

Working on connective professionalism: What cross-sector strategists in Swedish public organizations do to develop connectivity in addressing ‘wicked’ policy problems

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In light of current debates on ‘protective’ and ‘connective’ professionalism, this article explores a new type of occupational position that is emerging within the Swedish public sector: the cross-sector strategist. The growing presence of this intermediary occupational position is seen as attempts to formalize and institutionalize the imprecise roles and governance of ‘wicked’ policy problems, and the job of these strategists is focused on supporting other jurisdictions to meet and act. By pursuing connective strategies in the form of *triggering*, *selling*, *bridging*, *brokering*, and *forming accountabilities*, cross-sector strategists seek to establish embedded workspaces where strategic action and decisions can be produced jointly and across jurisdictional boundaries. The study illustrates how calls for changes in professional action towards connectivity are now part of the formal organizational structure of public sector organizations, confirming the incapability of professional actors to connect in the absence of intermediary support functions. In the concluding discussion, we consider the relevance of ‘connective professionalism’ as a descriptive theoretical device applied to work settings understood as increasingly complex and interdependent, with calls for inter-professional collaboration and intensifying engagement in preventing problems rather than simply treating them.

KEYWORDS: *connective professionalism; intermediary occupation; professions; occupations; relational; social sustainability.*

INTRODUCTION

Professionalism is a contested and elusive concept. The dynamics in and around existing occupations, as well as our theoretical conceptions, have shifted over time and space and left us with a range of attempts to understand what constitutes professionalism and how it relates to broader societal developments. In recent debates, Mirko Noordegraaf’s (2020) endeavour to reconfigure professionalism from ‘protective’ to ‘connective’ has sparked a range of intriguing attempts on this matter (Adams et al. 2020a, 2020b; Alvehus et al. 2021; Faulconbridge et al. 2021). Although the notion of connective professionalism has been scrutinized and questioned by a number of researchers, the idea that professional action is to be studied as relational processes enacted in changing societal

landscapes is neither novel nor possible to contest. The professional landscape in public organizations has been described as an emerging new complex and paradoxical landscape of entangled institutional logics (Alvehus and Andersson 2018), which is often interpreted to place the protective mechanisms of professional groups under increasing pressure (Reed in Adams et al. 2020a; Taminiu and Heusinkveld 2020). However, what is allegedly novel here is the perception that the ‘breaking down of protective shields’ (Noordegraaf 2020: 207) may not consistently lead to a categorical ‘decline’, ‘hollowing out’, or efforts to ‘reinstall’ professionalism, but a reconfiguration of professional identities and actions towards a new connective form. According to Noordegraaf (2020), this reconfiguration urges for ‘fundamental reflections and redefinitions

of what professionalism means and what professionals are' [205]. Yet the changing relationships and connections amongst professionals have captured the attention of scholars previously (Abbott 1988, 2005; Freidson 1985) and the horizontal practices to ensure appropriate conduct have long been seen as part of the essence of professional groups (Bejerot and Hasselbladh 2011). Professionals have always been connected to other occupations, management, and clients; so, again, what is new here?

Our contribution expands on this notion of novelty by focussing primarily on the 'changing social and cultural circumstances' (Noordegraaf 2020: 208) that call for changes in professional action towards a new connective ideal. Empirically, we explore a new type of occupational position that is emerging within the Swedish public sector: the cross-sector strategist. The growing presence of this intermediary occupational position is seen as attempts to formalize and institutionalize the imprecise roles and governance of complex policy areas, and the job of these strategists is described as focusing on supporting other jurisdictions to meet and act (Svensson 2017). Professionals in contemporary public sector organizations perform their work in policy environments that are increasingly understood as being filled with challenges on a global and cross-cutting scale (Tosun and Lang 2017). The perceived urgency and the intractable interdependencies of such 'wicked' problems (Rittel and Webber 1973) suggest that they need to be addressed on a variety of levels, stretching across well-defined jurisdictional boundaries and professional segments (Candel and Biesbroek 2016). The formalized work of cross-sector strategists in Sweden, and the growing prevalence of horizontal policy areas across national settings, suggest calls for changes in professional action towards connectivity are now part of the formal organizational structure of public sector organizations. In order to understand the role of professionalism in the context of such 'wicked' policy problems, we consider professionalism via a relating lens (Anteby et al. 2016) or 'outside-in' perspective (Noordegraaf and Brock 2021), analysing the job of cross-sector strategists as a mediating effect on contemporary professionalism. The study answers the question of *how and why cross-sector strategists work to develop connectivity in public sector organizations*. Finally, we discuss the relevance of 'connective professionalism' as a theoretical device for analysing professionalism in contemporary organizational contexts.

