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Youth representatives as agents of institutional change: the circumscribing effects of role prescriptions in sport governance

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ABSTRACT

Conceptualising the youth representative as an institutional role, we explore the institutional shaping of youth representatives as change agents in the governance of sport organisations. Focusing on how these shaping conditions who the youth representative can be and what determines the scope of their role fulfilment, including the impact of their work on established institutional orders, allows us to examine the shaping of agency related to governance institutions. Data is drawn from a questionnaire centred on the experiences of young people in sport governance ($n = 32$) and semi-structured interviews with 10 representatives of organisations affiliated with the Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederations of Sports. The role of the youth representatives is scripted in terms of who the representatives ought to be and what they ought to do. The scripting associated with the operationalisation of this ambition into role pre- and proscriptions stands in stark contrast to the ideal of youth representatives as agents of institutional change. Our study of the scripting of institutional roles has theoretical implications because it shows how normative typifications that link notions of actors with actorhood circumscribe institutional work pertaining to change.

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In organised sport systems, policies aiming at increasing the representation of young people in central governance structures, such as boards or committees, have gained increased attention by sport politicians and sport governance researchers (Waldahl and Skille 2016, Eliasson 2017, White *et al.* 2019, Llewellyn and Rich 2023, Lindsey *et al.* 2023). One central argument for increasing the representation of young people is that organisations that are mostly made up of and for young people should have governance processes in which young people have an opportunity to influence their sporting activity (White *et al.* 2019). Similar to the debate surrounding athlete representation, the issue of youth representatives is based on the idea that the few who are authorised to speak on the behalf of many (Cabello-Manrique and Puga-González 2021, Thibault 2021) should mirror the latter. In this paper, we focus on efforts to ensure this principle and more specifically on the introduction of reserved seats for so-called ‘youth representatives’ in Norwegian sport governance and the shaping of agency for incumbents of this role.

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Our analysis therefore links with recent good governance debates and research body which, alongside a focus on for example effectiveness, efficiency, and transparency, have examined issues of representation and opportunities for representatives to exercise agency (e.g. Persson 2011, Addink 2019, Stenling and Sam 2020). So far, the sport governance literature has fruitfully explored and analysed the *capacity* of democratic governance systems to compose boards and other governing bodies that reflect the current, or envisioned, membership-based system. In particular, researchers have focussed on the (under)representation of distinguishable groups, especially women (e.g. Hovden 2000, Strittmatter and Skirstad 2017, Evans and Pfister 2021, Knoppers *et al.* 2021, Piggott 2022, Valiente 2022, Lesch *et al.* 2023, Patil and Doherty 2023), athletes (Thibault *et al.* 2010, Geeraert *et al.* 2014, Kihl and Schull 2020) and other marginalised groups (Peers *et al.* 2023).

However, as far as democratic governance is concerned, it is important to keep in mind that representation may refer to the elected officials' *descriptive mirroring* of the membership group (e.g. when women members are 'mirrored' by women board members), the manner in which their *actions* (in representational bodies) further members' interests (Pitkin 1972), and the potential relationship between these two aspects in deliberative processes (e.g. Pitkin 1972, Hayward 2009, Stenling *et al.* 2023). Thus, representation conceptually and empirically includes who elected officials *are* (their descriptive characteristics) and what they *do* (the substantive content of their representational activities). From a governance perspective, these two aspects are fruitfully captured by the concept of institutional roles, defined as normative typifications that prescribe the appropriate links between actors and activities, the interactions between roles, and the various roles' relative positions in an organisational hierarchy (Berger and Luckmann 1966, Schütz 1967, Barley and Tolbert 1997, Abdelnour *et al.* 2017).

The inadequacies and shortcomings associated with representation that have been brought to light over the past decade or so have engendered a push towards adopting governance instruments that will invariably transform representation-related institutional roles. One example of these instruments is various sorts of board quotas. Quotas intend to increase the presence of previously under-represented groups and represent a descriptive view of representation in regard to the ways in which the interests of members are advanced in elected bodies (i.e. representatives 'mirroring' the represented, e.g. Hovden 2000, Knoppers *et al.* 2021, Lesch *et al.* 2023). When faced with the dilemma of skewed board composition, quotas are designed and adopted to disrupt and change institutional orders. However, this very feature implies that quotas may face fierce opposition and that their introduction and smooth implementation require lines of argumentation that speaks to the problems addressed and to the *mechanisms* that alleviate them. As with any other institutional arrangement, quotas are bound to include relatively explicit and implicit prescriptions, meaning there are expectations around who reserved seats occupants should *be*, what they should *do*, and, by extension, how they and their work should accomplish representation.

