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The Game of Influence: Policy Professional Capital in Civil Society

Joanna Mellquist

Department of Social Sciences, Sociology, Södertörn University, Huddinge, Sweden

**ABSTRACT**

This article investigates the field of policy professionals in civil society. The main objective is to gain knowledge on this subgroup of policy professionals, who are exerting vast influence over civil society organizations’ policy development. Using field theory when analysing interviews and ethnographic data, the study contributes to our understanding of these civil society policy professionals, adding to the literature on professionalization in civil society by conceptualizing the capital that they construct and bring to the organizations in which they work. The findings provide insights on three main themes: First, organizational capital, based on being active in associations, stands out as specifically important for these professionals. Second, policy political capital – knowledge, skills and contacts derived from the political structure – is important within the field. Third, drawing on Bourdieu’s conceptual apparatus, the analysis shows that the specific *illusio* for the policy professional field is influence. It implies the importance of successfully upholding the image of policy influence and is the return that the players in the field are competing for.

**KEYWORDS**

policy professionals; civil society; field theory; professionalization; capital

**Introduction**

I have been shadowing a team of policy professionals since early morning at the Political Week in Almedalen, the biggest political event in Sweden. The group consists of a number of policy professionals working at a Swedish civil society organization (CSO) that self-identifies as a popular movement. It is now late in the evening, and the group is meeting to evaluate their day of advocacy work. About half the group are communicators and half are ‘experts’. The chair of the organization is still at a seminar and cannot attend this meeting. The project manager begins by thanking everyone for the day’s work, pleased with the seminars that were organized. At one of the debates, eight members of parliament were present, she recounts. The press and communication manager continues by reviewing the day’s media attention: one newspaper has written...
about the organization’s election reports, and one of the organization’s experts has been interviewed for a magazine. Another magazine has written an article about the organization’s work in Almedalen, and a newspaper has published their debate article criticizing government policy. It is clear that it has been a good media day. The manager continues by bringing greetings from the association’s two in-house street fundraisers, who have recruited 29 members during the day. The group cheers and applauds the work – 29 new members in one day – that’s not bad!

After completing a round of evaluation, it becomes clear that the group is tired. It has been three long days filled with political advocacy work, during which they have all worked from seven in the morning – preparing breakfast for the first morning seminar – until late at night, participating in business mixers or preparing communication strategies for the next day. Before ending the meeting, the project manager asks everyone to help out a little bit more, by stacking chairs and unpacking the event tent for the next day. A policy officer apposes; today, some people from the [governmental] authority were there, and I was moving chairs instead of talking to them. Can’t we pay someone for that? Not 100,000 but maybe bring in a member?

There ensues a discussion of how best to prioritize time and effort, and whether it would be feasible to hire members for such physical tasks as making sandwiches, stacking chairs and even operating the sound system. One of the female experts blows a whistle and gets everyone’s attention. ‘Can I talk now? It works differently for everyone. For me it works fine to make sandwiches at 07.00, set up the tent and then host a seminar. I know my schedule. Why don’t you make a separate schedule for everyone?’

During the meeting it was obvious that they were pleased to have recruited more members, yet in this post-meeting discussion, the attitude towards members (whom these professionals essentially work for) appears to be distanced. These professionals do not want to carry chairs; they see themselves as carriers of knowledge and expertise. To analyse these specific actors’ contribution to civil society professionalization, we need to know more about the game in which they are players and the capital used in this game. To understand this, I suggest looking into the practices of these professionals as partakers of a field, in the sense used by Bourdieu (1996). By exploring the types of capital that they bring to the organization we can better understand ongoing professionalization of civil society at large, and specifically regarding policymaking. Through this conceptualization we can detect both what these civil society professionals bring to the organizations that employ them and how their contributions are used. Following these actors over time, it is obvious that they possess certain types of skills and experiences of importance for the influence that their employing organizations may exert in policymaking at large. These professionals and their peers inhabit a space between social movements and expert organizations, exhibiting both activism and professionalism. They make sandwiches and mingle with politicians, and as policy actors, their work has not been entirely visible to their members or to scholarly attention.