THE PROFESSIONAL LANDSCAPE OF PUBLIC ORGANIZATIONS

Noordegraaf (2020) is backed by many in stating that the protective mechanisms of professionalism have

come under increasing pressure. The professional landscape in public organizations has been described as an emerging new complex and paradoxical landscape of entangled institutional logics (Alvehus and Andersson 2018). A range of developments, changes, and reforms, such as technological advances (Brandis et al. 2016), reforms in public service delivery (Eriksson et al. 2020), and new demands (Noordegraaf et al. 2014), have contributed to this entanglement and instability. In terms of professional groups, factors that generate this instability are (1) intra-professional, such as stratification, inducing changes in the core of the profession (Waring and Bishop 2013); (2) inter-professional, where the jurisdiction of tasks is transferred from one profession to another (Aili 2002); and (3) intergroup, where the relatively strong positions of managers (Andersson and Liff 2018) and clients (Gustavsson and Andersson 2019) have influenced professional positions. In addition, there are tendencies to blend professional logic with managerial logic, as suggested via conceptions of hybrid professionals (Blomgren and Waks 2015), hybrid managers (McGivern et al. 2015), and organizational professionalism (Evetts 2009), where professionals themselves increasingly act according to a bureaucratic logic (Bejerot and Hasselbladh 2013; Timmermans 2008). Whether such changes are viewed in positive or negative terms, the subsequent instability of the professional landscape in public organizations is a common denominator (Alvehus and Andersson 2018).

The pressures on professionalism also relate to broader societal changes. Professionals face interdependencies beyond defined jurisdictions due to the effects of 'low-trust' societies (Troman 2000) with public and political turmoil tied to professional services (Bearfield et al. 2021) and rising costs of welfare sectors (Noordegraaf 2020). In addition, professionals in public sector organizations perform their work in policy environments that are increasingly understood as being filled with challenges on a global and cross-cutting scale (Tosun and Lang 2017). They face the challenge of addressing issues of public health, climate change, employment issues, organized crime and involuntary migration and segregation. The urgency and the intractable interdependencies of such 'wicked' problems (Rittel and Webber 1973) mean that they need to be addressed on a variety of levels, stretching across well-defined jurisdictional boundaries and professional segments (Candel and Biesbroek 2016). However, research has not yet been able to develop the analytical tools to fully understand the effects on professional work in contexts where it is increasingly understood as complex and interdependent, where there are growing calls for inter-professional collaboration (Armistead et al.

2007) and intensifying engagement in preventing problems rather than simply treating them (Gundhus 2013).

Connective professionalism was originally presented as an alternative view on professionalism (Noordegraaf et al. 2014) to explain how public sector strategists *might* establish connective relations that generate embedded workspaces (as opposed to sheltered jurisdiction) where strategic action and decisions can be produced. In his later conceptualization, Noordegraaf (2020) argues that professionalism is actually evolving towards a new connective form, suggesting that the narrow case-based expertise associated with the traditional form of 'protected' professionalism is moving towards more interdependent relations and an adaptive expertise to solve increasingly complex cases. Whilst the text raises questions about whether Noordegraaf (2020) aims to describe historical patterns or simply state a desired goal, we suggest that current developments in public organizations, described in the coming section, do imply calls for similar changes.