Whereas much of the literature on board composition and performance is positioned in a sport management context and has mainly focused on the impact of representation (e.g. Valiente 2022) or impact on the role (e.g. Velija *et al.* 2014), quota introductions offer a fruitful context in which to reverse this line of inquiry and explore the shaping of role incumbents, their work, and its institutional consequences. This paper sets out to offer such an analysis, thereby placing focus on the scripted character of a role that is associated with intentions and hopes for institutional change.

Purpose and significance of contribution

The purpose of this paper is to examine the scripting of the youth representative role, including how expectations surrounding the role shape the scope and boundaries of role enactment. In view of the hope placed in youth representatives as agents of institutional change, we furthermore seek to discuss the impact of the youth representative script on established institutional orders, as well its implications for broader issues of governance, democracy, and organisational legitimacy.

With our analysis, we make three main contributions to the literature on sport governance and (youth) representation. First, we show that the youth representative script implies that role incumbents' agency is circumscribed by the descriptive label associated with the role, both in terms of the issues linked to youth representative work ('youth issues') and its organisational locus ('youth committees'). We thereby extend previous works' focus on the underrepresentation of particular social groups (e.g. Cabello-Manrique and Puga-González 2021, Thibault 2021, Peers *et al.* 2023) by showing how quota instruments may bring about sharpened expectations around who holders of reserved seats are expected to be, and what they are expected to do.

Second, linking the governance literature (e.g. White *et al.* 2019, Llewellyn and Rich 2023) to more general question of organisational processes, we highlight the paradox of a role associated with hopes for change being scripted in a way that limits its impact on established institutional orders. In relation to this, we discuss how the good intentions attached to quotas may be accompanied by motives that stem from external critique of a mismatch in descriptive mirroring between those populating formal positions of power and the membership layers.

Third, we emphasise the relationship between the issue of reserved youth seats and broader issues of governance, democracy, and legitimacy. On this, we discuss the propensity for expectations forming around new roles to be shaped by the vested interests of those that enjoy the mandate of scripting roles in a way that may breed confusion, disappointment, and cynicism. Conceptually, we consider the transferability of our insights to other roles that are formed as a result of reserved seats, thus opening up for an academic treatment of quotas in sport to be understood in the context of instruments and processes of democratic governance, distribution of power, and the (re)production of institutional orders.

Study context

Norwegian sports, as counterparts worldwide, has successfully achieved a position as *the* youth movement (Strittmatter 2016, Seippel and Skille 2019, Skille 2011b, Frøyland *et al.* 2020). In Norway, three out of four teenagers have participated in organised sport during their teen-age years. The significant financial contribution from the public sector – the state, regional, and local authorities – is motivated by the association between youth activities and the expectation that sport activities morally, socially, and physically shape its participants. The legitimacy of public funding is moreover based on sport's democratic governance system, its potential for democratic fostering, and the expectation that elected sport officials will represent members (Enjolras and Waldahl 2010, Skille and Säfvenbom 2011). Therefore, it is unsurprising that the underrepresentation of youth in decision-making positions has spawned questions around the influence of Norwegian sport's largest membership group in the governance of activities arranged *for them*. In response, several legitimacy defending efforts have been launched (e.g. leadership courses and network meetings for youth), with the overall aim of providing youth with the agency to influence sport activities.

These efforts stem from – on a (civil) society level – that the "associationalism" which used to be recognized by a strong local to national integration has been partly replaced by a new organizational structure ... with more vague and less stable bonds within organizations' (Waldahl and Skille 2016, p. 137). Combined with the sports specific drop-out challenge, youth co-determination has been on NIF's agenda since 1991 (see Waldahl and Skille 2016, for a historical review). Most pertinent for this paper are the various measures associated with youth participation in governance activities. At the top level of the Norwegian sports pyramid, an 'under 26' quota was adopted in 2007. This quota was expanded from one to two reserved seats by the 2019 Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF) General Assembly, which also decided that for boards of NSOs ($n = 55$) and regional sports confederations (RSCs, $n = 11$) one seat is to be reserved for members under the age of 26 (NIF 2019). In 2021, young representatives were made mandatory for the nomination committees of these organisations (Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports 2021).

Conceptual framework

Quotas are brought in as instruments to induce change in the governance of sport organisations and thus, in the existing institutional order. Quotas bring with them a role prescription that casts reserved seat holders as agents of institutional change whose tasks are centred on fulfilling representation in the manner inscribed in the quota instrument itself. In that sense, while role incumbents may take up their position with well-founded hopes of changing old practices and structures in an institution, the scripts associated with their role allow only a certain type of agency. In order to shed further light on the mechanisms that enable and restrict change in sport governance systems, we apply institutional approaches as conceptual framework.