The focus of this article is therefore twofold: first to analyse these actors’ potential contribution to professionalization in civil society through an in-depth analysis of the particular capital forms that they bring and construct, and, by drawing on the term ‘illusio’ to understand what success means for these professionals and the organizations
they work for. A large part of earlier research on the professionalization of civil society has focused on exogenous causes of professionalization, especially state regulation and state funding (Fraussen, 2014; Ivanovska Hadjievska & Stavenes, 2020; Salgado, 2010; Suarez, 2010), demonstrating how an organization’s financial capacity determines the process of professionalization and the balance between volunteers and paid staff. Another strand of literature has shown how professionalization has meant that organizations become business-like, by employing more professionalized and management-oriented staff (Flöthe, 2019; Grossmann, 2012; Hoffmann, 2011; Jäger & Beyes, 2010; Maier et al., 2016), thus recognizing the critical role played by individuals. Here, field theory and theories on capital have made promising contributions when focusing on capital specific to civil society players (Broady, 1998, 1990; Hellberg, 1997; Nordvall & Malmström, 2015; Putnam, 1993, 2000). One recent example demonstrated the importance of symbolic capital for civil society elected elites in Europe (Johansson & Uhlin, 2020; Lindellee & Scaramuzzino, 2020). However, the group of employed policy professionals has generally been overlooked. Filling this research gap, the article focuses on policy professionals working in advocacy or member-based organizations, to describe a relatively new field in civil society, showing how these actors’ forms of capital are shaped and made use of within the organizations.

Second, this article aims to contribute to the literature on policy professionals while increasing the knowledge of policymaking within CSOs. The growing body of literature that recognizes the importance of policy professionals in policymaking at large has taken notice of the presence of these actors in civil society (Garsten et al., 2015; Selling & Svalfors, 2019; Svalfors, 2020). Nevertheless, focus has mainly been on policy professionals working in organizations such as government offices, lobbying firms, think tanks or political parties (Åberg et al., 2020; Nothhaft, 2017; Rhodes, 2011; Sörbom, 2018; Svalfors, 2016, 2017a, 2017b; Tylström, 2013, 2021; Ullström, 2011); the role and contribution of policy professionals in civil society is still in need of more in-depth knowledge.

The case used for this article concerns policy professionals working at 10 different Swedish CSOs based in a social movement tradition (folkrörelser), demonstrating a large member base and a democratic decision-making process at all levels of the organization (Lundström & Svedberg, 2003). Attention is placed on these actors as partakers of a field in civil society and as a subset of policy professionals. They differ from the broader group of policy professionals studied so far, in that they are involved in a civil society sphere, which is strongly associated with democratic values (Edwards, 2004), and they work on a mandate from member organizations. One important feature of the Swedish case highlighted in this article is the high level of general public trust towards both civil society and state institutions (Trägårdh et al., 2013). Many of these CSOs have strong ties to the state, which in turn views civil society actors as important and commonly invites them to engage in policy decisions and advocacy activities (Arvidsson et al., 2018; Micheletti, 1995; Trägårdh et al., 2013). Sweden has even been called ‘a popular-movement democracy’ because of the production of social capital and the role these organizations play in binding together an egalitarian welfare regime (Vogel et al., 2003). Arvidsson et al. (2018) speak about a Swedish ‘culture of advocacy’ that has allowed and expected actors to voice criticism of both policies and public actors. Supposedly, they have been both tied to the state and still free to criticize it. In Sweden,
however, the decline of corporatism, with weakened ties to the state, has provoked two
important tendencies: the business sector and for-profit organizations have gained a
larger influence on politics, while the more direct political influence of advocacy and
member-controlled organizations has decreased (Amnä, 2007, pp. 179–180; Hermansson,
1999; Lindvall & Sebring, 2005; Lundberg, 2017; Wijkström, 2012). Consequently,
CSOs have had to find new ways to gain policy influence, such as by lobbying and con-
structing informal networks (Hermansson, 1999; Lundberg, 2017; Svallfors, 2017a).
These new strategies foster the employment of ‘expert’ communicators and ‘spin
doctors’, here conceptualized as policy professionals, as key players in policy work
(Brady et al., 2015; Johansson & Nygren, 2019).

The article is based on a study of these contracted ‘experts’ working in popular move-
ments’ CSOs. Over a couple of years, I have interviewed and followed a group of such
experts employed in 10 organizations, whom I term ‘policy professionals’ (cf. Heclo,
1978; Svallfors, 2020). The study’s main objective is to gain knowledge about the
forms of capital needed for this group, exerting vast influence over these organizations’
policy development, and about their role in an increasingly professionalized civil society.
Moreover, inspired by Bourdieu’s field theory (1996), the article contributes a theoretical
conceptualization of the findings in terms of the game and illusio these policy pro-
fessionals bring to the field of civil society. By studying these professionals, this article
raises two overarching research questions:

1. What forms of capital do these professionals bring to and construct within the field of
   CSOs active in policymaking?
2. What is the illusio that actors within the field attempt to construct?