CURRENT ENDEAVOURS IN PUBLIC ORGANIZATIONS: THE CROSS-SECTOR IMPERATIVE

The specialized 'silo-organization' of the public sector has been widely accused of not being fit to tackle the complex problems that constitute grand challenges for contemporary organizations (e.g., Læg Reid and Rykkja 2015; Osbourne 2021; Rittel and Webber 1973). Explained as a mismatch between the problem structures of contemporary society and its organizational structure, problems such as unemployment, involuntary migration and segregation, public health, and sustainability issues are no longer viewed as the problems of single-sector organizations, but as problems that require the involvement of multiple and diverse organizations and jurisdictions. This shift has been evident in the range of novel coordination practices (e.g., Whole-of-government, Joined-up government) that governments across the globe have implemented in order to increase their capacity to cope with a range of complex societal challenges. Simultaneously, the number of policy problems that are formulated as complex and in need of cross-sectoral work has increased significantly over the past few decades across national contexts (Candel and Biesbroek 2016; Tosun and Lang 2017). The notion of collaborating across sector, organizational and professional boundaries is said to form the main instrument of choice and panacea in addressing the complex societal problems of today, in-between and across countries in all sectors: public, voluntary, and private (Armistead et al. 2007; Læg Reid and Rykkja 2015). This development is based on the view that the

management of such problems should reflect a diversity of relevant knowledge views, values, and frames, and the belief that increased connectivity between such boundaries will work as a proactive policy instrument for developing innovative, flexible, and sustainable solutions to complex societal problems (Klijn and Koppenjan 2014; Krogh 2022). The growing presence of cross-sector strategists in public organizations has, in turn, been described as an attempt to formalize and institutionalize the imprecise roles and governance of such complex policy areas (Svensson 2019).

Cross-sector strategists can be found at all levels of government in Sweden but are generally understood to work horizontally across sector boundaries within local government organizations to promote and monitor strategic policy areas such as sustainability, employment, public health, safety, and integration. These are policy areas that have in common that they cannot be addressed or solved by a single 'silo-organization' or professional group of the public sector alone. Cross-sector strategists are part of a new 'group' of civil servants that are here referred to as strategists, but their titles may also include coordinators, development leaders, and developers (Svensson 2019) and increasingly, these groups seem to perceive themselves as workers who do comparable work (Noordegraaf et al. 2014; Svensson 2017). Whilst there is extensive literature describing the type of governance that cross-sector strategists are part of (horizontal governance, cross-sectoral governance, mainstreaming, etc.), we know little about what such cross-sector strategists actually do (Svensson 2019), and seemingly nothing about how their work influences other professional actors. This is noteworthy considering that strategists have grown in importance in the public domain (Noordegraaf et al. 2014) and that their work consists mainly of supporting other jurisdictions to act. What we know is that cross-sector strategists are employed public bureaucrats with the formal task of promoting and monitoring horizontal policy areas whilst improving the capacity of public organizations to face complex societal challenges by facilitating cross-sectoral work (Svensson 2019).

Cross-sector strategists also exemplifies a more general development and rising academic focus on occupational groups and individuals that take on an intermediary role in managing and facilitating complex webs of relations by connecting and mediating across organizations, professionals, and tasks (Anteby et al. 2016). For example, research has investigated cross-expertise collaboration and the role of process experts, liaisons, and integrators in such processes (Barley et al. 2020; Langley et al. 2019; Neal et al. 2022) or the role of transnational professionals in processes of globalization (Harrington and Seabrooke