Institutional approaches to understanding organising are underpinned by an interest in the patterned interrelation between shared systems of meaning and organisational structures and practices (i.e. institutions, Scott 2013). In this study, we apply the concept of institutional roles (Berger and Luckmann 1966) and institutional work which is understood as ‘the purposive action of individuals and organisations aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions’ (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006, p. 215).

The institutional work approach serves to examine ‘micro-processes that underpin the relationship between human agents and institutions’ (McSweeney et al. 2019, 532) and sits alongside other approaches, such as institutional entrepreneurship (Andersen and Ronglan 2015) and translation (Skille 2011a, Steen-Johnsen 2007), that were launched as a reaction to institutional analysts’ tendency to privilege structural explanations and failure to conceptually account for and empirically explore institutional processes (e.g. change and reproduction).

Institutional roles

Although Berger and Luckmann’s *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) is most often credited through a passing reference, it was the central inspiration for early accounts in organisational institutionalism (e.g. Meyer and Rowan 1977). For these sociologists,

The origins of any institutional order lie in the typification of one’s own and others’ performances. . . . There will be the recognition not only of a particular actor performing an action of type X, but also of a type-X action being performable by any other actor to whom the relevance structure in question can be plausibly imputed. (Berger and Luckmann 1966, p. 72)

Following Berger and Luckmann (1966), the role concept thus presumes scripted notions that link actors (who the role incumbent should *be*) with actorhood (what the actor should *do*) through shared typifications that are brought to bear in social interactions. In the context of the present study, this implies an understanding of seats on boards – a governance-specific institutional role – as scripted in terms of who the appropriate incumbent is and what the prescribed role performance implies. Role pro- and prescriptions, such as those connected with boards seats, are part of any society’s social stock of knowledge (Schütz 2012) and are thus available to its actors through socialisation processes (Micelotta and Washington 2013, Bargues and Valiorgue 2019, Fulton et al. 2019). In that sense, pre-existing ideas – occasionally inscribed in organisational structures – concerning the being and doings of ‘youth representatives’ are presumed to script the recruitment, onboarding, and role execution of individuals in such roles.

Crucially, roles are significant to explore because ‘institutions are embodied in individual experience by means of roles’ and by ‘playing roles, the individual participates in the social world’ (Berger and Luckmann 1966, p. 74). The interlinking of roles with the institutional order is achieved through the ways in which the performance of a role represents both the role itself and reveals an entire nexus of conduct that is possible only through the performance of interconnected roles (Berger and Luckmann 1966). In this way, roles make it possible for institutions to exist because they allow actors to embody roles and the performance of roles to represent an entire institutional order. Institutional

roles as a conceptual tool therefore provides us with a window into the broader Norwegian sport governance system and the wider institutional context in which it is embedded.

Due to their pro- and prescribing feature, roles are fundamental to the controlling mechanisms of institutional processes. Beyond providing a script for 'type-casting' actors, this control operates through the socio-historically constructed standards used to verify the credentials of role incumbents ('Is this the right person for this role?') and their performance ('Is this person performing the role the right way?', cf. Berger and Luckmann 1966). Therefore, individuals most often find that a role is cast for them (Goffman 1949), and failing to meet embedded expectations may be the source of confusion, social disciplining, or attempts to recast the role itself by way of editing the role's script. Those that embark on the latter are likely to face resistance from actors who benefit from existing institutional arrangements and who are therefore more likely to work to maintain them (Jepperson 1991, Hardy and Maguire 2008, Nite and Edwards 2021).

Roles as objects of institutional work

The malleability of institutional roles was acknowledged already by Berger and Luckmann (1966), who posited that ongoing human production is the only ontological status of the social order, and that institutions 'exist only and insofar as human activity continues to produce it' (70). In contemporary theoretical parlance, this implies that roles are objects of ongoing institutional work (Hampel et al. 2017), whether directed at the maintenance or disruption of role prescriptions. Roles thus evolve through processes of negotiation concerning appropriate role incumbents and conduct. During such processes, an institutional role is also shaped by the role inhabitants' subjective experiences and the meanings they ascribe to their own and other's performances (Barley 2017).

To summarise, the above outlined conceptual ideas aligns with our concern to scrutinise the institutional shaping of a role to which much hope concerning disruptive institutional work vis-à-vis governance of representation is attached. It does so by allowing us to place analytical focus on what the youth representatives' role script implies in terms of envisioned beings and doings of incumbents.

