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Policy professionals in civil society organizations

Organizational hypocrisy and the myth of member centrality

Abstract

Drawing on 24 interviews with policy professionals in 10 Swedish member-based civil society organizations (CSOs), and observations of policy professionals in three of these, we investigate CSOs from the perspective of their policy teams. The article theoretically addresses how policy professionals relate to the members in whose name they work. This article extends the literature on civil society professionalization by conceptualizing the conflicts pertaining to policy professionals' work in CSOs and ways of managing these conflicts. We argue that, ordinarily, CSO policy professionals working to influence public policy respond to conflicting logics and myth-like institutional demands for strong and direct influence of member interests by maintaining face and investing in the myth of member centrality. Based on how policy professionals address these issues, we suggest that organizations respond to conflicting institutional pressures and myths via decoupling strategies, discreetly avoiding member concerns while investing in the membership myth, ultimately fostering organizational hypocrisy. Conceptually, the article contributes by connecting the literatures of civil society professionalization and new institutional theory to the burgeoning literature on policy professionals.

Keywords: civil society, policy professionals, member, myth, organizational hypocrisy.

MEMBERS AND ACTIVE membership have traditionally been a foundation on which civil society organizations (CSOs) have built their legitimacy. Simultaneously, potential tensions between professionals and members constitute an issue for CSOs, dating back to the emergence of social movements and political parties (e.g., Michels 1999[1911]; Weber 1919). The conflict was described in detail by Wilensky (1956) in a classical study of intellectuals in labor unions. More recent academic debates on professionalization in membership organizations also highlight possible tensions between members and staff and between organizations and their environment (e.g., Dodge 2010: Berkhout 2013). The continuous loss of membership in many longstanding CSOs, the increased complexity of politics, and the decline of corporatism in many Western countries are three important reasons why we should revisit the conflict. Together, these tendencies promote the employment of teams of policy professionals (Svallfors 2020) specializing in advocacy and policy engagement, potentially intensifying tensions between staff and members in CSOs.

This article investigates CSOs from the perspective of their policy teams, in the interest of understanding how policy professionals relate to the members in whose name they are employed. Policy professionals are hired to work specifically with policy and, unlike other staff, with advocacy and the crafting of policy directions in CSOs. In earlier research, policy professionals were conceptualized as a highly skilled group of personnel working on policy without public awareness (Garsten, Rothstein & Svallfors 2015). When first described in research focusing on issue networks in Washington, this group was highlighted as embodying a political legitimacy problem (Heclo 1978:282; Walker 1981). However, except for investigators in trade unions (e.g., Wilensky 1956; Hellberg 1997; Selling & Svallfors 2019; Svallfors 2020), the role of policy professionals specifically in CSOs has been overlooked. This is surprising and unsatisfactory, given their decisive role in the core tasks of policy and advocacy in CSOs.

The aim of this article is to analyze how policy professionals in CSOs relate to members and institutional ideas regarding the role of members. It does so by drawing on 24 interviews with policy professionals in 10 Swedish member-based CSOs, together with observations of policy teams in three of these organizations. More specifically, we answer two questions:

> How do policy professionals in CSOs describe their relations to the members of their employing organizations?

> How can we conceptualize both the inconsistencies that policy professionals see arising in relation to CSO members and the attempts to address them?

The article builds on and contributes to the literature on civil society professionalization by conceptualizing the types of conflicts pertaining to the work of policy professionals in CSOs and the ways of managing these conflicts. This contribution is primarily based on new institutional theory, seeing the concepts of myth, decoupling, discretion, and avoidance as techniques for maintaining face and manifesting organizational hypocrisy (Brunsson 1986; Meyer & Rowan 1977). This perspective is often used in studying professionalization (e.g., Meyer & Bromley 2013; Lilja 2014; Polat 2021), including in studies of civil society (e.g., Hwang & Powell 2009; Hvenmark 2013; Åberg 2015; Marberg, Korzilius & Kranenburg 2019; Mason, Margerum, Rosenberg *et al.* 2021). The perspective renders an understanding of how organizations commonly respond to contradictory external and/or internal pressures (Schmitter & Streeck 1999; Berkhout 2013). Our core argument is that, ordinarily, policy teams at CSOs working to influence public policy respond to institutional demands for strong and direct influence of member interests by maintaining face, in the sense of Goffman (1982[1967]), through decoupling, discretion, and avoidance, and also by investing in the myth of member centrality, fostering hypocrisy as an organizational response to these challenges. Conceptually, the article contributes by connecting the two literatures of civil society professionalization and new institutional theory to the burgeoning literature on policy professionals – i.e., those employed to influence policy

at think tanks, CSOs, governmental offices, parliaments, and PR firms (e.g., Heclo 1978; Walker 1981; Garsten, Rothstein & Svallfors 2015; Selling & Svallfors 2019; Svallfors 2020, 2016; Tyllström 2021; Mellquist 2022a).

Four explanatory notes are due at this point. First, the article examines the notion of members within policy units, not the members' actual relationship. We specifically focus on CSO "members" as parties to which policy professionals must actively relate in their organizations. Second, we study member-based organizations using a common form of representative democracy as their governance system (Hvenmark & Einarsson 2021). In such a system, the annual general meeting and the board (as elected by members) are meant to set general guidelines, while employed professionals are to operationalize these guidelines. The board (or other elected officials) do not take an active role in day-to-day activities, but the employed officials do. Third, the study includes, on one hand, both meta-organizations (Ahrne & Brunsson 2008), which have other organizations as members, and organizations with individual members, and, on the other hand, organizations that serve their members and those that pursue advocacy issues, such as trade unions and large advocacy organizations. The complex relationship of policy teams with members that the article traces appears in all organizations, irrespective of form and policy interests.