2020). Studies have also looked at how professional actors themselves may take on such intermediary roles (DiBenigno and Kellogg 2014). However, the focus of the present study is on the previously neglected aspect of organizations putting formal arrangements in place to facilitate such work in both public (Svensson 2019) and private (Monteiro 2017) organizational settings. Whilst some scholars distinguish between individuals who have been formally assigned a role as integrator from those who perform it out of personal interest (Levina and Vaast 2005), most studies focus on interpersonal aspects of boundary spanning and not on intermediaries that exist by design and as an official position in the organizational structure. Furthermore, the present case is part of a more general development where contemporary societal challenges are increasingly promoted as ‘grand challenges’ or ‘wicked problems’ and seen as confronting policy actors’ and businesses’ existing institutional regimes (Termeer et al. 2019). As private businesses become increasingly responsible for addressing social and environmental challenges (Reinecke and Ansari 2016; Shamir 2008), such problems are seen as requiring multiple-actor responses across business sectors (Gray et al. 2022) or via transnational regimes (Frey-Heger et al. 2022). Likewise, we see this development in our own field via increasing calls for transdisciplinary research to support efforts of enhancing coherent action in addressing the ‘wicked’ problems of our time (Wohlgezogen et al. 2020).

Consequently, cross-sector strategists constitute an interesting unit of observation to better understand contemporary professionalism seeing that the perceived need for cross-sector strategists suggests that (1) calls for changes in professional action towards connectivity are now part of the formal organizational structure of the Swedish public sector organizations, which, (2) suggests the incapability of professional actors to connect in the absence of such intermediary support functions.

WICKED PROBLEMS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF JURISDICTIONAL BOUNDARIES

The current developments in public management that this paper draws from are grounded in the growing interpretation of societal problems as ‘wicked’ problems (Crowley and Head 2017; Termeer et al. 2019). In their seminal article, Rittel and Webber (1973) joined other dissenters of the time by blaming escalating rationalization for the crisis in credibility for professionalism in the 1960s and 1970s. The main criticism can be summarized in that the abstract foundation of professional knowledge had simply not worked on a wide array of social

problems and that the skill of a professional is instead better expressed in their framing of a certain problem (Schön 1963). As a concept, wicked problems refer to unsolvable and interrelated clusters of societal problems viewed as inherently intractable due to their dynamic and complex character (Rittel and Webber 1973). Therefore, the process of addressing a wicked problem presumably cannot be reduced to causal explanations and there is no way of knowing where in the complex causal network the trouble really lies. Any single specified problem is merely a symptom of still another ‘higher level’ problem, and whilst it may be affected by interventions, such efforts will create ever-new dynamics that must be addressed.

However, it is not easy to relate ideas of interrelated, unsolvable clusters of problems to theories about professionalism. The tasks of professionals concern human problems that are amenable to expert service which receives its qualities within a cognitive structure of jurisdictional claims to diagnose, infer, and treat problems, constrained by an abstract foundation of knowledge (Abbott 1988). The academic level of professional knowledge and its strain towards logical clarity inevitably means that *diagnosis* involves a classification system that purposely ‘belies the muddle of practice’ [42]. In fact, the central aspect of professional diagnosis is the restriction of relevant information and the removal of extraneous qualities (Abbott 1988) in order to—simply put—make something out of a problem. Consequently, the openness of a jurisdiction to peripheral problems depends on whether the problems fit the ‘dictionary of professionally legitimate problems’ [44] and the professional’s own mapping of its jurisdiction.

According to Abbott (1988), weakly held problems, or residual dimensions of professional jurisdiction, make standard sites of inter-professional poaching, conflict, and competition. Accordingly, the novel work tasks that have emerged over the recent decades as responses to cross-cutting societal—often global—challenges have been studied as ‘proto-jurisdictions’, in which a variety of professional groups compete and cooperate around ways of addressing emerging local work tasks (Blok et al. 2019). However, whilst the right to decide the subjective properties of a problem has long been seen as a matter of jurisdiction for professional groups, the knowledge base of ‘wicked’ problems is understood as fragmented and contested, which makes the evidentiary and interpretative elements for diagnosis, inference, and treatment indistinguishable and inseparably intertwined (Daviter, 2019). Understood in the context of cross-sector governance, these problems are seen as constituting implicit dimensions of a multitude of professional jurisdictions and can, therefore, supposedly, not become the explicit

claim of a specific professional group. Instead, an essential idea in the literature on cross-sector governance is that the management of such problems should reflect a diversity of relevant knowledge views, values, and frames for the development of innovative, flexible, and sustainable solutions to complex societal problems (Klijn and Koppenjan 2014; Krogh 2022; Svensson 2017). How cross-sector strategists work to formalize and institutionalize the imprecise roles and governance of such complex policy areas in professional contexts arguably forms an important puzzle piece in understanding professionalism as part of contemporary organizational contexts.

