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Hierarchies of criteria in NSO board-nomination processes: insights from nomination committees' work

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ABSTRACT

Research question: The purpose of this paper is to create knowledge on board-selection processes and their outcomes in terms of board composition. We address two research questions: (1) What evaluative criteria are at play in board-selection processes; and (2) what hierarchies of criteria are formed when evaluative criteria are ranked? The significance of the study lies in contemporary considerations of *good governance*, in sport members' (un)equal access to positions of power, and in how issues of representation relate to the legitimacy of sport governance systems and to broader societal patterns of representation, influence, and democracy.

Research methods: Nomination committees are increasingly used worldwide to further good governance in sport organizations. Our analysis builds on interviews with representatives of 61 out of 71 Swedish national sport organizations' nomination committees.

Results and Findings: Our study shows that trade-offs are made not between gender and merit, as previously suggested, but between and among a wide variety of representation criteria and a wide variety of efficiency criteria. We show how tensions between criteria result in trade-offs that imply a ranking of criteria into seven types of hierarchies, only one of which prioritizes a representation-based board composition.

Implications: Because rankings of multiple evaluative criteria impact any single criterion of interest (e.g. gender), future studies should take into account the range of evaluative criteria at play. For sport management and policy practitioners alike, we provide a tool to understand and address (in)adequate representation but also an imperative to consider the meaning of adequate representation.

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In this article, we deal with a straightforward yet complex question: How do sport organization boards acquire their composition? In answering this question, our focus is on selection procedures, here defined as processes by which 'individuals are identified, screened,

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nominated, and elected (or appointed)' (Withers, Hillman, & Canella, 2012, p. 245). Such procedures precede and determine the composition of a board and are therefore central to the governance of nonprofit sport organizations (e.g. Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007). Despite being a pressing and widely discussed issue in times of calls for *good governance* in national and international sport organizations (cf. Parent & Hoye, 2018; Robinson, 2012), researchers (e.g. Elling, Hovden, & Knoppers, 2016; Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007; King, 2016) identify a lack of studies on board selection processes. This dearth of knowledge on how selection processes unfold and subsequently impact board composition similarly characterizes the broader nonprofit (Cornforth, 2012; Ostrower & Stone, 2006) and corporate (Clune, Hermanson, Tompkins, & Ye, 2014; Withers et al., 2012) governance literature.

The significance of this study lies in the recognition of the board as 'the pinnacle of organizational power, oversight, and decision making' (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007, p. 495) and, consequently, of selection processes as regulating access to the right to govern (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007).¹ Holding a board position means exerting influence over the orientation and management of organizational life, and because of sport's pervasiveness in contemporary society, patterns of representation on sport organization boards are part of and contribute to broader societal patterns of influence and democracy.² In the more narrow context of sport governance, knowledge on the processes that shape board composition has value against the background of sport organizations' continuing struggle to develop more inclusive governance structures (as revealed by, for example, Adriaanse, 2016; Ahn & Cunningham, 2017; Hartmann-Tews & Pfister, 2003; Henry & Robinson, 2010; Pfister & Radtke, 2009). Notably, this struggle is intimately connected to the emergence of policies launched under the auspices of good governance in sport (Chaker, 2004). Indeed, in sport systems that gain their legitimacy – and the (public) resources that follow – from having democratic governance structures and processes (e.g. Fahlén & Stenling, 2016; Puig, Martínez, & García, 2010; Strittmatter & Skirstad, 2017; Vos, Wicker, Breuer, & Scheerder, 2013), skewed representation (i.e. the over- or underrepresentation of a social category) is particularly problematic for policy makers and sport managers. This is also the case in Sweden – the context in which this study was conducted. For example, although Sweden is often considered to be a country in which equality is held high, recent statistics show that 59% of National Sport Organizations (NSOs) in Sweden have a gender skewed board (>60% male board members) and 11 out of 71 NSO boards have zero or one female on their board (Centrum för idrottsforskning, 2016a). Another example of skewed representation is that 75% of sport clubs lack board members under the age of 25, despite Swedish sport's character of a youth movement (Centrum för idrottsforskning, 2016b).

With the goal of providing knowledge that aid the understanding of the meaning and determinants of skewedness, the study deals with a particular aspect of board-selection processes, namely the evaluative criteria at play in them. In so far as we understand evaluative criteria as socially constructed, our study connects to previous works that have considered processes of board selection and composition as shaped by the notion of *fit* between socially constructed ideas of board candidate qualifications (i.e. evaluative criteria) and equally socially constructed ideas of skills, knowledge, characteristics, needs, and inclinations of a particular social category, for example, gender (Adriaanse & Schofield, 2014; Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007; Hartmann-Tews & Pfister, 2003; Hovden, 2000). However, we also extend work on this topic by addressing two interrelated

research questions (RQs). First, what evaluative criteria are at play in board-selection processes? Second, although assuming that many criteria are at play, we explore the impact of this plurality by asking what hierarchies of criteria are formed when evaluative criteria are ranked?