Fourth, policy professionals distinguish themselves from other employees by this criterion: "they are employed, on a partisan basis, in order to ultimately affect policy" (Svallfors 2020:3). In practice, they are employed at the national offices of large CSOs and form one type of employed officers among others but work especially on policy issues. This type of officer could be positioned in CSOs' research units, producing investigations, responding to governmental referrals, and providing support and information to management, boards, and regional offices. They could also be lobbying policymakers, working on the organization's media efforts, creating "spin" based on the organization's statements, and handling social media. Yet others could be writing debate articles or speeches for the chair, and so on. Most policy professionals in our sample worked in policy areas connected to matters of the environment, gender equality, and labor markets, either as researchers/investigators, policy advisers, and advocacy managers or press/PR managers and communication officers.

The article proceeds by discussing the literature on the professionalization of civil society. Then, the conceptual understanding provided by new institutional theory regarding organizational handling of internal and external conflicts is presented. Thereafter, we present the empirical basis of our argument and the subsequent analysis. The article ends with a normative discussion of how relations between policy professionals and members of CSOs are addressed.

Professionalization and membership in civil society

In scholarly discussions of potential perils of the bureaucratization of civil society, the nexus of member influence, oligarchization, and professionalization has been frequently debated (e.g., Staggenborg 1988; Skocpol 2004; Hwang & Powel 2009; Maier, Meyer &

Steinbereithner 2016; Diefenbach 2019; Hvenmark & Einarsson 2021). Following Weber's (1919) and Michels' (1999[1911]) understandings, it is noted that organizations, despite appearing democratic on the outside, can often be oligarchic on the inside (Leach 2005). The process of professionalization occurs in organizations having a specialized division of labor, in which employed staff and management control communication and access to information and few members actively participate (Binderkrantz 2009; Diefenbach 2019; Albareda 2020). While not focusing on policy professionals, earlier research on demands for the efficacy and professionalization of CSOs in Scandinavia has suggested that organizations tend to deal with these demands by relying on external expertise from, for example, think tanks, external consultants, and PR firms (Öberg & Svensson 2012; Åberg, Einarsson & Reuter 2021). Another way of dealing with conflicting demands within CSOs has been to use decoupling practices (Åberg 2013, 2015; Arvidson & Lyon 2014; Heras-Saizarbitoria 2014; Brandtner 2021). It has also been demonstrated that conflicts between the roles of members and paid staff (e.g., Fries 2011; Karlberg 2019) are especially prominent in meta-organizations (Ahrne & Brunsson 2008).

Research has shown that professionalization may lead to a decrease in active memberships or in member influence. However, recent evidence suggests that while reliance on paid staff affects member influence negatively, it could affect member engagement positively (Bolleyer & Correa 2022:532–533). If relationships with members are treated properly, professionalization could even facilitate member involvement (Heylen, Willems & Beyers 2020). Staff-driven organizations serving the public, rather than members, are also noted to be more politicized and to engage more members than do volunteer-based and member-serving organizations (Bolleyer 2021). These results highlight the need for nuanced research on paid staff and on how they potentially shape organizational life in civil society (see also Sanders & McClellan 2014; Bolleyer & Correa 2022; Karlsen & Saglie 2017:1332). This is all the more pertinent since previous research has been unable to show specifically how policy professionals influence civil society. As described in the introduction, only limited scholarly work has considered this group. Policy professionals' contributions to the field are of specific importance as their presence is essential to the professionalization of civil society, with potentially extensive consequences for matters pertaining to participation, representation, and transparency. This article, then, contributes new knowledge of this specific group in civil society and builds a conceptual understanding of this group.

Institutional theory and the logic and myth of membership

Using institutional theory, an extensive literature has treated organizational governance. These studies highlight how organizations are influenced by environmental factors such as available resources, opportunity structures, rules, and various external pressures (e.g., Hall & Taylor 1986; Schmitter & Streeck 1999; Klemsdal & Wittusen 2021). Regarding the professionalization of member-based CSOs, Schmitter and Streeck (1999) outlined two conflicting logics that organizations must address to ensure organizational survival:

> [Organizations] must, on the one hand, structure themselves and act so as to offer sufficient incentives to their members to extract from them adequate resources to ensure their survival, if not growth. On the other hand, they must be organized in such a way as to offer sufficient incentives to enable them to gain access to and exercise adequate influence over public authorities (or conflicting class associations) and, hence, to extract from this exchange adequate resources (recognition, toleration, concessions, subsidies, etc.) enabling them to survive and to prosper. These two "logics" of exchange we label "the logic of membership" and the "logic of influence" (Schmitter & Streeck 1999:19)

The clashing logics of the needs both to engage members and influence public authorities, described by Schmitter and Streeck, form the background for many policy-oriented CSOs. Each logic entails specific constraints in the form of external pressures, demands, and resources for the organization, which all need to be considered to understand how and why an organization acts as it does (Berkhout 2013). For this article, the contradictions that may arise between the logics of membership and of influence are studied by analyzing how policy professionals in Swedish CSOs describe their relations with the members of their employing organizations.