Methods

Our theoretical outlook implies a social constructionist underpinning of the research process. Therefore, we operate with the assumption that institutional structures and practices are arrangements constructed by actors attempting to make sense within their own frame of thoughts and suits of interest (Guba and Lincoln 2005). Specifically, a role experience encompasses the sense of becoming enabled to develop a narrative of, and align with, events of biography. The subjective experience of roles and its 'interpretations and enactment lay foundations for change in role behaviour and trajectories that may eventually modify roles' institutional face' (Barley 2017, p. 347), which we can build our empirical investigations upon. In that respect, data were generated through two rounds: a survey with open-ended questions and qualitative interviews. As part of a broader ambition to investigate issues of representation in Norwegian sport, present study drew mainly on data showcasing aspects connected to age and how expectations surrounding the role associated with age shape the scope and boundaries of role enactment.

Data collection

The data subject to analysis were collected via two interconnected steps. First, an online survey was distributed to 65 individuals aged 15–26 years who were gathered for a youth representative network meeting organised by NIF. Of these, 32 office holders in NSO youth committees ($n = 16$), RSCs ($n = 15$), and regional sports organisations (RSOs, $n = 1$) responded. Of the 32 respondents 26 were board members in a sport organisation. The questionnaire included a series of open-ended

questions centred on the experiences, challenges, and needs of young people in sport governance. The responses were quite brief; most of the respondents wrote two to four sentences, while the longest response was 748 words. In total, approximately 6000 words were analysed. The questionnaire data provided an overview of how young people are recruited and how they perceive their agency and challenges in making their voice heard. The questionnaire also helped us recruit youth representatives for the second data collection step.

In the second step, the first author conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 representatives of organisations affiliated with NIF. The informants were selected based on their merits of representing different organisations, including NSOs, RSCs, and NIF. The informants were in decision-making positions (eight of them as board members) that allowed them to reflect and provide their opinion on the topic. Interviews lasting from 36–82 minutes were carried out with both youth representatives (age 19–26) ($n = 4$) and older leaders (age 27 and above; $n = 6$). Hence, informants have an age span between 19 and 61 years. During the interviews, a guide was used with questions concerning roles, representation, and experiences of and with young representatives' involvement in the governance of sport, e.g. How did you come into the position as board/committee member? Could you describe your tasks in the organisation? Could you describe your contribution to your organisation and Norwegian sports? The interviews allowed us to penetrate the topic deeper, and to ask follow-up questions that elicited concrete examples of situations and experiences from the informants. The interview guide was reviewed by five young leaders in Norwegian sport organisations (aged 20–25 years) and two employees in NIF (aged 31 and 37). Their input helped us develop the questions so that they were understandable and relevant for gaining knowledge on young people's involvement in sport governance. All interviewees were informed about the purpose of the study, their right to anonymity, and their right to discontinue participation at any given time. The study has received ethics approval by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

Data analysis

In preparation for data analysis, all interviews were transcribed verbatim and interview data were thereafter analysed alongside survey data. Because of its flexibility in theoretical application, we followed the steps of thematic analysis as laid out by Braun and Clarke (2006, see also Braun *et al.* 2016). In this process, the first author began by familiarising themselves with the data and taking notes for the subsequent analysis. In a second step, the first author identified first-order codes relevant to the scripting and consequences of young representatives' roles through a close line-by-line examination of the data pertaining to interviewees' experiences. The analysis Software MaxQda was used. Examples for first-order codes were: tasks of young people, challenging the established, focus on youth topics, generational prejudices, young people's exclusion from decision-making. All authors participated in steps three to five, which involved a progressively more theoretical reading of the codes and the construction of themes and results. Themes generated were institutional expectations, reproduction of established institutional orders, representation duties, shaping activities, intention and hinders to challenge the established. During these steps, we drew on the respective authors' expertise to construct an account that is grounded in the data, but theoretically meaningful and informative. These steps lead us to identify the two main categories as presented in the results: 'scripted being' and 'scripted doing' of youth representatives. To secure the anonymity of the quoted informants, we refer to youth representatives as informants Y1 to Y36 (as data came from 36 youth representatives) and to the older leaders as informants O1 to O6.

Results

The youth representative as a specific institutional role is underpinned by expectations of a much-needed rejuvenation of the governance of Norwegian sport, with a particular eye towards enhancing youth presence and influence. However, our analysis shows that the scripting associated with the

operationalisation of this ambition into role pre- and proscriptions stands in stark contrast to the ideal of youth representatives as agents of institutional change. In the following, we provide an account of, first, expectations around who the youth representative ought to be – the social characteristics and qualities included in the youth representative ‘script’. Second, we explicate the scripted actions of this institutional role in terms of the pro- and prescriptions related to representational *doings*, with a specific focus on representative mandates and responsibilities. In the section succeeding the findings, we discuss the transformative potential (or lack thereof) of the institutional work made possible through the shaping of the youth representatives who shoulder the responsibility for institutional change.