Our answers to these questions build on interviews with representatives of 61 out of 71 Swedish NSOs' nomination committees (NCs). NCs' primary function is to define requirement profiles and subsequently identify, screen, and propose candidates for election to a board (Australian Institute for Sport, 2015; Hockey Canada, 2017). Research from corporate governance shows that candidates proposed by NCs are typically elected (Withers et al., 2012). To the extent that this can be assumed to be valid also in sport, NCs are crucial gatekeepers in board-selection processes that, through their work, shape board composition. It is important to note that even though NCs have long been used in the governance of member-based, federative systems (e.g. Swedish voluntary sport), they are more recent phenomena in many other nonprofit sport governance contexts, where they have emerged as part of the rise of so-called codes of good governance (cf. Australian Institute for Sport [2015]; Sport England [2016]; Sport New Zealand [n.d.], for examples). In that sense, our specific focus on NCs provides a timely account of an emerging international phenomenon.

Literature review

This section serves to (1) show the potential for a more fine-grained understanding of the range and types of evaluative criteria at play in sport organization board selection processes than what is currently available, and (2) provide a foreshadowing of the criteria that we might expect to find in the Swedish context. Mirroring the tension between ideals of member representation and efficiency³ in considerations of what constitutes an adequate composition for sport organization boards that is identified by Tacon and Walters (2016), Sam (2009), and Taylor and O'Sullivan (2009), the evaluative criteria we identify can be sorted under these two broad categories.

Representation-based evaluative criteria

Taking the perspective of descriptive representation (i.e. the extent to which representatives are recruited from a certain group [Fenichel Pitkin, 1967]), studies on board composition in a sport context commonly attempt to explain women's (under)representation on boards. Adriaanse and Schofield (2014), Claringbould and Knoppers (2007), and Hovden (2000), for example, all show the gendered character of board-selection processes and how the inclusion of women on boards are pitted against socially constructed ideas of the merits required to serve on boards. Such a focus on the representation of a particular social category has the advantage of providing nuanced theoretical and empirical analyses of how board composition processes are, for example, gendered. However, a consequence of this research strategy is that the evaluative criteria against which gender is traded off is collapsed under the general label merit. As an illustration, Adriaanse and Schofield (2014) describe a 'tension between a preference for a merit-based board over a gender-balanced board' (p. 492), Claringbould and Knoppers (2007) describe a prioritization of the "quality" of the candidate' (p. 503) over gender-related affirmative action policies, and Hovden (2000) uses

“‘heavyweight’ candidates’ as a metaphor whose ‘connotations implicitly and explicitly refer to middle aged men who are interested in high-performance sport’ (p. 80).

However, even if such analytical differentiation is not made, these studies indicate that the general category merit may contain what is in fact representation-based evaluative criteria. In other words, a closer look at these studies reveals that several of these criteria rather are social categories of representation. For example, one of the interviewees in Claringbould and Knoppers’s (2007) study, by stating that in recruitment processes ‘you look for people who are more your own age and have a perspective that can add something to the board’ (p. 500), indicate that in addition to *gender*, *age* is an evaluative criterion at play in board composition processes (see also the preceding quotation from Hovden [2000]). Although not concerned with board composition, Steward and Cunningham’s (2005) study of job recruitment show that *ethnicity/race* is another social category invoked in selection processes in sport. Furthermore, many countries’ sport systems are member-based and federative and some – though not all – of these use the so-called delegate governance model (Bradbury & O’Boyle, 2015; Shilbury & Kellett, 2006). In this model, sport clubs, regions or other *geographic divisions*, or the *specific sports within a NSO*⁴ are yet other likely evaluative criteria (cf. Tacon & Walters, 2016). In sum, we have identified a number of *representation-based* evaluative criteria potentially operating in board-selection processes: gender, race/ethnicity, age, geography and sport background. To the extent that representation is interpreted as *acting for* rather than *standing for* (Fenichel Pitkin, 1967), the promotion of candidates who act in the interest of member groups without being recruited from these groups (Tacon & Walters, 2016) constitutes a possible additional representation-based evaluative criterion.

Efficiency-based evaluative criteria

Beyond a diversity of representation-based criteria, sport organization studies and the broader governance literature indicate that general terms such as merit, quality (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007), and heavyweight (Hovden, 2000, p. 80) conceal a number of different types of efficiency-based evaluative criteria. One type relates to *the resources that a candidate brings to the board* in a sport organization (Balduck, Van Rossem, & Buelens, 2010; Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007; Hovden, 2000) or corporation (Clune et al., 2014; Johannisson & Huse, 2000; Walther & Morner, 2014). Claringbould and Knoppers (2007), for example, suggested that quality refers to a candidate that ‘possesses knowledge of the sport, is acquainted with the nature of the position, [and] has experience in governance,’ criteria that the authors connect to ‘high level jobs in society, where status, reputation, and networks are important’ (p. 500). Similarly, in Hovden’s (2000) study, the term heavyweight ‘generally alluded to features as long and varied experience in elected posts, a high-status occupation in economic management and strategic planning and extensive contacts in business and politics’ (p. 80).