For our understanding of how policy professionals in CSOs relate to members, we start from Meyer and Rowan's (1977:343–344) idea of how certain institutional-level activities or ideas become myth-like, forming rationalized and impersonal prescriptions that in some measure are beyond the discretion of any individual participant or organization. As such, myths are something that organizations must relate to, even, or especially, if there is some mismatch between the myths and what specific organizations actually do. Such myths enable, and often require, participants to organize along prescribed lines (Meyer & Rowan 1977:344). With the intention of conceptualizing the inconsistencies that policy professionals see arising in relation to members, we use the term "organizational myths." The myth concept is used to analyze how the logic of membership and membership-driven decision-making is handled by policy teams in large member-based CSOs (see also Åberg 2015). Just as highly generalized myths regarding, for instance, professionals, contracts, and expertise are important for modern organizations in general (Meyer & Rowan 1977:347), we understand the history of mass-movement organizations (especially in the "popular movement tradition") and member centrality as a powerful myth that modern member-based CSOs must relate to (see also Åberg 2015; Selle, Strømsnes, Svedberg *et al.* 2018:44). An example of how this myth is upheld and activated is the democratic decision-making process involving the congress of members, annual general meetings, the board, and member meetings, a process that in theory grants members full governance of the organization. However, whereas the incorporation of the institutionalized myth of member centrality gives the organization legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan 1977:349), it may conflict with the organization's pursuit of efficiency, which may entail not involving members in daily and strategic decision-making. If such conflicts surface beyond the daily practices at the office, the organization could

find itself in a situation in which it either risks losing legitimacy as a democratic organization, or being less efficient in realizing its goals.

Meyer and Rowan (1977) drew on Goffman's (1982[1967]) concept of "maintaining face" when analyzing how organizations behave in such situations, managing conflicts and restoring confidence. Goffman (1982[1967]:13) described the capacity to maintain face as a type of social skill and diplomatic technique to preserve core values. In this context, according to Goffman, we tend to avoid contact with a subject that may reveal how claimed values are in fact not being respected. We therefore tend to discreetly avoid specific topics, drawing on circumlocution or intentional ambiguity (1982[1967]:18). In the modern organization, Meyer and Rowan (1977:358) argued, this face-maintaining work is generally undertaken through the techniques of avoidance, discretion, and overlooking. To this, Meyer and Rowan (1977) added the term "decoupling," meaning, according to Boxenbaum and Jonsson (2008:81), that "organizations abide only superficially by institutional pressure and adopt new structures without necessarily implementing the related practices". In so doing, decoupling generally results in weaker alignment between talk and practice within organizations. Together these face-maintaining practices, according to Meyer and Rowan (1977:358), "ultimately reinforce confidence in the myths that rationalize the organization's existence." The creation and upholding of the myth of member centrality is not to be understood as interchangeable with the logic of membership; rather, in this organizational context, it is understood as an elevated mythologized logic of membership. The myth of member centrality implies active performance, something organizations stage and reproduce to create legitimacy and influence in CSOs.

We suggest that, in the conflict between the logics of membership and of influence, CSOs attempt to maintain face as member-driven organizations by practicing decoupling, discretion, and avoidance (see also Heras-Saizarbitoria 2014; Brandtner 2021; García-Sánchez, Hussain, Khan *et al.* 2021). For policy professionals in CSOs, face-maintaining practices are central to appearing legitimate as democratic organizations, specifically when linked to a "popular movement tradition." It becomes necessary to keep "away from activities that would lead to the expression of information that is inconsistent with the line […] [the organization] is maintaining" (Goffman 1967:16). Importantly, this type of face maintaining is found both at the individual and organizational levels.

By using these techniques to maintain face, the organization reinforces confidence in the organizational myth of member centrality, while maintaining faith in the good work of experts as democratically governed. However, the inconsistencies are not overcome. Rather, these practices advance inconsistencies between language and actions. In so doing, the organizations construct what could be understood as organizational hypocrisy (Brunsson 1986), in that they say one thing but do another. Hypocrisy has negative connotations and should be understood as a problem, but it is common in organizations and has potential to help overcome short-term crises and in that sense can be helpful (Glozer & Morsing 2020). While action acquires legitimacy through agreement between speeches, decisions, and actions, hypocrisy can attain legitimacy

through its ability to reflect and deflect conflicting norms and interests. Moreover, instead of only one group of stakeholders being satisfied through real action, several groups are simultaneously satisfied through hypocrisy (Brunsson 1986). Through studying policy professionals' work in member-based organizations, we suggest that organizational hypocrisy is a way of understanding how CSOs manage and subdue organizational inconsistencies on a day-to-day basis.

We use the above-defined terms to describe and explain how the logic of membership, together with membership-driven decision-making, in member-based CSOs is treated as a type of organizational myth. In so doing, this article adds theoretically grounded knowledge of the professionalization of civil society, as shaped by policy professionals, and of the issues this may entail in terms of member-driven governance.

Methodological considerations

The choice to base our analysis on a sample from Sweden arose from a desire to find rich empirical examples of policy professionals in contemporary CSOs (see also Eisenhardt 1989). We suggest that CSOs in Sweden constitute exemplary cases of the institutional demands and conflicts that professionalization may entail. This is because Swedish civil society has, over the last hundred years, been internationally noted for an unusually strong emphasis on active membership and for being oriented towards advocacy and interest representation rather than welfare service provision (Åberg, Einarsson & Reuter 2021:638). Indeed, Sweden still reports comparatively high levels of membership and participation (SCB 2020), although with shifting meanings in terms of popular engagement (von Essen 2019).

