these processes are shaped might help to understand further policy processes and subsequent legitimations within sport governance.

## Notes

1. Space precludes us from lengthy a definitional discussion of the concept, but excellent overviews can be found elsewhere (e.g., Deephouse and Suchman *et al.* 2008, Bitketine 2011, Tost 2011, Deephouse *et al.* 2016).
2. We acknowledge that the policy phases are themselves theoretical tools for understanding – and represent a rational ideal for policymakers – rather than an accurate depiction of policymaking (see incrementalist or ‘garbage can’ policymaking or ‘policy windows’ [e.g., Parsons 1995]).

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