Another type of efficiency-based criterion deals with *what a candidate is perceived to be*. This type of criterion may be framed both as a general attention to a candidate’s ‘personal qualities’ (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007, p. 500), ‘personality’ (Walther & Morner, 2014, p. 144), ‘traits’ (Balduck et al., 2010, p. 228), and specific characteristics such as ‘orderly, result-oriented, courageous [and] determined’ (Hovden, 2000, p. 77).

The two preceding efficiency-based criteria are both located at the individual level. However, boards are groups, and candidates may be evaluated *qua* potential members of this group. Board-level evaluative criteria, such as *the composition of 'the right mix of people'* (Bradbury & O'Boyle, 2015, p. 26), are therefore also likely to come into play. Indeed, studies on non-profit sport organizations (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007) as well as corporate organizations (Clune et al., 2014; Johannisson & Huse, 2000), show the perceived importance of predicted personal chemistry between a candidate and incumbent board members, which indicate that an important evaluative criterion is the impact a particular recruitment may have on the group as a social collective.

To sum up, an analysis of extant literature on selection processes in sport-, other non-profit-, and corporate organizations reveals the potential for several representation-based evaluative criteria and several efficiency-based criteria. Beyond the general distinction between representative- and efficiency-based criteria, criteria within these categories are quite different from each other. Unlike the literature that is focused on a single criterion (e.g. gender), the aim of our first RQ is to capture the entire range of criteria that is at play in selection processes in sport, and which, as the preceding shows, is implicitly suggested in previous research. To the extent that multiple criteria are considered in a nomination process, and unless several criteria materialize in one candidate, this plurality may be assumed to necessitate a ranking of evaluative criteria, the outcome of which in terms of hierarchies is explored through our second research question.

Theory

To be able to answer our RQs, we chose a research design that does not involve any *a priori* determination of which evaluative criteria might be at play. However, we do have a theoretical understanding of one of the key concepts of the study: evaluative criterion. We see evaluative criteria – the yardsticks against which potential candidates' appropriateness are measured – as concrete manifestations of the socially constructed systems of meaning that constitute organizations' institutional context (e.g. Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Suddaby, 2008). Such systems of meaning constitute the cultural material available for actors in their construction of evaluative criteria (cf. Broch, 2014; Creed, Scully, & Austin, 2002; Fahlén & Stenling, 2018; Swidler, 1986). Cultural material exists in the form of both rules and regulations (e.g. by-laws or NSO policies) and informal norms (e.g. ideas on gender diversity), and they are powerful mechanisms for social control and order (cf. Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007).

Institutional contexts – not least sport organizations' – contain a multitude of sometimes conflicting systems of meaning (e.g. Gammelsæter, 2010; Nite, Singer, & Cunningham, 2013; Skirstad & Chelladurai, 2011; Southall, Southall, & Dwyer, 2009). This creates a potential for a variety of symbolically underpinned evaluative criteria. However, processes of organizing, like board selection, are also concrete practices that invariably involve trade-offs (Clegg, da Cunha, & e Cunha, 2002) that result in value-based hierarchies (cf. Stenling & Fahlén, 2009; Stenling & Sam, 2019). This theoretical insight underpins our second RQ, which is aimed at mapping such hierarchies and their implications for board composition. At a general level, the studies by Tacon and Walters (2016) and Taylor and O'Sullivan (2009) illustrate the tensions between ideas on

representation- and efficiency-based board composition, as well as the inclination to rank the latter higher than the former.

Methodology

Context

We build on data from a larger project on board-selection processes in Swedish voluntary sport. In Sweden, NSOs' NCs are subordinated to the NSO general assembly, and regulated solely in NSO by-laws (Fahlén & Stenling, 2018).⁵ According to the by-laws in effect at the time of data collection (Swedish Sports Confederation [SSC], 2016), NSOs must work actively to achieve plurality in the composition of boards, nomination, and other representative committees. However, how they should do that, or even what 'plurality' means is generally not stated in the by-laws. Apart from the requirement that candidates elected to the board must be a member of a sport club that is federated under the NSO, and that candidates cannot be part of the NSO's staff, the by-laws thus give little guidance with regards to which evaluative criteria NCs should use, or which criteria should be prioritized. NCs' primary function is to prepare elections to the NSO general assembly and provide a list of candidates to be voted on by the membership. However, affiliated clubs and district sport federation-delegates are also entitled to propose candidates to the general assembly.

Data collection

Together with theoretical and contextual considerations, the unchartered character of the range of evaluative criteria used in selection processes prompted us to collect data through interviews. While we recognize the risk for idealized answers, interviews have the potential to prompt descriptions of past and potential future actions, meaning, and meaning making (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The use of interviews therefore allowed us to tease out evaluative criteria (RQ1) and hierarchies resulting from the ranking of these criteria (RQ2). Observations, that would perhaps be a more reliable method in an explorative project like this, were indeed considered but due to the project's financial constraints (e.g. traveling costs) and assumed difficulties in getting access, we opted for interviews that can both capture recollections of a number of meetings and prompt reflections on why-questions.