Here, we study a specific part of civil society in Sweden that has walked the path of increasing professionalization: large member-based organizations with many employees and with teams. These organizations are well established and recognized by the public both as partners in governmental processes and as important policy advocates. The same organizations, however professionalized and institutionalized they are, describe themselves as popular social movements (*folkrörelser*), meaning that their identities are those of movements with active members pushing the state and established political parties in the directions that the movements and members of particular organizations decide. These CSOs are heavily dependent on membership, especially associations representing societal groups (e.g., trade unions and tenants' associations) and working for and drawing their legitimacy from their members (Einarsson 2011; Hvenmark & Einarsson 2021). For these CSOs, sometimes defined as "expressive" organizations, membership defines their power through bargaining and practices such as strikes and demonstrations (Gordon & Babchuk 1959:25). For "instrumental" organizations, which do not necessarily serve their members but rather strive for goals beyond them, members are also important, but less as a rationale for organizational existence. Instead, they tend to use members as a resource to stir public opinion (Gordon & Babchuk 1959:25). The organizations and informants studied here are both *expressive* organizations working for their members'

interests, such as trade unions and tenants' associations, and *instrumental* member-based advocacy organizations.

Based on earlier research and our empirical findings, we know that policy professionals in CSOs have varied educational backgrounds (Svallfors 2020; Mellquist 2022b). Many of those working in research departments have PhDs in disciplines such as economics, political science, sociology, and law. Policy professionals working specifically in communications have slightly lower academic degrees, from disciplines such as communication, political science, and media studies. Irrespective of their orientations, policy professionals in CSOs display a range of competencies, skills, and types of capital important for policy work. Compared with other professionals working, for instance, in think tanks and governmental offices, this group has rich experience of associational life. This is especially the case for those working in trade unions, who often have experience of voluntary work in the "movement" (Selling & Svallfors 2019; Svallfors 2020; Mellquist 2022a, 2022b).

Data were gathered for this article with the intention of providing an in-depth account and rich empirical examples of policy professionals' relationships with their employing organizations' members, possible inconsistencies, and attempts at managing these tensions. Overall, we draw on 24 interviews with policy professionals in 10 Swedish member-based CSOs.[1] This material was gathered during two phases of data collection. First, ten interviews were completed, following up an older study of policy professionals in Sweden (see Garsten, Rothstein & Svallfors 2015). From this sample, we specifically distinguished and selected informants who worked in CSOs. Second, to deepen the focus on member-based CSOs, 14 additional interviews were conducted with policy professionals in three strategically selected membership-based gender equality and environmental advocacy organizations and in trade unions. All informants were contacted through an email message in which the research purpose was stated as "to study employed groups who influence policy content and forms," with a specific focus on professionals in CSOs.

In the shadowing part of the study (Czarniawska 2007), we closely followed three of the organizations in the second phase of interviewing: one blue-collar trade union, one environmental organization, and one organization advocating for gender equality. At these three organizations, we shadowed multiple policy professionals in policy teams, gathering 80 hours of observations at internal policy workshops, management meetings, meetings with members, public events, and meetings with other CSOs.[2] The interest in including observations was to follow policy professionals' contributions in practice, for instance, at policy workshops, seminars, and meetings. This allowed us to analyze these professionals' practices and relations with other actors, to better

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1   The project does not include any sensitive personal data and has therefore not undergone ethically review. Prior to the start of the project, the project obtained an advisory opinion from the Regional Ethics Review Board, which found no ethical problems with the design of the project.
2   The empirical data collection and NVivo processing were undertaken by Joanna Mellquist. Adrienne Sörbom participated in the interpretation and conceptual analysis. For ease of reading, we write "we" when describing methodological processes.

understand how their strategies were manifested and how they were received by others, without relying solely on their own accounts from interviews (e.g., Jerolmack & Khan 2014). Although not all the observations are explicitly drawn on in the empirical part of this article, they were foundational to our conceptual and analytical understanding both of the inconsistencies between policy professionals and members, and of organizational responses and individual attempts to address them. For an overview of the data, see Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of interviews and observations.

Type of advocacy issue at organization	Labor rights	Gender	Environment	Other	Total
Interviews	13	4	4	3	24
Shadowing at organizations	8 h	8 h	14 h		30 h
Shadowing at the Almedalen Week		25 h	25 h		50 h

For the 24 interviews with individual policy professionals, Dexter's (2006[1969]) understanding of elite interviewing was beneficial because of policy professionals' leading positions in their organizations. To obtain as much knowledge as possible from the interviews, polysemic questions were used to provide more freedom for the interviewee to structure the interview (Dexter 2006[1969]) instead of simply answering predetermined questions. The interviews and field notes were transcribed and coded using a provisional coding technique (Layder 1998). In the first step, the data coding and analysis involved separating and sorting the material. In the second step, test coding was conducted in an open and inductive way, identifying themes in the material (Glaser & Strauss 1967) that were later adopted as core codes and categories (Layder 1998). The coding and the analytical process as such were inspired by an abductive approach, iterating between theory and data, discussing findings and conceptualizations in relation to theory throughout the research process (Meyer & Lunnay 2013). As a result of this abductive process, we first identified three empirically based issues relating to inconsistencies between policy professionals and their relationships with members. These issues concerned differences in knowledge, strategic competence, and ideologies. We termed these issues "gaps," because they exemplify chasms and disparities between the ideal of member rule and the efficiency of policy work resulting from the clashing logics of membership and influence (Schmitter & Streeck 1999). In a second step, based on previous literature we conceptualized how these gaps were addressed, and with what consequences. The results of these two steps are presented in Table 2, which summarizes both the empirically based gaps and our conceptualization of how organizations and policy professionals respond to them.