In the first of four parts I present a brief literature review on professionalization of civil
society. The next section handles theoretical dimensions, first, the concept of policy pro-
fessionals and, second, field theories. The third part concerns the methodology used for
this study. The fourth section presents the findings, focusing on different forms of capital
and the illusio of influence.

**Theoretical Considerations**

**Professionalization of Civil Society**

The professionalization of CSOs has been a well-studied theme within sociology and the
study of social movements, and in research on associations and interest groups, investig-
gating logics of membership and logics of influence (Ahne & Papakostas, 2003, 2014;
Lang, 2013; Saurugger, 2012; Skocpol, 2003). According to Weber, professionalization
occurs when an organization undergoes a process of bureaucratization (Weber, 1994).
The bureaucratic apparatus is created through both centralization and socialization of
the specific organization (Weber, 1983, p. 183). Professionalization is in this article
understood as a process that ‘signifies the authority of institutionalized expertise over
the authority of other claims’ (Lang, 2013, p. 71), such as claims derived from the
social movement members or other stakeholders. The development of a more rational
and efficient bureaucracy has unintentional consequences. On the one hand, through
professionalization, CSOs may stop being the ‘other’, for instance, by engaging in
governmental negotiations or becoming more business-like. Bureaucratization and professionalization are not only an endogenous process, emerging from a desire for effectivization and rationalization, but also something expected by tax authorities and funding organizations that push this process from the outside (Lang, 2013, p. 75; Suarez, 2011). Professionalization of CSOs can lead to a legitimacy problem: when CSOs become more influential but also rely more on employed staff, they risk losing the representative character that they used to gain a legitimate place in policy work and governance structures (Klüver & Saurugger, 2013; Saurugger, 2012).

Research has focused on professionalization of civil society in the broader context of a loss of engagement in associations, where both CSOs and political parties have lost members (Amnå, 2008; Harding, 2012; Vogel et al., 2003; von Essen, 2019). Some studies have focused on civil society professionals and targeted an increasing gap between members and elected representatives (Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011; Vogel et al., 2003). Other important strands of research focus on structural changes such as marketization (Eikenberry & Klüver, 2004; Wijkström & Einarsson, 2011), Europeanization (Lang, 2013; Meeuwisse, 2019), professionalization of trade unions (Hellberg, 1997; Wilensky, 1956) and civil society elite activism (Lindellée & Scaramuzzino, 2019, 2020). Wilensky’s early study of trade unions in the United States is an exception in the field, describing this group of organizations as a case of institutionalized social movements where a managerial revolution took place when an increasing number of experts became contracted and gained power over the unions (Wilensky, 1956, pp. 237–239). In the Swedish trade union sector, one early study claimed that the capital of trust was more valued than academic knowledge, but that economists had a significant influence on the trade unions’ policy development (Hellberg, 1997, p. 227).

Conceptual Considerations

A ‘policy professional’ does not hold a profession in the traditional sense (based on specific education, etc.), nor do policy professionals develop or express one particular identity. They are termed policy professionals because they are employed to work with policy, in contrast to elected representatives or members who also develop policy content (Svallfors, 2017). In the organizational context, their positions are located outside of the democratic electoral system of the organization. They are contracted as ‘experts’ to support and serve the elected board as it works to achieve the organizational goals decided upon by the members. I understand the employees studied here as inhabiting a field of professionals active within civil society who share some common characteristics. However, policy professionals are a boundary-spanning category of professionals (Medvetz, 2012), with both their activities and networks spanning organizational boundaries within and outside their field (Svallfors, 2020). In this context it is also implied that many CSOs’ policy professionals are boundary crossers who move between societal spheres, elected positions and work tasks.

To define policy professionals, I add to Wilensky’s classification of experts in unions, who are (1) full-time employees hired by the organization and responsible to elected officials and (2) persons of knowledge who bring specialized knowledge or skill (Wilensky, 1956, p. 22), by suggesting that the knowledge and the work that policy professionals do has to concern public policy (Svallfors, 2017). They are responsible for
developing policy documents, lobbying politicians, creating spin based on the organization’s statements, writing reports and debate articles and so on. Common titles for the policy professionals at the organizations followed in the fieldwork undertaken for this project are Chief deputy, Director, Secretary, Investigator, Chief investigator, Analyst, Expert, Economist, Lawyer, Project manager, Lobbyist, Opinion maker, Press secretary, Informer, Communicator, Communication strategist, Policy expert, Policy advisor and so forth.