Second, we recognized the need for detail on many similar incidents to build a robust account (Eisenhardt, 1989). That is, we wanted to cover as many data points (i.e. NCs) as possible to allow for comparisons and, ultimately, constructions of patterns. To combine these two considerations, yet still avoid death by data asphyxiation (Pettigrew, 1990), we constructed an interview guide with a limited number of questions that were theoretically driven yet detailed operationalizations of our RQs. We formulated questions that share a language with the interviewees, and that would generate data that could be interpreted with previous research as a backdrop but which left ample room for induction. In short, we followed Charmaz (2014) in using previous research and theory as sensitizing concepts, 'a place to *start* inquiry, not to *end* it' (p. 31).

Interview questions that generated data of particular interest for this study are 'How would you describe the ideal board member of your NSO's board,' 'How would you describe the ideal board for your NSO,' and 'Imagine that you have two seats on the

board to fill, but you have six potential nominees, which of these candidates would you nominate and why?' We did not ask the alluring question about who is actually selected to the board. This was because outcome-measures such as actual board composition tend to be very temporary by definition, while data on the processes leading up to such outcomes have greater explanatory power in relation to the purpose of the present study.

We collected the data through telephone interviews with one NC representative for each NSO (see Table S1 in supplemental file for a participant profile). To recruit interviewees, we contacted all 71 NSOs via e-mail, informing them about the project and asking for their participation, and 61 agreed to participate (12 female and 49 male representatives, each one representing one NSO's NC). All interviewees were informed about the purpose of the project, their anonymity, and their right to discontinue participation at any time. The interviews, which were carried out in Swedish, ranged from 12 to 51 min, resulting in approximately 30 h of interview data that were transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Subsequent to condensing the data through the meaning concentration technique (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), the analysis proceeded in three steps, the bulk of which was carried out by the first and second author, separately and together to vouch for the robustness of the analysis. First, we drew on the distinction between individual- and board-level criteria that were made apparent through our analysis of previous literature, sorting the data using this distinction as *à priori* codes (RQ1). In this first step we also sorted out all data that related to the ranking of criteria (RQ2). Second, we used the comparing and contrasting tactic (e.g. Miles & Huberman, 1994) to inductively construct the range of criteria cited during the interviews (RQ1, see Tables S2 and S3 in supplemental file), as well as the different types of rankings in the material (RQ2, see Table 3). Throughout these first two steps, we kept a so-called case-ordered descriptive matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994) in which each NC's placement under the emergent codes was noted. This allowed us to track prevalence (e.g. in how many NCs is each criterion a priority) and to discern patterns with theoretical import. As this matrix developed, we became aware that there might be a certain pattern showing whether and how there is a consistency between a NC's espoused individual- and board-level ideals and its ranking. We therefore, in a third step, explored this through a pattern-matching analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and the result is displayed below.

Results

Before we account for the results relating directly to the two RQs, we would like to note that only a very few of the interviewees reported having developed procedural documents to aid the NC's work. In almost all cases, these guidelines concerned the NC's working process (e.g. when to meet, how to communicate) and not the evaluative criteria to be used by the NC.

RQ1: What evaluative criteria are at play?

Our first RQ asks what evaluative criteria are at play in board-nomination processes. We answer this question at two levels: the individual board member and the board level.

Individual-level criteria

Table 1 shows three categories of criteria concerning the ideal board member (i.e. ‘Individual characteristics’, ‘Behavior in the boardroom’, and ‘Conditions’), the sub criteria (1–10) from which they are created, the number of NCs represented in each category, and the number of statements corresponding to each criterion.

As expected, we see a rather wide range of criteria at play, both within and across the 61 NCs. The criterion that constitutes the first category (criterion 1) relates to ideas of what the ideal board member should be, where *action oriented*, *calm*, *responsive*, *a team player*, *creative*, or *having integrity* are examples of sought-after individual characteristics. The second category revolves around considerations of the board as a group, and it contains criteria related to the behavior(s) and abilities (e.g. the ability to motivate decisions, collaborate, and communicate) displayed in the boardroom (criterion 2), reasons for accepting a board position (e.g. not to pursue a personal agenda; criterion 3), and the general attitude (e.g. ambitious and passionate about the sport) displayed by the ideal board member in his or her engagement in the board (criterion 4). The third category, constituted by criteria related to preconditions of the ideal board member, is the category with the most statements. The three numerically dominating criteria in this category are constructed from statements around the appropriate life conditions (e.g. sufficient time to devote to board work) of the ideal board member (criterion 5), its knowledge and understanding of the sport(s) delivered within the NSO’s federated network (criterion 6), and of the NSO’s structural and value-based characteristics (criterion 7). Although sorting the criteria under the broader themes of *efficiency* and *representation* is not a straightforward task, these criteria certainly vary in their bearing on these themes. On an efficiency–democracy continuum, criterion 1, 2, 5, 6, and 10 would be placed on the efficiency side. This is because they relate to the capacity to contribute to a smoothly running and goal-attaining board rather than one that adequately represent members’ interest, a view that is instead reflected in criterion 3, 4, 7, 8, and 9.

Board-level criteria

Table 2 displays our findings related to the board level; four inductively constructed categories of criteria (i.e. ‘The board as a group,’ ‘Role(s), function(s), and actions of the board,’ ‘Board resources and outcomes,’ and ‘Representation’); the subcriteria (1–14)

Table 1. Ideal board member criteria.