Table 2. Gaps, their practical management, and organizational responses.

Gaps in policy work	Practical management	Organizational response
Gaps in technical knowledge	Maintaining face: avoidance, discretion, and decoupling	
Gaps in strategic work	Investing, staging, and participating in the myth of member centrality	Organizational hypocrisy
Gaps in ideology		

While our understanding of the gaps is based on a material-driven conceptualization, using the empirical evidence from interviews and observations, our conceptualization of the management of these gaps made use of theorization originating from Brunsson (1986), Goffman (1967), and Meyer and Rowan (1977).

In the operations of CSOs, these gaps refer to situations that arise when policy professionals' work conflicts with the ideals of member-driven governance. An example of this is the need to follow annual general meeting decisions irrespective of whether the policy professionals consider them the best and most efficient strategies for addressing the matters at hand. The management of such conflicts is designed to conceal, or at least deflect attention from, the incomplete compliance with the norms or rules of the member centrality myth. Conceptually, we understand these practices as maintaining face, while investing in the myth of member centrality. By constant referral to the importance of members in face-maintaining activities, policy professionals actively stage and participate in the myth. Finally, we understand these practices as an organizational response furthering what resembles organizational hypocrisy (Brunsson 1986).

Myth of member centrality and gaps in practical policy work

When interviewing and following policy professionals in member-based CSOs, we found that they invariably talked about members. When asked, these professionals would unanimously answer that members were crucial for the organization. Members were declared to constitute the organization, and as employees of the organization, the policy professionals said they were proud to represent them. This message was also featured in visual communication on organization websites, illustrating the central position of members and how the number of members is key to policy work: "With almost a quarter of a million members […] we have excellent opportunities to make a difference" (Content from trade union website).

Just as all websites were decorated with such statements about the centrality of members, observations revealed the same practice of validating members. The standard formulation whenever a public meeting opened would be "We have XX thousand members" or "We are a member-based organization with XX members – together we are stronger, and we would be happy if you would join." Likewise, in interviews, our

informants described how, when talking to policymakers, it was common to emphasize the number of the organization's members:

> This is often the first question you get when meeting with policymakers, from a minister, for example: "How many members do you have now?" Then you give them the number and they say, "Oh my," and write this in their little notebook. It matters. (JCS-11)

Members thus have a prominent role in the discourse of policy professionals and their employing organizations, when talking both with policymakers and, more broadly, with the public. Members are also used in describing the organization's identity and image, and to gain legitimacy in contrast to other organizations and business interests. This is how one informant described this distinction:

> In business they don't work as we do; they are faster – it's bang, bang, bang. This is more of a slow organization, and what makes it slow is that movement democracy takes time and must be allowed to take time. There are pros and cons to that. The disadvantages are that you cannot be as fast in the public debate as those who do not have a grassroots system to consider. The advantage is that once you come up with something, it is quite well rooted, socially. (J-6)

Crucially, according to the ideals and norms emerging in both interviews and observations, policy development in the CSOs is to be undertaken by elected representatives or directly by the congress, not merely by professionals at headquarters. This means that policy goals and advocacy are to be developed in a slow working process in which changes are made democratically, step by step. Moreover, it was underscored that it is important to follow, and respect, decisions made by the board or by members through the congress.

These declarations notwithstanding, the interviews and observations also revealed that issues arose when following and implementing these ideals. As described in the earlier methodological section, we distinguished three types of issues, or gaps, relating to differences in technical knowledge, strategic political knowledge, and ideology between policy professionals and organization members. These gaps illustrate how the logic and myth of membership were confronted with the need for efficiency by professionals.

Gaps in technical knowledge
Generally, it was evident that the interviewed policy professionals believed that they wielded substantial power when formulating policy content for their employing organizations. One reason for this related to knowledge differences regarding more technical aspects of various policy issues. Compared with most members, even board members, policy professionals often have superior knowledge, education, and information about the technical details of numerous policy issues. This is why they are brought into

CSOs. However, this gives professionals the upper hand in policy work, giving rise to a gap between policy professionals' expertise, on one hand, and individual members and board members, on the other.

In practice, this means that policy-related activities are shaped by the research department and those communicating this research, rather than by the members and their representatives. As noted by one informant, it is the policy unit that does the job:

> As a rule, however, the board members are formally the ones who come up with policy and decide on our annual plans, both in the short and long terms. But in practice, it is us in the office who do the job. We do the basics, then the board will approve them. But we have huge influence on choosing priorities and choosing what material we present, so to speak. (J-11)

Even though the "general rule" and system are meant to work differently, the staff working daily on policy wield decisive influence over the content area, and by their daily choices they set precedents for later decisions to be made by the representative bodies. In this way, the system implied by the myth of a member-driven organization is, in matters related to policy, turned on its head: the professionals set the frames, and the democratic representatives acknowledge them.