Field theory is used by many sociologists as a conceptual framework to study civil society (Barman, 2016). A field is often defined as being composed of all those actors, individuals or organizations, who recognize themselves as co-actors in the specific field (Bourdieu, 1996; Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008). I argue that the policy professionals that I study recognize themselves as partakers in the field of civil society, but also that they are part of a broader field of policymaking. The diagram below illustrates my understanding of the intersection of spheres where policy professionals-at-large work. Adjacent arenas are the business sector, the state sector and the media sector. The general group of policy professionals inhabit an arena that crosses all these sectors, and many policy professionals move between organizations. The arena where civil society and the policy professional arena intersect is of specific interest here Figure 1.

Following Bourdieu, the field is understood as a configuration of relationships where ‘[t]he strategies of the agents depend on their position on the field, that is, in distribution

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**Figure 1.** Intersecting fields of policy professionals.
of the specific capital and participation’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 101). The policy professional field in civil society is investigated through looking at both objective structures of the field, ‘the game itself’, and the capital important for the field, ‘the feel for the game’ (Savage & Silva, 2013). Additionally, I analyse the game played out in the field, using what Bourdieu termed the illusio of the field. Illusio is not to be confused with illusion; rather, it is a concept that highlights the actor’s interest in the field and his or her willingness to invest in and commit to it (Bourdieu, 1996; Colley & Guéry, 2015). As will be demonstrated, I understand the object of this game as to become consequential within the field, and for the organizations where these professionals are employed. This game is played drawing on and constructing a number of forms of capital, and a goal of this study is to identify the properties and efficient characteristics, that is, the specific forms of capital, that are important to this specific field (cf. Bourdieu, 1996), resources that may be material and/or cultural (Barman, 2016) and can be drawn upon in the interest of influence in the broader context of policymaking.

First, social capital is understood as resources that are accessed through relationships and membership in associations and is important for the creation of social trust (e.g., Putnam, 1993). This view of social capital asserts the importance of associational involvement of citizens (cf. Putnam, 2000). It departs from Bourdieu’s recognition of the term, stressing more of a Tocquevillian understanding, where associations are understood as schools for democracy. This understanding of social capital is, in this article, however, combined with a Bourdieusian understanding of social network, viewed as the core element of social capital and of key importance to other forms of capital in civil society. Bourdieu (1985) defines social capital as ‘the aggregate of the actual or potential resources that are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition’ (1985, p. 248). Thus, social capital in the field of policy professionals gives individuals returns through their social networks, such as recommendations for employment, suggestions, support and job opportunities. It includes both collective and individual goods, as the specific exchange can be important and of value for a larger community, not only for individuals (Ferlander, 2007).

Second, Bourdieu (1996) points towards the importance of symbolic capital as both collectively and individually owned, and as something at stake and used as a tool. Symbolic capital is the resource an actor is recognized for, and it is therefore (also) a relational type of capital by nature. The autonomy of the field is measured through the degree of accumulated symbolic capital, which is built over years of being active in the field (Bourdieu, 1996). The symbolic capital works for the field as a form of credit or trust. The actors who are seen as having more symbolic capital become freer and bolder and thus are in a better position to act independently (Bourdieu, 1999, pp. 97–98).

Third, in addition to Bourdieu’s categories of social and symbolic capital, a distinct form of capital related to civil society in Sweden, termed organizational capital, has been found useful in the Swedish popular movement tradition (Broady, 1990). Organizational capital is, in essence, resources acquired through associations and central educational institutions such as ‘adult education institutions’. This form of non-formal education has proven to be highly valuable in terms of gaining political power in Sweden (Broady, 1998, 1990; Nordvall & Malmström, 2015).
Fourth, policy political capital can be seen as a contribution of this study that adds knowledge on capital specific to the policy professional field at large. Earlier research has pointed out that knowledge about the political system, such as knowing the game, framing problems and accessing information through important networks, is a general resource found in the field of policy professionals (Selling & Svalfors, 2019; Svalfors, 2017a). This combination of political knowledge, experience and social skill (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012) is conceptualized here as policy political capital. This form of capital is not to be confused with what Bourdieu (1999, p. 27) terms political capital, which refers to what a political or union elite, through their position, can acquire in the form of material assets. Instead, policy political capital is, as we shall see in the empirical part of the article, viewed by the actors in the field as knowledge and skills that are important in the production of public policy. As such, it is a form of capital that is both produced and asked for within the field.

These four forms of capital are useful for the policy professionals of the CSOs studied here and will be interpreted as an indication that these professionals form a specific field where these types of capitals are of value.