A member of our board should ...	NSOs	Statements
<i>Individual characteristics</i>	25	25
1. Have certain characteristics		25
<i>Behavior in the boardroom</i>	43	55
2. Display board-appropriate behavior or abilities		23
3. Be on the board for the ‘right’ reasons		17
4. Have the ‘right’ attitude		15
<i>Conditions</i>	47	87
5. Have appropriate life conditions		28
6. Have a competence that fits the needs of the board and/or the competence of a member leaving the board		27
7. Have NSO-specific knowledge and understandings		17
8. Have membership approval		7
9. Have values that align with the NSO’s		4
10. Have experiences from outside of sport		4

Table 2. Ideal board criteria.

	Our NSO board should ...	NSOs	Statements	
Efficiency	<i>The board as a group</i>	14	14	
	1. Cooperate well as a group and share power, workload, and accountability		14	
	<i>Role(s), function(s), and actions of the board</i>	29	42	
	2. Understand the role and position of the board as the top governing body of the NSO		18	
	3. Act strategic, not operative		13	
	4. Be a good external representative of the sport		11	
	<i>Board resources and outcomes</i>	46	62	
	5. Contain an appropriate mix of competencies		35	
	6. Develop the sport in both organizational and sport-specific terms		16	
	7. Have knowledge of sport-specific conditions and ideals		8	
	8. Have an extended network		3	
	Representation	<i>Representation</i>	46	85
		9. Further the internal, bottom-up democracy		27
		10. Be gender diverse		24
11. Be age diverse			15	
12. Be geographically diverse			10	
13. Be diverse in the sport(s) and orientations (e.g. mass vs. elite) represented			5	
	14. Be ethnically diverse		4	

from which they are created; the number of NSOs represented in each category, and the number of statements corresponding to each criterion. Read from the top, the first three categories encompass criteria variously related to the efficiency of the board. They are however located at slightly different levels, which, as we tried to convey in the literature review, shows that efficiency (like *merit* or *professionalization*) is a multidimensional concept.

The first single-criterion category of an efficiency type is constructed from statements of the ideal board being able to cooperate well, share power and influence, workload, and accountability. The second category is made up of criteria related to the ideal board's knowledge, understanding, and actions in relation to what it means to be a NSO board (as opposed to a club or corporation board). As the decision-making organ, the NSO board should, for example, be able to handle personnel and budget matters appropriately, make uncomfortable decisions, and be well acquainted with policy documents (criterion 2). The board should also refrain from interfering with the operative matters of the NSO and instead focus on matters of strategy and policy development (criterion 3). Moreover, the board ought to be able to navigate the *corridors of power* and be an appropriate and credible representative of the sport vis-à-vis external stakeholders (criterion 4).

The third efficiency category consists of criteria linked to the resources and outcomes of the ideal board. In this category, we find the criterion mentioned by most NC members: that the ideal board for their NSO contains an appropriate mix of various competencies (criterion 5). Although a number of different competencies are mentioned by the interviewees (e.g. marketing, finances, and legal), the most important aspects of this criterion are that boards should not be one sided in terms of the competencies held by its incumbents and that members hold positions based on their qualifications and *not* the social category they represent. This category furthermore includes two criteria that again relate to the notion that the board is the top decision-making organ of a *sport* organization: the board's ability to develop the NSO's sport(s), both in organizational and sport-specific terms (criterion 6), and the significance of the board having knowledge of specific

conditions and ideals (criterion 7). As the final efficiency criterion, a limited number of interviewees also state that, between its members, the ideal board of their NSO has a network that extends to important external stakeholders (criterion 8).

The fourth board-level category in Table 2 is made up of six criteria related to issues of representation (criteria 9–14). For the proceeding analysis, it is important to note that interviewees from almost three-quarters of the participating NCs cite one or several of these criteria as important aspects of their ideal board. Together with ‘Board resources and outcomes,’ this category contains the most NSOs. The most prevalent criterion within the category is the board’s ability to abide with and further the sport’s internal, bottom-up governance structure (criterion 9). Whereas this criterion relates to structures and processes related to democratic governance, reflecting an *acting for* view of representation, the remaining criteria (10–14) are directly linked to the group from which a board member is recruited, thus mirroring a *standing for* view of representation (Fenichel Pitkin, 1967). Although gender is the (social) category mentioned by most NC members, it is clear that other criteria related to representation (e.g. age and geography) are also at play.

RQ2: Hierarchies of criteria formed through rankings of evaluative criteria

To allow for stability and continuity, most NSOs have a system in which the terms of office overlap. This practice of successive replacement means that unless the entire board chooses or is forced to resign, there is a limited number of vacancies to be filled (most often 2–3) in each election.

The study’s assumption of a range of both *efficiency* and *representation* criteria being at play in board-nomination processes is clearly confirmed in the preceding section. However, lest several criteria coalesce in one person (which interviewees report is quite unlikely), this plurality of criteria requires members of NCs to rank criteria. As per Table 3, our analysis reveals seven types of such rankings. Types 1 and 2 are both rankings that include representation criteria. However, only the first involves the prioritization of ‘Representation’ over all other criteria. For the sake of parsimony, we have included all representation criteria in this ranking type. In reality, there are thus additional rankings being made between these criteria (see Table 2, criteria 9–14). The second representation-based ranking, although indicating an aspiration to compose a board based on representative ideals, implies that a candidate from a representative-based group is nominated only on the condition that he or she also fulfills an efficiency-based criterion or criteria. We term this ranking type ‘Conditioned representation.’