Indeed, in our interviews, most individual members and board members were seen as lacking knowledge required for the practice of policy production. This was expressed by one interviewee, regarding board member influence and policy suggestions:

> However, they usually do not come up with that many suggestions, because they are not trained to think like that. And if they do come up with suggestions, it is often the case that they want to write about things that are relevant to the debate at the time or that were relevant a couple or three months ago. (JC-10)

This policy professional spoke of the knowledge advantage of his peers relative to the membership, board, and committees, as members of these were not trained to think strategically and could not be trusted to do so.

To further address the members' lack of technical knowledge, resulting in professionals running the organization's work in this area, the policy professionals represented in the material tended to discreetly avoid member interests, instead opting to diffuse their professional knowledge in various formats. They would inform members of why the organization was taking specific stands, sometimes contrary to members' suggestions, in order to secure their support. In our interviews and observations, we saw, for example, how policy professionals, in the interest of shaping member knowledge of technical policy issues, would attend member meetings and give lectures, or communicate through, for example, research blogs, short video lectures, or articles in organizational media. In this respect, especially those policy professionals working with communication were important for bridging gaps between the organization's "experts" and its members, leading members to accept the positions of the former. In

this capacity, policy professionals with communication skills become responsible for the organization's "face work" (Goffman 1967) in attempts to keep members informed of the technical knowledge of the policy unit. In practice, such face work was crucial. As described by a policy professional working with communication in a trade union, "any distance from members is very costly and risky" (JCS-27).

Strategic gaps

In day-to-day events at headquarters, ideals of democratic member-based decision-making intersect with the practices of contemporary policy professionals' work schedules and the fast-changing everyday political landscape. In this context, these employees draw on their specific knowledge of political strategy, which is sophisticated but not necessarily aligned with member wishes. This is where a strategic gap arises, stemming from experience of a professional reality in which the production of policies is more complex than commonly recognized by members. Simply put: what members want does not always align with what is strategic. Answering a question about the consequences of doing political advocacy for a member organization, one informant gave the following example of having to work on a "politically dead" question:

> There is this annual general meeting resolution that says that we must do something communicative, and publicly, to draw attention to a certain policy issue. For me, it's a dead question, but the meeting has decided, and I must follow. It just felt – ahh! (JCS-18)

In the above quotation, the resolution that the congress asked the organization to work toward had already been determined by a cross-party agreement, so in the eyes of the policy professional, it had already been dealt with. It would be unstrategic to follow up on the decision, as they were expected to do by congress. The quotation indicates that ideas from the members, and the logic of membership, not only relate to and depend on the myth of member centrality, but are also real constraints that shape policy work and organizational life. In the policy unit, the issue was in practice discreetly downplayed as a minor one, which still caused frustration within the unit.

In this strategic knowledge gap, even individual members can be a source of frustration, if they intervene and put themselves forward in unwanted situations:

> It can be quite difficult to involve members, even members who in many ways are very knowledgeable. It also happens that "happy amateurs" can show up. Then it is easier to paint us [negatively] as "a certain type of organization" compared with if you come well dressed, know your stuff, and develop a reasonable discussion. (JCS-28)

Although members are presented by the policy professionals as resources conferring legitimacy, they should not show up at policy discussions with actors outside the organization. That is the job of policy professionals, who know the dress code, understand

the complexities of the matters at hand, and can engage in strategically informed discussions. Indeed, active and visible members can put the organization's reputation at risk. Members are instead to be used cunningly, primarily as numbers or when the CSO needs "people in the streets." In these instances, they are seen as resources; in others, they are kept out of sight, as they risk tainting the organization's image.

The policy professionals studied here addressed this type of gap, arising from differences in strategic knowledge, by circumventing the democratic process to shape policy issues the way they deemed best. One example of this came from an organization in which a group of active members pushed the agenda on an ideological policy issue important to the organization. The management and policy professionals handled the demand by suggesting to the congress that the matter be investigated, knowing full well that the results would show that the issue should not be pursued. The gap and its handling became apparent when we followed the process of the investigation. As part of that process, a focus group was set up to discuss the report. Although members were invited to comment on the draft report, it was clear in off-stage conversations that they were invited more because the policy team needed to anchor the organization's stance – that it was strategically impossible to make such a demand – rather than to use the members' comments in changing public policy. Because of the report's content, presented through statistical measures by the policy professional, it was difficult for members, even those passionate about the issue, to push the issue further. On one hand, this process illustrates how this CSO actively related to the membership logic by staging member centrality, inviting members to the policy process and anchoring political proposals. On the other hand, it indicates how an organization, dealing with the logic of influence, saw the need to decouple critical member demands from the organization's policy and advocacy work. The question was handled by the head office and policy professionals by upholding the myth of members as active and decisive over the policy process, while avoiding having to change or adopt any new policy demands. The result was a situation in which the organization, rather than actively listening to critical initiatives arising from below, staged member participation.

A second, and contrasting, example of how to address the strategic gap was a situation in which the policy team drew on a group of progressive members to prompt a congress decision on equal parental leave. This was an initiative that the policy team was backing, despite knowing that most members would reject it. The strategy worked, and the policy unit together with the progressive group of members managed to win over congress delegates. Yet, the policy unit avoided making the decision publicly known after the congress. As stated in an interview, this was "because we know that the members, they don't like it." Instead, for this issue the policy unit decided that it "must work internally and form an opinion on it" (JCS-32), keeping quiet on the matter.