Method and Case Selection

Data Collection

Empirically, the article builds on 25 semi-structured in-depth interviews with policy professionals working in civil society in Sweden (Dexter, 2006). The interviews were conducted in Stockholm with policy professionals working at 10 different CSOs. For each policy professional, additional biographical and career data were collected through organizational websites, personal websites, and Twitter and LinkedIn profiles. The sample of informants includes policy professionals working at five different trade unions and five larger CSOs with varying political focuses; this selection was made to include CSOs with well-developed policy teams and a strong organizational capacity (Albareda, 2020). Still, each organization self-identifies as a social movement organization, which was important for the analysis focusing on member-based social movement organizations and not on professionalized lobby organizations. All informants were current or recently departed contracted staff at the national offices of the respective organizations, working specifically with policy development. The interviews varied from one to two-and-a-half hours in length.

Additionally, 80 hours of observation were conducted, shadowing policy professionals at three of these organizations. Several researchers studying policy professionals have used ethnographic methods (Garsten & Sörbom, 2018; Nothaft, 2017; Rhodes, 2011; Tyllström, 2009; Ullström, 2011), and following their example, the combination of interviews and shadowing techniques was used in the interest of offering enhanced understandings of the role of policy professionals within civil society, partly by being able to study up close the networks, contacts, work, relationships and development of these actors (Czarniawska, 2007; Dexter, 2006; Jerolmack & Khan, 2014). The observations included steering meetings, internal policy development workshops, outward-looking arrangements such as policy debates and the political summit of Almedalen (which was referred to in the introduction) – where all CSOs, trade unions, political parties, businesses and lobby organizations meet. Journalists from all newspaper and broadcast
channels are also there to mingle and discuss with politicians, lobbyists and the public (Region Gotland, 2018). During this political summit, I followed five policy professionals from morning to night, gathering 50 hours of observations.

Data analysis was conducted following an abductive and qualitative tradition, not trying to prove a theoretical thesis, but unfolding how something might be, in this case, the field of civil society policy professionals (Meyer & Lunnay, 2013; Shapiro, 2002). All interviews and observations were transcribed and coded in NVivo. After extensive reading of the transcripts, codes were constructed focusing on resources and illusio and ‘the feel for the game’ (Savage & Silva, 2013). Statements about resources drawn upon, such as education, network, family background and work experience, were operationalized as capital. The term illusion, on the other hand, was operationalized from statements and situations when informants where upholding the image of and talking about their individual and their organization’s policy influence. Table 1 presents an overview of codes used in the analysis:

In the next sections, these codes are described and elaborated to indicate the illusio constructed in this field, together with the forms of capital drawn upon in playing the game of the field of civil society professionals.

**The Game Played**

**The Illusio of Influence**

Returning to the political week of Almedalen 2018, I investigate the illusio that drives the field forward. Here, policy professionals take part in the game where they struggle for success and influence within the field. This ‘game’ is especially prominent during the political week in Almedalen where politicians, parties, policy teams and actors such as companies and state agencies work with agenda setting and advocacy. During the week, seminars, meetings, parties and demonstrations are held side by side in the small area of the city; this year, 2018, 1929 unique organizers (most of them interest groups of various sorts) conducted 4311 events over eight days (Region Gotland, 2018). The political week is an open event, and there is no charge to attend. It is, however, a costly project to arrange seminars and rent facilities and housing. The game in the field is already visible in the preparations leading up to the event. In one interview, an informant describes the importance of drawing the right players to their corner of the field:

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<th>Table 1. Coding scheme.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Coding scheme</td>
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<tr>
<td>Illusio of influence</td>
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We almost always manage to get a minister. This year we will have group leaders in parliament.... But we have had party secretaries, we have had the youth federations’ chairs for the past three years. It’s not too bad. Not everyone succeeds in doing that. (JCS-19)

According to this logic, the more established the players, the larger the crowd attracted, which increases the gains of the game – as well as the stakes involved. This was made clear when one of my informants had to step down from being a moderator of the event he was organizing, because, unexpectedly, the General Director of the responsible governmental authority was to participate, meaning that the President of the organization stepped in to take the moderator role instead. The seminar ‘had to be matched with a heavier player’. In this way the players pay tribute to those with a more leading position, thereby reproducing their positions in the field. After the seminar, I asked the informant if he was satisfied with the attendance. Did enough of the ‘important people’ attend? Interestingly, his answer points more towards the panel than the audience:

The audience is not as important. It is important that the audience is crowded, and it’s good that there are a lot of young people in place, so the issue appears to be a future issue. But it is the panel participants we want to influence, not the audience. (Observation JOA-3)

For this informant it was considered important that the panellists see the organization’s ability to attract interest and understand that young people care about the issues of the CSO. Still, the audience and the public are foremost a backdrop for ‘the game’, and not actual players or actors that the organization wants to enrol for its ideas. Thus, the significant policy change sought happened during the actual panel discussion when the panellists could see the importance of this specific CSO, through its performance.