The five remaining ranking types (3–7) are efficiency based. Numbers 3, 4 and 6 involve gearing the nomination process toward constructing an efficient group by way of matching the vacant position with a candidate that is either equivalent to the member leaving the board, or that better completes the board puzzle.

Whereas Table 3 describes the different types of rankings constructed in the analysis, Table 4 displays the results of the pattern-matching analysis of the relationship between statements on the ideal board member and ideal board (see Tables 1 and 2) and a particular NC’s way of ranking (see Table 3). This analysis shows that there is indeed a consistency in this regard; among the NCs, there are five nomination process profiles, each with a different combination of ideal board and board member and ranking type.

Table 3. Ranking types.

We will prioritize a candidate that ...	NSOs
<i>Representation ranking types</i>	
1. Belong to an underrepresented group	20
2. Belong to an underrepresented group, on the condition that he or she meets additional criteria ('Conditioned representation')	5
	15
<i>Efficiency ranking types</i>	
3. Best matches the competence that is missing or is to be replaced + meets additional criteria	40
4. Best matches the competence that is missing or is to be replaced	16
5. Best matches the development pursued by the NSO + meets additional criteria	14
6. Best matches the personality that is missing or is to be replaced	5
7. Best matches the development pursued by the NSO	3
	2

Note. The rankings do not add up to 61 because there are data missing on one NSO.

Table 4. Nomination Profiles

Profile	Ideal board/board member (RQ1)	Ranking (RQ2)	NSOs
1.	Efficiency	Efficiency	23
2.	Representation	Efficiency	16
3.	Representation	Conditioned representation	9
4.	Efficiency	Conditioned representation	6
5.	Efficiency/Representation	Representation	5

Note: The NCs do not add up to 61 because there are insufficient data on two NSOs.

Starting from the top, the profiles include the following: (1) an espousal of only efficiency criteria in relation to the ideal board and board member combined with an efficiency ranking type; (2) an espousal of representation criteria in relation to the ideal board and ideal board member combined with an efficiency ranking type; (3) an espousal of representation criteria combined with a 'Conditioned representation' ranking type; (4) an espousal of only efficiency criteria in relation to the ideal board and board member combined with a 'Conditioned representation' ranking type; and (5) an espousal of both the *efficiency* and *representation* criteria in relation to the ideal board and board member combined with a representation ranking type.

Discussion

RQ1: What evaluative criteria are at play in board-selection processes?

At the most basic level, an explanation of the continuing problems with skewed representation is that although representational categories are often treated separately and one at a time in the scientific realm (e.g. studies on women's representation on boards, see e.g. Adriaanse & Schofield, 2014; Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007; Hovden, 2000), multiple bases of representation are considered simultaneously in the realm of the concrete. Our study shows that although gender is the most prominent representation criterion among Swedish NCs (except for the *acting for* criterion, see Table 2, criterion 9), four additional representation criteria are at play in selection processes. To understand board selection as a process wherein gender is weighed against merit therefore underestimates the complexity of representational concerns in these processes. Adding to this complexity, *merit* or *efficiency*, as we call it, is in itself a broad category that includes a range of criteria (see Table 2, criteria 1–8). The tension is thus not between gender and merit but between a wide variety of representation criteria and a wide variety of efficiency criteria.

Between them, these criteria have different properties that render them more or less objective (cf. Cunningham, 2017) for *organizational practitioners*. Gender and age, for example, are fairly easy to match with a candidate and are consequently readily identifiable by members of NCs as missing (or not) in the composition of a board. However, unless ethnic diversity is simply taken to mean *not Swedish*, it is an example of a criterion with a potentially wide range of interpretations. As a further illustration, consider, for example, the individual-level criterion *appropriate life conditions* (Table 1, criterion 5) and how notions of appropriateness may cause individuals to enter – or not – NCs' radars. If, for example, appropriate life conditions are specified to mean time and availability, as in Claringbould and Knoppers (2007) study, and this is coupled with assumptions about women not having time to spare because of their domestic responsibilities, this might lead NCs to refrain from asking women to run for the board. This is substantiated by previous research that shows how evaluative criteria – although they may be portrayed as such by actors – are not neutral with regards to their connection to other criteria. In particular, in addition to Claringbould and Knoppers (2007), Adriaanse and Schofield (2013), Hovden (2000), and Shaw and Cameron (2008 in Shaw, 2017) all show the gendered nature of the construction of various merit-based criteria (e.g. the amalgamation of notions of masculinity and merit) that work to exclude women from being considered appropriate from a merit-based perspective.