Scripted being: expectations concerning characteristics and qualities

Our analysis uncovers several aspects of who the youth representative ought to be. Perhaps, the most explicit prerequisite for what ‘counts’ as a youth representative is the upper age limit (26 years) specified in the quota construction. Specifying that role holders must be under the age of 26 is significant in itself because it positions incumbents as ‘young’ vis-à-vis the average age of elected officials, but hardly in relation to the average age of the membership body of Norwegian sport.

Beyond clear-cut and formalised definitions of when ‘youth’ ends, the youth representative script contains more tacit expectations of the preferred qualities of role incumbents. Importantly, these are qualities that are seemingly understood to ‘mirror’ young people in general. As one older informant stated:

in a National Sport Organization, and in NIF as well, a governing body must mirror the membership. Sport consists of very many young people, and the decisions you make have consequences for the membership. And young people have a lot to contribute with, not only in relation to the fact that they are future-oriented and dynamic and have a different perspective on both the present and the future than those who have lived longer. Therefore, it is important to get them properly anchored in the decision-making processes. (O4)

While Informant O4 described young representatives as ‘dynamic’ and ‘future-oriented’, Informant O3 stated that ‘young people are willing to change. When several young people work together, you feel that it is fun to change. They show engagement and the ability to do adopt to new situations quickly’. Young role incumbents echo these expectations by suggesting that they may bring ‘joy and positivity’ (Y23) and ‘excitement’ (Y3) to board processes. Furthermore, in an organisation in desperate need of change, young people are conceived of as having a desirable and different mindset than their older counterparts: ‘In a way, they can think a little differently than adults about how things should be done. Especially in a sport and a sport organisation that wishes to change’ (O1).

However, while the script says that role incumbents should help to create change, the following quote indicates that youth representatives should not be too bold.

[The youth representative] is still young and has probably learned a lot in that process. Simultaneously ... there have been some small challenges regarding how [the youth representative] may have wanted to take up a little more space, than what was natural or desirable. For example, he somewhat has had some opinions that have been a bit at odds with the majority’s, which is kind of both good and bad. (O1)

Despite the senior representative’s understanding youth representative as too immature or inexperienced to begin with, the interview thus continues: ‘there may have been a bit of a learning process in that [the youth representative] has perhaps a slightly more realistic picture of what they can contribute, and what they are capable of, than they had in the beginning’ (O1).

Reflecting the idea of the proper youth representative as having distinct insights and embeddedness, the analysis further elucidates that youth role incumbents are expected to possess knowledge of grassroots sports (the primary sporting arena for children and youth) and the sport preferences and behaviour of children and youth. Youth, in short, are connected with other youth through a shared identity as well as through concrete networks (the basic premise being that young people

simply know many other young people). We have thus far described what the youth representative script infers in terms of the envisioned characteristics and qualities of preferred role incumbents. Following our conceptual understanding (Berger and Luckmann 1966), institutional roles link actors with expected performances (i.e. *beings* with *doings*). We now turn to the latter element of the youth representative role.

Scripted doing: expectations surrounding representational mandates and responsibilities

Along with ideas around who the ideal youth representative *is*, the role script includes pre- and proscriptions concerning what incumbents should *do* – their representational mandates and responsibilities. Central to this aspect of the role are those on behalf of whom the youth representative speaks, and how representational activities are to be carried out. Inscribed in the quota itself is the mandate to represent the membership, as must any other board official. However, our analysis makes visible that the role prescription goes beyond such general expectations to specify that incumbents are spokespersons *solely* of their descriptive membership mirror-image: other youth. This circumscription of the role's ascribed 'constituency' is illustrated, for example, by Informant Y5, who stated that they 'feel like we [youth representatives] are only there to have a voice for the youth, and not for the rest [of the membership]'

Similarly, filling the youth representative seat was explained as follows: 'Sometimes I get the feeling that we let young people into the board half-heartedly. Almost like ticking off for having a young person on the board, but they don't get any concrete tasks' (Y5). By implication, this aspect of the role script means that youth representatives are proscribed to represent the entire organisation and its membership. Informant Y4 illuminated this well when they referenced their organisation's practices around representational visits to other sport organisations:

All board members were sent out to sport clubs to do representational work, most were simply listed by the administration 'you go there, etc.', and if I didn't explicitly ask for it, I was never assigned any visits. So, others were listed and instructed to do it, while I had to ask for representational missions Perhaps they were unsure as to whether I would behave properly [or] were uncertain about whether I would be able to attain to the regional sport confederation's overarching interests.