It is hard to measure the effects of the efforts put forward during the political week. No one in the field knows exactly how much of their work contributes to social change, but everyone believes that the efforts influence policymaking, at least down the line. It is a game where the most influential player impresses with larger seminars, interactive events, blog posts and growing groups of communicators and staff on site. Consequently, every year they all invest in new seminars and campaigns and set up new communications services and so on. During the week, the actors compete over which tent has the best programme, which food is the most climate smart, which seminars are best attended and which organizations are heard the most and have the most publicly recognized policy proposals (Region Gotland, 2018).

In policy-related activities such as these, the actors attempt to shape and form what is considered imperative in their field, which is to exert influence over policymaking. However, as the outcomes of these attempts are uncertain, it is the game about how policy is produced that forms the core of these practices. They are performative in the way they constitute the field and the idea of influencing through such activities. As such, the practices restore confidence and interest in the game itself. With Bourdieu’s conceptual apparatus, one can speak of a specific illusio for the policy professional field: the illusio of influence (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 330). This specific illusio implies succeeding by cutting through the noise to publish an important debate article or to have one’s background research quoted in legislative text. It is this possible gain, this illusio, that the players are competing for. The policy-professional-of-civil-society-organizations game circulates around whose policy proposal goes through, which voice becomes the most consequential and where public opinion goes. The actors at Almedalen are reviewed
daily, and the illusio is created in the civil society policy professional field (cf. Bourdieu, 1996) with the very intention of winning the field’s illusio and cutting through the noise with their specific policy proposals, to appear as if they are influencing public policy. It is important here to bear in mind that the informants use the appearance of influence; the illusio is socially contracted and not measurable. To be successful in this game requires that others view the organization and the policy professionals as influential.

Interestingly, in interviews with policy professionals about career choices and recruitment processes, this illusio arose as an important criterion for accepting a job offer. As one interviewee put it:

If the position does not mean power and influence, I decline. Then again, power and influence are not enough for me. I want power and influence, but I also want to feel that what I do actually plays a role. And that it’s intellectually challenging. (J-8)

For a job to be attractive to this group, the position needs to be strong regarding the illusio of the field, that is, it must be strong in the appearance of influencing public policy. However, belonging to and staying in the field means appearing to influence other agents in the field; those without voice and influence will not be among the important players and will lose their positions in the field.

If the image of influence is the illusio of the field, what makes the game worth playing, the different forms of capital elaborated in the next section are resources the players bring to, use and construct in the field.

The Combination of Knowledge and Network

When asked about what skills are essential to succeed in their field, most informants talk of the need to be sociable. Of course, to be an expert you have to know your area, but that is not enough; success comes out of networking. One informant describes this, saying that one needs to be knowledgeable about the issues but also to be a ‘communicator’ and have a certain social ability. I ask what she means, and she responds:

[You need] to be able to create relationships. Relationships should not be underestimated. A straightforward and trustful relationship is important. (JCS-44)

Being sociable and skilled in networking is thus a key capacity. However, this capacity needs to be combined with being connected to influential others in the field. That is how one gains social capital in the field. Being able to send a text message or a message via Facebook to decision-makers is a good way to receive information or services. To this end, it is imperative to have strong ties to what are perceived as influential networks, as one interviewee describes it:

I get them to participate (in seminars) because I know them, so it is much easier for me to get them in than if someone else would call. If you don’t know the right people, you are just a random person. (J-10)

It is notable how this informant makes use of social capital within the field. According to this logic, well connected also means important. Having interpersonal relationships built on trust gives access to networks, knowledge and other resources important to the field. It is easy for a well-connected person to call someone for a favour when the acquaintance
goes back 30 years. In this manner, the policy professionals can exchange contacts, knowledge and experience for influence in the field. Importantly, though, these assets become capital only if they are useful and drawn upon.

**Organizational Capital**

There is an overlap between social capital and *organizational capital*, here meaning experiences of active participation in associations. To have organizational capital requires knowing people from civil society. Still, in the interest of understanding this particular group of policy professionals, there is an important distinction to be made by separating these into two forms of capital. For the civil society policy professional, many contacts, skills and resources come from being active in ‘the movement’, as informants would term it. The professionals in this group often have a solid background in associations and have a long history of volunteering in CSOs and developing strong ties to their communities. They have typically taken on central positions such as chairs or board members of the organizations they were engaged in. In this manner, they have had rather elite positions within the organizations and are not typically grassroots activists.