PROFESSIONALISM VIEWED OUTSIDE-IN

Ideas about how the public sector should be governed and what role professionalism bears in the organization of work are under constant development and change. As an ideal type, professionalism represents a coordinating mechanism that results from an interrelated relationship with Adam Smith's 'free market' and Max Weber's 'bureaucracy'—the three forces that together constitute the organization of work (Freidson 2001). Utilized as a method of analysis, this framework draws attention to the social arrangements that produce and allow autonomy in the tensions between these theoretically incompatible forces. In this sense, professionalism carries particular 'institutional, theoretical constants' (Freidson, 2001: 180), such as a specialized body of knowledge, occupational control over the practice and credentials of the work, and an ideology for service quality. However, the phenomenon highlighted by the ideal type is dependent on several contingencies for realizing its ideal-typical components, such as the organization and policy actions of state agencies, the organization of occupations themselves, and other social, historical, and economic conditions.

Noordegraaf's (2020) conception of connective professionalism clearly concerns the theoretical notion of professionalism as actors and actors' activities, but viewed through the lens of Freidson (2001), the novelty of Noordegraaf's (2020) claims lies not in the connectiveness between actors *per se*, but in *how* and *why* such connections may change over time and place. Such investigations would suggest that careful attention should be placed on the societal arrangements and surroundings (Noordegraaf and Brock 2021) of professional action as mediators of the role of professionalism in the organization of work. Connective professionalism is then used fruitfully as a descriptive device to enable analysis of shifts in the practices (Alvehus, in Alvehus et al. 2021)—or

perhaps novel understandings of the practices—through which ideal type professionalism can be maintained. Which proposes a use of the concept that beneficially poses and answers questions of the ongoing shaping and reshaping of patterns of work, the negotiation of order in organizations and the division of labour in societies.

To lay the groundwork for such a view, the main focus of this article is to analyse the growing calls for changes in professional action towards a new connective ideal. More specifically, the role of professionalism in the context of addressing 'wicked' policy problems. This is done by studying the work of cross-sector strategists as a mediator in the organization of work (cf Freidson, 2001) and by describing and analysing how and why cross-sector strategists pursue connective strategies to develop increased connectivity between previously separated professional groups. Importantly, professionalism is analysed from the 'outside-in' (Noordegraaf and Brock 2021), via the work of cross-sector strategists, who are not themselves portrayed as professional actors.

METHOD

Research context

This study is based on a qualitative case study of cross-sector strategists and how they perform their work to promote and monitor the strategic policy areas of social sustainability and public health. The studied cross-sector strategists are employed in a public organization in Sweden that is responsible for public health and social sustainability issues on a regional governmental level, but they are located in 15 municipality organizations part-time. The local and regional levels of government are responsible for a large proportion of the welfare services and hold extensive self-governance in relation to the Swedish national level of government, which has led to wide variation regarding how cross-sectorial work in Sweden is organized (Svensson 2017). Although cross-sector strategists can be found at all levels of government, we focussed on the Swedish local level to increase our chances of finding a variety of strategies that cross-sector strategists use, and hence our ability to draw more general conclusions. However, our aim is not to argue for any general validity in the strategies described below, rather our empirical illustrations address Noordegraaf's (2020) fundamental question of 'why professional fields may be changing and connecting more to outside worlds' [219]. Specifically, this is done by illustrating and analysing how the significant growth of policy problems that are formulated as complex, in need of policy integration and cross-sectoral work, intend to affect professional work. Whilst cross-sector strategists form the main tool for achieving policy