Along similar veins, it seems difficult to let young people represent their sport organisation at the General Assembly of NIF, to which NSOs and RSCs send delegates. Thus, the following quote shows that the script limits young people's role of doing and thereby ensuring existing institutional arrangements are maintained:

During a selection of delegates for the General Assembly, [the youth representative] proposed themselves, with the argument that it is important that youth are represented. Then the Secretary General decided who would be delegates . . . so [the youth representative] was not chosen, which [the youth representative] disagreed strongly with. . . . The background for the decision probably regarded who was best qualified and had the competence to simply represent the organization [despite] I don't quite know how the [General Secretary] . . . assessed. [the candidates] (O1)

Related to scripted limitations around youth representatives' constituency, the role prescription shapes incumbents' involvement in board decision-making processes and the policy issues linked to their role. Specifically, even though youth representatives are elected to rather powerful decision-making bodies (e.g. NSO and RSC boards), they are expected to limit themselves to providing a 'youth perspective' (Y18, 21, 25) and expressing their opinions and views on youth issues. As Informants Y21 and Y18, both holders of the youth representative role, shared, 'most of the tasks we have been given are along the lines of "look at this and offer your opinion on what young people like"' (Y21) and 'I try to provide my views where relevant, in my case mainly youth issues' (Y18). Role expectations thus discourage incumbents from engaging in issues of perceived weight that do not carry the youth label – elite sport development, for example.

Somewhat paradoxically, role expectations also include being made accountable for some of the most complex and challenging issues facing Norwegian sport. One example of such a presumably unrealistic task handed to youth representatives is to 'do something about youth drop-out, a problem that *nobody* has an answer to' (O3). Informant O3 elaborated as follows:

To say 'here you go, here's a good chunk of money—do something about drop-out' is way too big. And when youth [representatives] give up, the response is 'youth are not engaged enough, we gave them every opportunity, but nothing happens', but in my view, it's not really giving them a fair chance of success.

In that sense, the issues that youth representatives are expected to weigh in on or contribute to policy around fall under the categories of either inconsequential and youth-related or hopeless and unsolvable. Indicating that scripts shape but do not determine agency, there are examples of role incumbents occasionally going off script by challenging the linking of youth representatives with youth issues. Informant Y3 indicated that, although faced with much scepticism, they convinced their board to invest in athlete development by establishing a cross-branch training team, where both amateurs and elite athletes can train together. They also managed to 'get one of the regional organisation's members into the elite sports committee in our NSO, as well as challenged the sport manager in the association to look beyond the [central region] when it comes to relevant national team athletes'. (Y3).

Informants of both categories at times recognised and lamented the narrow scripting of the youth representative role, suggesting that 'young representatives should function as a completely ordinary board member, I mean you don't call a woman board member a woman representative' (O2). However, attempts at script-bending in action appeared to be few and far between.

Considering the above analysis, what, then, is left of the vision of youth representatives as agents of institutional change? Notably, the scripting of the role includes the notion of role incumbents as 'contributing to a positive, more youthful image' (Y3) for the organisation and being role models who 'show younger people that it is possible, that you don't need to be fifty years old and a heavyweight to enter a board. Everyone has something to contribute, you just need to be aware of your specific contribution' (Y25). The data analysis tells us that beyond these hopes for symbolic representation, youth representatives are indeed expected to enhance youth participation and influence in governance. In other words, the youth representative script includes the imperative to conduct institutional work aimed at increasing the agency of the demographic group they are deemed to represent. This process takes an ambiguous form: on one hand, the youth representation is based on a circular argument (youth present youth because they are youth); on the contrary, the youth are expected (and themselves expect) to create real institutional change. The latter requires that youth governance is strengthened – not only through youth committees but also – by having a voice in the real decision-making forums.

Another youth representative said that he worked with writing a proposal to strengthen young people's influence in sport governance presented at NIF General Assembly. 'The proposal was the project called "youth governance", which involved looking at the whole sport organisation and young people's involvement in decision-making, and how to create forums where young people can learn from each other' (Y19). The options available for young people's institutional work nevertheless appear to be as circumscribed as the aspects previously addressed here.

Specifically, increasing influence through changing governance arrangements seems to be confined to the establishment of youth committees, disseminating the youth quota-instrument throughout the Norwegian sport system, and initiating youth-directed activities and events where young people get to connect. Commenting on their attempts to achieve formal recognition of governing organisations, Informant Y1 stated that their youth committee was in the process of determining 'what youth committees should be, what position they should have, and what their function in Norwegian sport ought to be' (Y1). At the time of the interview, Informant Y9's youth committee sought to create 'a case that allows [the youth committee] to fit properly into an

organisational chart, getting a formal agreement that we are a youth committee that sorts under the board, and [that] we have a real mandate with real tasks' (Y9).