Organizational capital is understood in the field not only as contacts within civil society; it also entails civil society trust in this person as an organizer, based on the knowledge, for instance, of how to arrange meetings and practise argumentation for debating ideological and issue-based questions. That is to say, if social capital is partly based on time spent together and long relationships, organizational capital is more often linked to practices and specifically having a spatial quality. Through participating in the same boards, attending the same meetings and demonstrations and having a track record from other CSOs, organizational capital is constructed. Organizational capital is high on the qualification scale when asking for valuable resources in the field. It refers to ‘knowledge that cannot be taught at the university’. As one interviewee said:

The association experience I have acquired through many of the years of running associations, I believe, has been important. I know how the economy works, how to get people committed. It has probably been invaluable for the work I have ended up in. Generally, and especially here. Without that, I don’t think I could have developed this work. So, the experience of working locally in associations from the lowest level is central. (J-14)

Student networks, newspapers, women’s associations, reading circles, adult education institutions, investigator networks are central for becoming a policy professional in these CSOs. The comment below illustrates how organizational capital – here termed ‘ideological education’ – can be important in the recruitment process:

I am ideologically educated in this. I know what a union does … . I am quite active in the Social Democrats (political party). I have been to party training sessions and leadership training. The Bommersviks Academy and such leadership training within the party. And my boss is also a very active Social Democrat. This would sound pretty awful if it were a right-wing organization, but when you work at a union, things like this are important. (JCS-25)

This form of capital is thus acquired through one’s own engagement in social movements. Like social capital, organizational capital is linked to networks, but it adds a level of loyalty through years of participation. At the same time, there is some variation to be found among the policy professionals regarding what types of organizational
background work as capital. As suggested by the quote above, for investigators and policy experts working at trade unions the ideological education from social democratic organizations, including youth associations, may be decisive for one type of organization, but not for others.

**Symbolic Capital**

*Symbolic capital* is the capital that the individual policy professional is mostly recognized for – it provides access, legitimacy, respect and a good reputation in the field (Nordvall & Malmström, 2015). Symbolic capital is self-evidently context dependent; it varies depending on what counts in the field. In this field, organizational civil society capital could be understood as symbolic capital. However, not all actors who could claim organizational capital could claim symbolic capital, which is the reason for analytically separating these concepts. Symbolic capital is more than an expansion of organizational capital, not merely based on knowledge of ‘how popular movements work’. Symbolic capital is not experience that is gained through practice per se; symbolic capital is gained when a player is recognized for that experience:

I work in a people’s movement, an interest organization. Not only because I have the knowledge and I have an academic education … It is also assumed that I share, as it is called when we are employed, ‘the values of this social movement’. In some sense, it is the reason why my employer hired me, because I believe in some form of common idea. (J-6)

Symbolic capital in the field of civil society professionals is thus the recognition of values, of being attributed as faithful and dependable, from years of activism, which in turn can be exchanged for legitimacy in the field. An expert who can display this type of capital is valuable for the organization because he/she has authenticity to speak. Moreover, with an employee who holds symbolic capital, the organization can expect loyalty, as the person’s interests are aligned with the organization’s. The language and rituals of grassroots activism are thus connected to symbolic capital rather than an actual activity. When identified as such a legitimate and committed player in the field, one can tap into that collective source of symbolic capital, which may render legitimacy, but also demands loyalty.

**Policy Political Capital**

When analysing the material, a fourth form of capital specific to this field emerges: *policy political capital*. This type of capital is a combination of political knowledge and social skills – having experience of how politics work and being able to read and use this knowledge beneath the surface of official rules. Policy political capital typically is established through the experience of working as a political adviser for a political party, as a press secretary at the government offices or in some other expert capacity in politics. As commonly explained by informants, having political skills means having politics in ‘one’s blood’ and knowing how politics is organized. In practice, it means knowing how and when to intervene to be able to influence policymaking. It involves knowing when in a process it is possible to be influential, taking strategic decisions, reading budgets and making judgements about which races are worth running and what policy gaps exist.

For this form of capital, networks are also imperative. In contrast to social capital, however, which favours networks in general, and organizational capital, which acquires
networks in civil society, policy political capital requires networks in politics. Hence, being acquainted with many and diverse people in the political arena is an important resource in and of itself. Therefore, having been political adviser in a Swedish government office appears to be key to a civil society policy professional career. An example of this is an informant who describes the following:

We have now recruited a new chief economist. He was previously a political adviser in government and is quite young. Now there are many of his former colleagues who are political advisors . . . . I realize that my contacts in the political world are becoming old, but on the other hand, they are becoming more and more qualified. Those I was involved with as a political advisor at the end of the nineties are now the state secretary and ministers. This means that you have an incredibly easy access to them. (J-10)

Here, it is possible to note how contacts, knowledge and experience from early on are exchanged for influence and become capital when they are made useful in the field. Former classmates or colleagues become important contacts who initially suggest career paths and later offer direct input to policymaking. When asked about networks and strategies to develop networks, most informants describe their networks as a consequence of earlier work experiences, and not necessarily as something strategically developed. Contacts from previous political workplaces are important resources for the individual and for the organization where the policy professional works. It appears that policy political capital could give access to the field on its own, without needing the other types of capital. Talking about this issue, an informant said:

Then a job came up at a civil society organization, so I applied for it, and it was a completely different world. But I got it on merit, not that I had any issue-relevant background, but since I had worked in parliament. That's the reason they gave when they called back. It had a lot of weight when it came to their choosing me.