integration and cross-sectoral governance in Sweden specifically (Svensson 2019), research suggests that this phenomenon is also part of an international development. This includes an increased importance of strategists in public sector management (Noordegraaf et al. 2014), a significant growth of horizontal policy problems (Candel and Biesbroek 2016; Tosun and Lang 2017), and collaborative activity to solve complex societal issues (Armistead et al. 2007; Læg Reid and Rykkja 2015) across national contexts. The development described in our case also resonates with a rising academic focus on occupational groups that take on an intermediary role in managing and facilitating cross-expertise collaboration in both public and private organizational settings (Anteby et al. 2016; Barley et al. 2020; Langley et al. 2019; Neal et al. 2022).

The studied unit of cross-sector strategists has overall responsibility for coordinating, conducting, and strengthening regional, sub-regional, and municipal processes for social sustainability. The unit works strategically and in collaboration with a range of actors, mainly not only externally through municipalities but also internally at the regional level as well as in relation to other authorities, governmental, and non-governmental organizations. The strategists studied describe many of the initiatives that are linked to social sustainability as important to pursue in relation to children and young adults; and collaboration between different municipal and regional organizations in their local contexts, such as school, maternity care, child healthcare, youth clinics, the police, and social services, are considered crucial for a successful outcome. It is the strategist's responsibility to stimulate such cross-sectoral work.

Data collection and analysis

The main data collection method was in-depth interviews with the cross-sector strategists in focus, but also managers, politicians, and other actors involved in forming and incentivizing their work. All cross-strategists were interviewed and managers, politicians, and other actors were selected by a snowball sampling based on their connections to the cross-sector strategist's work. Interviews were complemented by documentary analysis and observations of strategists in action. Data were collected during 2020 and 2021 and the total collected data material was made up of four components: (1) thirty-six interviews (50–90 min duration) with cross-sector strategists, municipal managers, and politicians, as well as politicians on the regional level of government; all interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim; (2) twenty-three participant observations (>50 h) of meetings regarding public health/social sustainability, where cross-sector strategists, various professional actors, managers, and

politicians interacted; (3) seven focus groups involving cross-sector strategists (>20 h), in which we as researchers gave descriptions of our observations and interpretations of the participant observations, and the practitioners interacted and discussed our descriptions; (4) formal documents such as notes from previous meetings, plans, and agreements. This comprehensive data collection was essential for our understanding of the work that cross-sector strategists do. Other actors' views on the work that cross-sector strategists perform, or should perform, were critical to ensuring that the 'connective ideal' that saturated our data set was shared amongst a larger circle of actors and not simply a matter of 'legitimizing talk' on behalf of the strategists themselves. The data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to infection prevention restraints (namely social distancing in Sweden) during this timeframe, approximately half of the observational hours and all but three of the interviews took place in a virtual environment. All focus groups were conducted face-to-face.

We started the data analysis by reading and re-reading the transcribed material from interviews and observations. The next step was to inductively identify cross-sector strategists' connective strategies and to organize the data; that is, actions that involved other actors in different ways. We sorted all these descriptions of relational actions and searched for similarities and differences that enabled grouping into preliminary second-order themes that described patterns of relational work. This coding procedure was facilitated by the qualitative analysis software NVivo. The first phase of analysis uncovered nine connective strategies where the patterns of relational work were descriptions of *what* relational actions cross-sector strategists used and *how* they used them. In the next step, we analysed these patterns further based on *why* the strategists pursued these actions. Over time, constant comparison between the analytical themes allowed for an axial and selective coding phase (Corbin and Strauss 1990), resulting in five connective strategies.