Extending previous research on selection processes in sport (Adriaanse & Schofield, 2013; Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007; Gabaldon, de Anca, Mateos de Cabo, & Gimeno, 2016; Hovden, 2000, 2010; Shaw and Cameron 2008 in Shaw, 2017; Steward & Cunningham, 2015), we suggest that the socially constructed nature of evaluative criteria makes the selection process vulnerable to biased interpretation with regards to at least three aspects. These aspects are, first, which criteria to include (e.g. 'appropriate life conditions?'), second, the meaning of criteria (e.g. 'what should be considered appropriate life conditions?'), and third, whether a candidate meets a criterion (e.g. 'does X have the life conditions that are appropriate,' or, more generally, 'do we know of anyone who has the appropriate life conditions?'). Add to this that NCs are themselves a group constituted by several individuals. The ways in which selection processes' play out is likely to contain not only judgement but also negotiation among these individuals concerning the aspects discussed in the preceding. Although our data do not shed light on this, such group-level dynamics can be assumed to have their own patterns of power and (re)production that will depend, in part, on who is a member of the NC. Supporting this is Kaczmarek, Kimino, and Pye's (2012) finding that female presence on NCs has a positive impact on board gender diversity.

RQ2: What hierarchies of criteria are formed when evaluative criteria are ranked?

The findings related to RQ1 show that there is an extensive recognition of representation-based criteria as an aspect to consider when constructing the ideal board; 46 members of NCs cited one or several such criteria (see Table 2). This is perhaps an indication of the institutional setting of Swedish voluntary sport, wherein government sport policy and internal policy documents both create an imperative to strive for adequate representation in governance. A clear indicator of this is that after data collection for this study was

completed, a 40/60 board gender quota was voted through at the 2017 SSC general assembly (SSC, 2017).

National settings aside, institutional contexts are heterogeneous and contradictory (e.g. Gammelsæter, 2010; Nite et al., 2013; Skirstad & Chelladurai, 2011; Southall et al., 2009). As a consequence, all organizational practices involve trade-offs (Clegg et al., 2002), and our analysis shows a ranking of criteria into hierarchies. Indeed, although 15 members of the NCs claimed that they would nominate a candidate on the basis of representation on the condition that he or she also fulfills efficiency criteria, only five stated that they would give top priority to a candidate that fulfills a representation criterion. Beyond the 16 NC members who did not acknowledge representation as an ideal-board criterion in the first place, that still leaves 20 NC members who did, but for whom representation was no longer on the table when they were faced with the task to rank criteria. For the vast majority of NC members that do not give representation the highest priority, the inherent tensions between criteria at play is thus resolved through trade-offs that to a varying extent favor efficiency over representation.

Furthermore, although one candidate may presumably meet one or several representation criteria (e.g. gender and age), as well as one or several efficiency criteria (e.g. has the right competence and board experience), it is rather unlikely that a candidate will meet all of them. In effect, one or several criteria will always be comparatively lower or higher prioritized. In other words, trade-offs are not only made between a representation- and efficiency-based board composition but also between representation and efficiency criteria, respectively. If we take into consideration whether NC members cite representation and/or efficiency in the description of ideal board members and ideal boards, the five nomination profiles in Table 4 indicate selection processes that, starting from the bottom, are increasingly exclusionary from the perspective of representation. However, from a conceptual standpoint, the contents of these profiles are of less importance than the suggestion that trade-offs are inherent to board selection process. This shaping effect of NCs' rankings is further heightened by the structural circumscription of access that the practice of successive replacement of board members places on selection processes. To the extent that board-nomination processes can be likened with piecing together a puzzle, this practice implies that there are always some pieces of the puzzle already laid out. Because NC members place value on having a board that as a group lives up to a number of efficiency criteria (Tables 1 and 2, cf. Bradbury & O'Boyle, 2015; Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007; Clune et al., 2014; Johannisson & Huse, 2000), the practice of successive replacement means that NCs tend to take their point of departure in the characteristics of the incumbents – the pieces already laid out (see Table 3, ranking types 3–7). In other words, although there are pieces of the puzzle in the realm of the *ideal*, the actual puzzling takes place in the realm of the concrete, and in that realm, finishing the puzzle – a prerequisite for the continued governance of the organization – tends to be top priority.

Concluding remarks

With the aim of producing an explanation for – and a tool to address – skewed representation in sport organization boards, this study makes two and interconnected knowledge contributions. Extending previous research on the topic, we first show how the evaluative criteria at play in board-selection processes (RQ1) include a heterogeneous set of

representation criteria and a heterogeneous set of efficiency criteria. This implies that although single criterion (e.g. gender) studies concerned with patterns of board representation yield analytical advantages, they do not fully capture the complexity of representational considerations at play, a complexity that will arguably impact the presence of any social category on boards. That is, rather than being a question of gender vs merit, any social category will, so to speak, be ‘up against’ all remaining evaluative criteria (see Table 1). This insight can be fruitfully brought to bear in future research. For example, research may draw upon this study in surveys that seek to establish the validity of, and/or map the relative weight given to each criterion in different sport systems.