Conceptually, we can understand policy professionals' management of the strategic gap in terms of avoidance and decoupling (Meyer & Rowan 1977:358). In practice, this would entail the policy unit discreetly decoupling members' demands from its policy work, avoiding or attempting to compromise with members on their demands. This would primarily be practiced when the organizations could risk losing legitimacy

if it would communicate how they, in fact, work. It is crucial to maintain the image of a popular movement in which members drive the policy agenda: as described by one policy professional, "otherwise it would appear as if we were working against our members" (JCS-32). In addition, if the organization successfully upholds and relates to the image, that creates leverage for further activities.

Ideological gaps

An ideological gap appears when policy professionals and members do not share the same perspective or ideology regarding a certain policy. That is, the issue here is not technical or strategic in character, but is based on ideology and on professionals not agreeing with (some) members. In the larger political sphere, policy professionals choose to work in organizations that align well with their own values (Selling & Svallfors 2019). This would be even more the case in CSOs in which background in "the movement" may be a resource, being proof of closeness to the members (Mellquist 2022a). Still, our empirical investigations showed that there are some persistent policy issues where members' and policy professionals' opinions diverge. This gap occurs more often in organizations in which professionals and members have different educational backgrounds.

As the following policy professional described it, the distance between members and professionals gives rise to constant frustration:

> After all, professionals are recruited from other places. They may not even be members of the organization. That is how the distance increases. Yes, we are becoming more and more professional. We're somehow full of ourselves [laughs], or I don't know. The more you must relate to the whole office with all its parts, the less you somehow have time to listen to the popular movement, perhaps. […] There is constant dissatisfaction among the members, that the distance is increasing, and there is contempt for headquarters. (JCS-11)

To address the ideological gap, policy professionals described using their social skills and identity to bridge the gap and assert legitimacy. This could, for example, be done by stressing one's own background in the broader movement: for policy professionals in blue-collar trade unions, that would be their roots in the working-class community, for others, a broader civil society/movement background. Some policy professionals described working with language, clothing, and identity to be accepted by members, and not appear aloof and distant: "I need to struggle not to be too snobbish," as one informant put it. Others referred to "talking to members in their own language" to convince them of a shared perspective and ideology.

Related to the gap caused by ideological differences, we found examples of members expressing more progressive ideas, demanding more radical policy solutions than the policy department accepted, and of policy professionals dealing with ideologically complex matters, such as racism and homophobia among members. A typical example cited by policy professionals in blue-collar trade unions was ideological inconsistency between them and members who vote for right-wing populist parties:

> There is a certain tendency among us, for example, when we think they are not thinking correctly. The Sweden Democrats [i.e., a right-wing populist political party] is a typical part of that. How can so many vote… they are against so very much of what a union stands for. (JCS-24)

Policy professionals in blue-collar trade unions, who have often obtained considerably more formal education than the union members, appear to struggle more with ideological differences connected to cultural issues than to ideological left–right matters. A similar dynamic is, however, also implicitly present in many of the other organizations.

In conceptual terms, we would describe the management of this gap as drawing on the suite of face-maintaining practices: avoidance, discretion, and decoupling. In the first instance, many of the informants avoided working with issues not aligned with their own preferences. At the organizational level, when policy units know that members are not fond of a certain policy issue, they tend not to campaign, speak, or organize around that issue. In other cases, policy units attempt to educate members or work around democratic procedures. This latter form of gap management entails using techniques of persuasion and sometimes manipulation. As one informant described it, referring to decisions made by congress, the policy unit may have to augment the arguments of members, at the same time as this may require adding a new layer of understanding:

> Decisions are also made that you don't agree with. Sometimes you may want to help the delegates to argue in a better way than they do [laughs]. I can summarize the decisions better when we sit down afterwards, internally. Then I can say [to the unit]: "What they probably really meant was this…" But I cannot use arguments that the delegates wouldn't use. (J-9)

Policy professionals in general specialize in social skills (Svallfors 2020:22–26). In the interest of bridging the gap, however, policy professionals working with text and communications become real experts in what Goffman (1967:17–18) would describe as "phrasing with careful ambiguity," "employing courtesy," and "tactful overlooking." Investigators in policy units, on the other hand, are more likely to use the tactics of decoupling and avoiding. Although the methods of both types of policy professionals are meant to restore the organization's legitimacy toward both the public and members, they also put legitimacy at risk. As described by Wilensky (1956), with reference to internal communication specialists in trade unions, policy professionals adjust their language and educate members, and in this way "help tend the elaborate democratic machinery that gives the interested member a sense of participation and keeps the union leader from hating himself when the imperatives of action and efficiency require departure from the democratic norm" (ibid.:83). Similarly, policy professionals do the "dirty work," diverging from the myth of member centrality at the same time as they lend democratic authority to the organization's elected officials.

Discussion

Returning to the question of how policy professionals in large member-based CSOs relate to members, and to the types of inconsistencies that may arise in connection with this, we acknowledge that doing policy work on a partisan basis entails working in accordance with one's ideological and political understandings, in contrast to other more neutral work (see Svallfors 2020:35–55). Although the system of electing representatives while having employees is not necessarily a problem, practice (i.e., our empirical evidence) indicates that with policy professionals it becomes complicated. Employing professionals to undertake policy work in member-based CSOs runs two risks. First, policy professionals risk taking shortcuts around the interests of members, who function as the organization's principals. Second, by claiming to uphold the ideal and practice of members as the organization's principals, while its policy professionals at times take shortcuts around them, the organization risks becoming democratic more in charter than in practice.