Our inductive analysis suggested that the work of cross-sector strategists to different extents was based on a shared ideal of seeking increased connectivity between previously separated professional groups. Therefore, we utilized Freidson's (2001) framework on professionalism to investigate the employed strategies as a mediator of the organization of work. As our data will illustrate, the interpretation of the problem structure of social sustainability constituted an important mechanism for how the studied cross-sector strategists pursued their work. The idea of social sustainability is often conceived of as a vague and complex concept consisting of phenomena that are immaterial, dynamic, intertwined, and unpredictable, and

also hard to implement, control, and measure (Eizenberg and Jabareen 2017). However, by locating the idea of ‘wicked problems’ in a social constructionist frame, the concept here functions as a guide for interpretation rather than as a starting point for our analysis. Our research in this sense answers calls to study how abstract, grand, and holistic views of wicked problems are experienced, constructed, and viewed on the individual and organizational levels (Noordegraaf et al. 2019), rather than building the grounds for normative calls for more connected professionals.

EMPIRICAL STUDY

Throughout history, views have shifted regarding what constitutes the health of a population and how it should be managed. Accordingly, the studied strategists described how the public health concept has changed from an area that was previously linked to an individual citizen’s lifestyle choices and state of health to embrace a broadened view of public health as social sustainability and to the social conditions that create and contribute to inequalities in the health of the population. This focus shift means that public health issues are no longer a matter to be handled by public health strategists alone, or the narrow field of public health policy, but a matter for the entire public sector.

Previously, my work was considered a form of health-care. Now, instead, my work is related to everything! [...] When I started to work with public health issues I had my own organization, but public health is no longer about my own work or about writing a specific plan for public health, it has to do with the municipality’s overall plan. (Strategist B)

Even though strategic work in the public sector is formally organized through the medium of assigned responsibilities, authorities, and organizational units, the studied cross-strategists face dependencies on actors that, to varying degrees, do not automatically value or understand the need for their involvement. Consequently, the strategists must build crucial preconditions and influence the relational dynamics in their environments to get strategizing done. This means promoting and monitoring the mission of social sustainability by actively involving different actors in their work, such as politicians, managers, professional groups (including teachers, psychologists, social counsellors, community engineers, dieticians, police officers, and midwives), and other strategists (communication, digitalization, quality development, labour market, etc.). Thus, the process of becoming a strategist

revolves more around learning about and becoming embedded in their local context than around becoming sustainability experts.

Triggering

Without a decision-making mandate or their own executing organization, the studied strategists cannot necessarily rely on a superior knowledge base that other actors will request. Therefore, a large part of their work consists of striving to make the concept of social sustainability clear to others. All strategists emphasized the challenge of defining social sustainability, capturing, and understanding the concept of public health, and the interconnectedness and complexity of the related issues. An important task for the strategists is to trigger the understanding of politicians, managers, and different professional groups in these complex relationships. This mainly includes informing others that the common knowledge of public health has expanded to include more than just aspects of physical health and lifestyle, and that it is now part of the umbrella term *social sustainability*, which consists of complex interrelated problems that defy simple solutions and demand complex, cross-cutting interventions.

I have to talk about complexity and how societal problems are interconnected and the need for cross-sectoral work. I have to make them understand that what we do in our day-to-day practices spills over into everything—everything! Everything we do is connected and interrelated—we cannot produce activities for public health on the one hand, while inducing unsustainability through others—we need the bigger, overall picture. (Strategist J)

Triggering concerns informing about the characteristics of social sustainability challenges, but also how such issues ‘should’ be approached (that is, preventive work and cross-sectoral organizing). There is a broad consensus amongst the strategists that the sustainability perspective should be incorporated into all activities, policies, and decision-making within the municipality and that the insights shared by the strategists will be part of the backbone of all professionals in their day-to-day work.

My work is about arousing thoughts in people. As with socio-economics, for example, that people do not share the same opportunities in life—this is something that all officials must carry with them in their day-to-day work, automatically. I want to induce the public health consequences into the entire municipality’s activities so that people think in terms of social sustainability in their everyday work. (Strategist F)

Since the strategists perform their work through other professional groups, which do not necessarily value or understand the need of their knowledge base, the strategists must create a demand for their own work. Therefore, a large portion of the connective strategies is related to triggering other actors, which includes politicians and managers with the authority to mandate or increased collaboration across professional and organizational boundaries.