Our second main contribution is that we show that the ranking of criteria involves trade-offs among and between representation and efficiency criteria that result in hierarchies of criteria that in the vast majority of the NC members under study promote an efficiency-based over a representation-based board composition. On a more conceptual level, we propose that board-nomination processes may be metaphorically conceptualized using the notion of piecing together a puzzle, but the puzzle is always half completed, and the pieces already on the table (i.e. board incumbents) may have great implications for what pieces to propose as additions (i.e. new board member candidates). That selection processes rarely start with a ‘clean slate’ may seem like an almost trite insight. Nonetheless, our findings show that incumbents are often the starting point for board selection processes, and this should arguably be accounted for in our conceptualizations of these processes. Our research design is limited in the depth and width of data it provides for each NC. However, our tentative conceptualization of board-nomination processes as similar to piecing together a puzzle may be utilized in future studies that focus on fewer NCs and build on data that may answer questions around institutional-, organizational-, and NC-level interpretive and processual aspects that determine how (e.g. when, where, by whom, and why) this puzzle piecing plays out and with what effects on board composition. A concrete suggestion in this regard is to follow a limited number of NCs during their entire term of office (i.e. from their election/appointment to when they put forth their candidate suggestions) to explore institutional-, organizational-, and group-level dynamics and points of action that impact the formation of hierarchies of criteria. Methodologically, repeated observations of NC meetings (online and face-to-face) and communication (e.g. email conversations) would likely be the best tool for this research task.

From the perspective of sport management and policy practitioners, our contribution may form a basis for a discussion about the meaning of adequate representation and about trade-offs inherent in strategic decision making related to board composition. Indeed, the intrinsic value of individuals’ equal access to decision-making bodies aside, sport’s external and internal stakeholders’ increasing concern with adequate representation indicates that the legitimacy of sport governance systems is at stake. An inability to address inadequate representation relates to sport’s continued operation, simply because actors are reluctant to deal with organizations whose legitimacy is put into question (Strittmatter, Stenling, Fahlén, & Skille, 2018). Skewed representation may therefore impact, for example, the flow of financial resources to sport, changes in government regulations, members’ propensity to run for board positions, and sport’s general standing as an authoritative voice in the public debate.

For (government) policy practitioners, our analysis implies the need to consider how the advancement of particular categories of representation (e.g. gender) is enabled and

constrained by the trade-offs inherent to selection processes. Put differently, governments cannot have it all, so to speak. At a more general level, our study indicates a need to consider the type of representation (e.g. *standing for* versus *acting for*) that governments wish to impel and how this relates to how *sport* views representation. Although our study does not shed light on this, it is likely to be a discrepancy in this regard. The importance of such considerations is arguably augmented by the fact that the membership pattern of the sport cadre – the de facto constituents of sport’s internal democracy – is skewed to begin with. This certainly complicates the relationship between the idea of self-governance and adequate representation. Take gender quotas for example. Although one may convincingly argue that they are efficient instruments to increase female board representation, from the perspective of *standing for*, they create an overrepresentation in NSOs with male-dominated memberships, something that may be viewed as undemocratic in such NSOs. This example raises the question of whether to drive development from the top (i.e. reducing skewedness in membership participation patterns by changing board composition), from the bottom (i.e. reducing skewedness in boards by changing patterns in the group from which candidates are drawn), or both.

Awareness is a good starting point for development though, and our study may aid actors that seek to become aware of which criteria are included or excluded in selection processes and of how these criteria are traded off in rankings, thereby allowing an informed sport management and policy practice. In that sense, our study provides new explanations that may be used as a tool to alter selection processes (and, ultimately, board composition), but it also raises new questions around what adequate representation is and how it may be achieved.

Notes

1. Knowledge on board-selection processes is also important because of its assumed relationship with the overall effectiveness and function of the board (Withers et al., 2012), its strategic capability (Ferkins & Shilbury, 2012), decision making (Soares, Correia, & Rosado, 2010), and overall organizational performance (Rose, 2007; Siciliano, 1996). This, however, is not the main reason for our study.
2. Although important, we are not concerned with whether certain patterns of board composition better reflect the interests of constituents (e.g., are women better representatives of women’s interests? cf. Wängnerud, 2000) but with (un)equal access to positions of power.
3. Although efficiency can mean different things (cf. Stone, 2012), we refer to evaluative criteria that guide recruitment of candidates that aid the attainment of the organization’s outcomes, whatever they may be. Alternative terms used for this in the sport literature is merit-based, professionalized, and commercially-oriented boards (e.g., Sam, 2009; Taylor & O’Sullivan, 2009).
4. Some NSOs federate several sports. The Swedish Ski Association, for example, is the national governing body for alpine skiing, free skiing, mogul skiing, speed skiing, roller skiing, cross-country skiing, ski jumping, Telemark skiing, ski-cross, and snowboard (Swedish Ski Association, 2019).
5. The organizing principle of Swedish sport is that individuals form clubs that are affiliated to district sport organizations ($n = 1,000$, with regional authority over one specific sport), regional sport organizations ($n = 19$, providing administrative support to and representing all sports), NSOs ($n = 71$, with national authority over one specific sport), and, finally, to the SSC (affiliating in total 3,147,000 members in 20,164 clubs, [Fahlén & Ferry, 2018]). Any individual member can be elected to the boards governing these organizations and to the biannual general assembly of the SSC.

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