Throughout this section, we have provided an account of the scripted being and doings of the youth representative role. In the following, we discuss our findings against the background of the ambitions ascribed to this role and the theoretical implications of our analysis.

Discussion

In our preceding analysis, we have shown that even if the role of the youth representative is created to perform institutional work aimed at producing institutional change, it is circumscribed in such a manner that the leeway for role incumbents is restricted to a small number of very specific tasks (cf., Persson 2011, Addink 2019, Stenling and Sam 2020). Empirically, our analysis shows that although institutional disruption is the centrepiece of the script, the possibilities of acting as agents of change in general and of altering patterns of representation specifically, are limited by certain aspects of the script prescribing who incumbents ought *be* and what they ought *do*. In the following, we will discuss in more detail: a) the potential impact of such prescriptions on youth representatives' institutional work; b) the potential impact of youth representatives' institutional work on established institutional orders (i.e. the intentions and hopes for institutional change in general and change representation in particular) and c) the implications of these processes on broader issues of governance, democracy, and organisational legitimacy.

Regarding the first aspect, our analysis suggests that institutional roles are indeed *objects* of institutional work. Bargues and Valiorgue (2019) tell us that 'the maintenance of an organisational role is not a mechanistic and automatic process, and actors with lower status actively participate in the maintenance process' (p. 45), and our data are explicit in that regard – youth representatives play their roles as scripted. As such, the performance of the role aligns with expected being and doings and conforms to established institutional orders and logics of appropriateness, which in turn stand in contrast to the general aspirations ascribed to the role. In that sense, the role script can be said to colonise young representatives' agency as the cost of institutional approval thereof. The script is upheld by the expectations conveyed by other representatives (and by other actors in sport more broadly), but also by role incumbents 'staying in character' (cf. Turner 1978, Biddle 1986).

Insofar as acting upon dynamic and change-oriented traits (scripted qualities of the role) is even possible, it is done so within a very restricted frame. Indeed, youth representatives are not only allowed but also encouraged to raise issues, but not just any or all sorts of issues: the script prescribes that youth representatives should pursue issues associated with the 'young' character of the role (cf., Hovden 2000, Knoppers *et al.* 2021, Lesch *et al.* 2023). Key here are issues that are either supposedly relevant and important to their peers (youth governance and grassroots sport) or very difficult to address (drop-out rates). The standards of conduct used to verify the credentials of role incumbents thus serve as a reproductive control mechanism (Berger and Luckmann 1966, Lawrence *et al.* 2011).

However, the script does not only prescribe content. It also prescribes form by governing the role's performance on a certain organisational stage – the youth committee. The actual (and institutional) work incumbents can perform is thereby confined to a specific arena kept separate from regular (and perhaps more important) business. Through this combination of form (structure) and a specific sort of issues (content), the agency conferred by the script is partitioned to an organisational locus where disturbance of the existing institutional order is unlikely. In this way, role incumbents may sense a degree of agency, but fundamentally the role remains harmless and non-threatening vis-à-vis existing arrangements. This gives the impression of the role being installed as a token of an underrepresented group (Kanter 1977) and add-on intended to protect the legitimacy of the organisation (see also Waldahl and Skille 2016, Strittmatter and Skirstad 2017, Strittmatter *et al.* 2018).

Second, in terms of the potential impact of youth representatives' institutional work on established institutional orders, it is not surprising to find few (if any) displays of disruptive

activities in our data. Even though intentions and hopes for institutional change are ascribed to the role and the role is intentionally created to enable institutional work, it is scripted in a way that does not disturb the institution. Thus, it seems as if the restrictive impact of the scripting of the institutional change agent role exceeds the actual impact of incumbents' institutional work on established institutional orders, and that this effect is not counter-balanced by role holders exercising agency vis-à-vis the role itself. Ironically, then, a role charged with promises of disruptive institutional work is operationalised through a script according to which the boundaries of agency imply little chance of actually disturbing the institutional order, including the distribution of power (see for example Knoppers *et al.* 2021 for a similar observation).

This is perhaps unsurprising, as the role and its script are constructed by actors with more power than those occupying the role, and who therefore may have an interest in maintaining that power advantage (Micelotta and Washington 2013, Bargues and Valiorgue 2019, Fulton *et al.* 2019). A role associated with institutional disruption may thus have been established to gain legitimacy for an organisation that has been critiqued for its mismatch between those who populate the governance system (older white men, Hovden 2000) and the membership base (children and youth).