Of great importance, as our results indicate, is that the professionals attempt to manage the conflict between opposing logics while behaving respectfully toward the members. Internally, the gaps in knowledge, strategy, and ideology are dealt with by discreetly avoiding and decoupling from member influence when it is not beneficial, as ways of upholding the myth of member centrality. Externally, the gaps are sidestepped by constantly referring to the number of members affiliated with the organization. A type of isomorphic behavior and vocabulary is thus used to provide legitimate accounts (Meyer & Rowan 1977:349). In such instances, the organization, via its policy team, relates to, manages, and builds on the myth of the significant role of the members. It is in this way truly an active myth. These instances could potentially be productive, as needs and opportunities to act, manage, and overcome the gaps arise. The policy professionals are part of the problem, but they also take part in constructing solutions when attempting to reduce the gaps. Hence, while being partly problematic, a gap also opens a window of opportunity to creatively manage the relationship with members.

The attempted solutions often take the form of organizational hypocrisy, as the organizations say one thing to members, but in policy practice do another. This discrepancy is somewhat satisfactory, because policy professionals can be effective while members are honored as part of a democratic organization. As Brunsson (2007:113) put it, "Hypocrisy is a response to a world in which values, ideas, or people are in conflict – a way in which individuals and organizations handle such conflicts in practice." Similarly, using organizational hypocrisy in relation to the myth of member centrality helps organizations to bridge these gaps.

Returning to the concerns raised by Weber (1919) and Michels (1962[1911]) regarding the "iron law" and bureaucracy that member-driven democracy and large effective organizations are incompatible, we find no easy solution. Because lobbying and policy influence have become central to democracy (e.g., Eyal 2019; Wood 2019), it is even more problematic to reconcile movement dynamics and policy advocacy efficiency in the same organization. For organizations to be able to influence public

policy, specialized policy teams may be required, with the consequent concentration of considerable power in the hands of a few policy professionals. From the perspective of members accepting the need for policy work expertise, it could be preferable to have policy professionals working in house, partly controlled by rules and the myth of member centrality, rather than contracting policy professionals from consultancy firms, who might be more disconnected from the ideals of membership. Yet, professionalization and the use of organizational hypocrisy risk furthering the entrenchment of a civil society sphere where experts produce the organizational goals, rather than representing the groups they are meant to speak and work for. In turn, this could threaten CSOs' standing as actors for social integration and democratic learning (see also Selle, Strømsnes, Svedberg *et al.* 2018).

Conclusions

Departing from debates on professionalization and the transformation of CSOs from member-driven associations to staff-driven organizations (e.g., Bosso 2003; Skocpol 2004; Hwang & Powell 2009; Saurugger 2012; Maier, Meyer & Steinbereithner 2016; Albareda 2020; Heylen, Willems & Beyers 2020), this article answers questions concerning how policy professionals relate to members and to the myth of member centrality. As the work of policy professionals in civil society is under-researched, despite their key policy work roles in their employing organizations, this article contributes both empirical knowledge and theoretical conceptualization of these professionals.

First, it describes how policy professionals in CSOs relate to members and to institutionalized ideas of the members' role in member-driven organizations both as an active myth and as a real limitation that complicates practical work. The relationship between members and policy professionals in CSOs gives rise to a paradox. On one hand, the analysis indicates that policy professionals thrive on, activate, and perform the myth of membership centrality. On the other hand, to be effective, they use techniques such as decoupling, discretion, and avoidance to avoid having to deal with members' wishes in their practical policy work.

Second, we distinguish three types of issues, related to three types of differences between members and policy professionals: one related to policy professionals' relative knowledge advantage, a second relating to members' and board members' lack of strategic political knowledge, and a third relating to ideological inconsistencies between members and staff. The conflict between the logics of membership and of influence underlying these gaps not only creates tensions for the professionals, but also creates dissatisfaction among members along with contempt for headquarters.

This article does not answer the question of whether professionalization may lead to a decrease in active membership or member influence (Bolleyer & Correa 2022; Diefenbach 2019; Heylen, Willems & Beyers 2020). Rather, we can see that policy professionals, through their investment in the myth of member centrality, reinforce an image of this centrality in CSOs. Somewhat contradicting Meyer and Rowan (1977), our analysis indicates that the myth of member centrality is not merely a myth

produced by rationalization concerns. Rather, the myth creates actual constraints that encourage policy professionals to manage their presence by means of organizational hypocrisy precisely because they do believe that members are central to organizations. It is not mere lip-service to a rational myth. Therefore, the tensions between professionals and members are not resolved but rather managed. However, in the long run this organizational response may become a liability. As conflicts are not resolved, tensions may increase, and the discrepancies ultimately become more difficult to conceal, which could put the organization's potential for policy influence and legitimacy at risk.

This study was based on the Swedish case, which entails certain limitations in the findings and in the ability to generalize to other voluntary sectors. Still, the Swedish context, with its social-democratic voluntary sector in which members have a strong position in CSOs, has allowed us to develop a model of how policy professionals manage and use the myth of active membership. Had we chosen a country where membership is less developed, we would not have been able to shed light on this issue. The practices we have identified can undoubtedly be found in other contexts, where they may appear in slightly different combinations. Further research would benefit from more in-depth analysis of inter-organizational relationships between different types of organizations and national cross-comparisons. A specific area of inquiry concerns the importance of professional practices and what we can learn from seeing policy professionals as, indeed, constituting a "profession" (Abbott 1988), for example, by studying in detail how the relationship between work tasks and abstract knowledge systems can be understood.

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