Author: Was all that knowledge useful to you within the organization?

Yes, it was, to some extent. I had quite good knowledge of the persons working there, in parliament, which members could do something in certain areas of concern. Who were driven in what areas and who were potentially able to listen to the issues that the organization were working on. At the organization they did not have good knowledge of how to read a state budget and so on, but I had learned that when I worked at parliament. Such things were very useful. (JCS-18)

As indicated in these quotes, policy political capital contributes to the production of knowledge and social skill for the civil society organization. As such, it may be consequential when trying to influence policymaking.

**Conclusions and Contributions**

This article has identified the field of policy professionals working with policymaking in civil society organizations in Sweden as a field of imputed policy influence. These policy professionals constitute a category of professionals who generate various forms of capital of importance to civil society but pertaining to and departing from different fields. Organizational and symbolic capital are tied to the civil society field, whereas policy political capital is more tied to the governmental and media fields. Social capital is important for and related to all fields.
However, the presence of policy political capital may, more than the other forms of capital, indicate what professionalization of politics in civil society looks like. Having political experience or knowledge, either from work within a party organization or from work in government offices, is a resource that opens up considerable opportunities. Knowing how to get it right is their skill and the pursuit of their work. Having this type of political background is therefore of specific consequence for the role that policy professionals may play in civil society policy teams. Policy influence becomes a game where you can buy, hire or win influence rather than the position of the organization. In combination with the specific form of symbolic capital constructed in the field, gained by recognition as an activist from within civil society, legitimate influence is feasible.

The results in the article indicate three contributions for understanding the role that this particular subset of policy professionals plays for the professionalization of civil society. In relation to Hellberg (1997), these findings suggest that legitimacy, trust and loyalty found in the organizational capital, and additionally the symbolic capital, also described by Lindellee and Scaramuzzino (2020), are still key components for civil society organizations’ legitimacy and a specific form of capital for policy professionals in this field (cf. Svallfors, 2020).

Second, the empirical analysis demonstrates that policy political capital is potentially reshaping the norms of the field of civil society. The employing of the holders of such capital opens possibilities for not only further political professionalization (Brady et al., 2015; Hermansson, 1999; Johansson & Nygren, 2019; Lundberg, 2017; Svallfors, 2017a), but also potential conflicts (Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011). These types of capital could be conceived as part of a power struggle between various types of agents and forms of capital in the civil society field at large. Loyalty to the organization is important, but policy political capital, as suggested by the data drawn upon here, is becoming more important and may become a core element in civil society policy work.

Contributing to the understanding of professionalization, in the sense of developing professional and influential policy teams within the CSOs, leading to a legitimacy problem (Klüver & Saurugger, 2013; Saurugger, 2012), these findings suggest that the risk of running into legitimacy problems could be tied to a unilateral use of policy political capital, while a more evenly distributed use could both maintain and strengthen the organizations’ legitimacy both internally and externally.

Third, the analysis suggests that the specific illusio shaped and upheld within and by the civil society policy professionals is influence. It implies that the image of policy influence is the game in play within the field, and the prize that the players are competing for. Being situated in a policy team of a well-regarded, large CSO gives access to a position in the field ripe with possibilities to influence others, if played well (cf. Fliigstein & McAdam, 2012, p. 181).

Revisiting the group of policy professionals holding an evaluation meeting at Almedalen, and the discussion on what to prioritize in advocacy work, it is clear that the rise of policy professionals in civil society brings both professionalism and commitment to civil society. Still, compared to elected staff and members, their situation is ambivalent – full of ‘spin’ and action, but also precariousness. Those belonging to the field of civil society policy professionals are supposed to create the illusio of ‘influence’; if they do not succeed, they will lose their positions in the field.
Although this case is context specific and with its limitations, findings could potentially be used to understand the same group in other countries as well. For further research it would therefore be of interest to analyse this group in different national contexts.

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**ORCID**

Joanna Mellquist [http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2533-7366](http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2533-7366)

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