We now turn to, third, a discussion of some potential implications of these processes on broader issues of governance, democracy, and organisational legitimacy. We suggest that the above insights may be transferred to other institutional roles, whether that of a woman installed because of a gender quota (Valiente 2022) or that of an athlete representative positioned as a voice for fellow athletes (Thibault *et al.* 2010). That is, although roles may be formally framed to make decisions in the interest of the entire organisation, the role scripting that takes place in practice links roles to specific interest groups. Thus, by observing how the role of the youth representative is underpinned by a descriptive view of representation (i.e. representation achieved by representatives mirroring a particular group; Pitkin 1972), we propose that roles linked to seats reserved on the basis of other descriptive characteristics may be cast in similar ways, with the important distinction that incumbents for some roles will transition out of the role's script, for example by simply getting older.

As shown in previous work on representation, various criteria can in a practitioner perspective be viewed as more or less objective (Stenling *et al.* 2020). Being young is in that sense more of a relative definition, while being a woman is less relative (although socially constructed gender categories are arguably less objectifiable). Nonetheless, while well-intended, the system of reserved positions runs the risk of confining responsibility for issues of concern to specific social groups, as well as prompting interest in other social groups' descriptive presence, thus fragmenting the constituency and hampering cross-group understanding. Previous research has, therefore, suggested the importance of embedding governing instruments such as quotas in articulated and well-thought-through ideas of the mechanisms of their intended change (Stenling *et al.* 2023). In the context of this paper, this implies that the role of change agents requires intentional and wise institutional work. The uniqueness with youth quota (compared to for example gender quota) is the temporality; since it is based on age and experience the role incumbents will eventually be not suited for the youth role.

Constructing, scripting, and installing institutional roles is, thus, also a form of institutional work. In light of the bureaucratic structures in place in most sport governance systems worldwide, new roles are bound to be scripted by the incumbents of existing older roles that are powerful simply because they include the mandate to create new roles. This means that a new role will most likely be scripted to be less powerful than existing ones, not least because roles with less power have less capacity to change existing institutional orders, such as the one which distributes power in an organisation. This means that when individuals – enticed by the promises of spearheading change, development and reform – discover that the true power to do so lies with other positions, located in other boxes of the organisational chart, they are likely to be confused and disappointed. Arguably, being associated with such experiences is troublesome for the legitimacy of any organisation, but even more so for organisations such as NIF, a volunteer non-profit organisation that is dependent on the unpaid efforts and goodwill of potential role incumbents.

Conclusions

This paper has sought to unpack the prescriptions of the institutional role of youth representatives, their content, context and consequences. Drawing on institutional theorising (Berger and Luckmann 1966) and the concept of institutional work (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006), the study sheds light on the institutional circumscribing of change agents and its effects on the scope and impact of their institutional work vis-à-vis established institutions.

Our analysis is limited in terms of exploring one type of institutional role only. Young people, simply because of the societal standing created by their age, may be presumed to have a weaker agency than other social categories. Therefore, the meaning and room for agency associated with other role scripts may differ from the one we identified here. A further limitation concerns the recent establishment of the role under scrutiny here. The 'newness' of the role did not allow us to study or speak to the long-term implications of the script on incumbents' role performances. Does, for example, 'getting into character' over time produce more or less 'bending of the script'? These limitations aside, we wish to highlight two main conclusions of theoretical significance that we suggest future institutional work and governance research take into consideration.

First, drawing on data that speaks to the expectations associated with so-called youth representatives in Norwegian sport governance, we have demonstrated that even those roles that are positioned as 'change agents' are scripted towards institutional reproduction rather than change. Specifically, institutional role scripts pertaining to envisioned change agents are constituted by typifications that link notions of actors (who role incumbents should be) with actorhood (what role incumbents should do), thus circumscribing the institutional work made possible. In the context of our study, this unfolded in a way that safeguards existing institutional arrangements.

Notably, our analysis should, second, not be taken to mean that actors are unimportant. To the contrary, as institutions are the product of human interpretation and conduct, without actors and their doings there would be no institutions (Berger and Luckmann 1966). However, in 'actor-centred' times like these, our analysis serves as a timely reminder that actors and their actorhood (including their 'purposive action' (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006, p. 215), are institutional products too (e.g. Meyer and Jepperson 2000). This implies that if change agents succeed in their endeavours, they do so because – not in spite of – institutional conditions. Likewise, and as demonstrated by our study, the reproductive effects of change agents' efforts are best explained with reference to the institutional shaping of their roles.

We argue that it is crucial to retain conceptual and empirical steadfastness concerning the core assumptions of institutional analysis: the social shaping of conduct. With our analysis, we have shown that a methodological 'zooming in' to the level of meaning-laden conduct allows us to analyse actors and agency as formed within – not outside of – institutional processes. This implies that it is not actors, including the scope and meaning of agency, that should be discarded from institutional analysis, but methodological individualism and theoretical models that locate explanations outside of institutional settings.

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