Selling

The strategists' dependency on other actors to pursue and integrate issues of social sustainability means that influencing others' views and actions is a key connective strategy. Although there is no direct resistance to working for social sustainability amongst other actors, such initiatives often lose momentum in competition with other issues, especially under resource constraints. Due to the lack of organizational incentives to prioritize social sustainability issues in general, and through cross-sectoral work specifically, selling issues and initiatives to other actors is considered a main job for the studied strategists.

In our municipality, we have a lot of domestic violence and we need to work more on that matter, but if I can't find a suitable collaborator there is no way for me to do my job. I have to wait for the right opportunities, bring it up in many different settings and convince others, but I can never work on the matter myself or demand others to do so. (Strategist D)

The strategists use a combination of bringing in new and unattended issues to the agenda that are perceived to sit in the inter-organizational domain, meaning that no specific professional group alone carries the responsibility for addressing it and bringing already-attended-to and adjacent issues into the inter-organizational domain. The strategists believe that these problems demand cross-sectoral work approaches. Hence, the strategists' work revolves around making other actors understand how their ongoing practices relate to social sustainability, but also other parts of the organization and the jurisdiction of diverse professional groups.

When we decided to work more systematically with mental health issues the social welfare committee was in charge of the processes, but my job is to work for a much more holistic perspective. I have to make sure that mental health does not become an issue for social counsellors only, so I lobby for the question in

all kinds of forums, even the municipal board to make sure that they let more knowledge perspectives into the discussions. (Strategist J)

The high abstraction level of the umbrella term *social sustainability* supports the strategists' attempts to create commonality between their issues and the everyday work of professional actors, as the term has the potential to mean different things depending on the situation, as well as fit into different ongoing political and professional projects. The strategists pragmatically 'pick and choose' suitable concepts and arguments to appeal to different actors that they want to involve in their work.

We usually compare ourselves with chameleons—if I talk to the social services I can't just go on and say 'this is what you should work with', but rather constantly adapt my way of thinking to the specific context that I am in. If I work in relation to elderly care, they have one way of working, in school, there are other ideas. (Strategist B)

The term *social sustainability* is considered to cover a large number of related strategic policy areas—such as basic needs, employment issues, crime prevention, physical, and mental health—that are, in themselves, considered to be complex and hard to define. Thus, interventions related to social sustainability can be translated into a wide array of initiatives, such as urban planning to reduce crime and insecurity in particular areas, after-school programmes involving the police, or increased collaboration amongst child protective services, midwives, and/or school educators to enhance the well-being of children and families in need. Aspects of both the character of social sustainability challenges and the strategists' (inter-) organizational position make triggering and selling important connective strategies. These strategies serve as a basis for increased connectivity between other actors, but they are not always sufficient for nurturing action. Selling means a more direct influence to act upon the 'triggering', but the strategists' lack of decision mandate means they need to trigger and sell specific issues, rather than decide about them.

Bridging

The budgets of the silo-organization control how we are organized, which is not very strange, but I have to fight against it in my work. My work is all about convening different groups, to tie them together; I am the connection that makes other actors dare to work across budgets. (Strategist D)

Bridging actors as a strategy is considered a crucial task in order to better synchronize social sustainability initiatives, to gather different actors, and collaborate to find new solutions and ways of addressing complex problems. The boundaries of the fragmented public 'silo-organization' are considered a main challenge when these actors perform their work, as such an organization hinders the process of more apprehensively identifying, defining, and addressing local societal challenges. These boundaries are manifold and considered to create incentives for a substantial focus on internal vis-à-vis external efficiency.

If a child suffers from any type of problems in preschool, then it is the preschool's money that is responsible. But if neither the preschool nor the school acts in any way, then all of the sudden we have us a drug addict who will cost our society a lot of money! I'm exaggerating, of course, but the school will never have to pay for not acting, you know? Instead the police or social services will pay. But no one is ever responsible for what happened to that child. (Strategist F)

The budget boundaries of sectorized political tasks and decentralized units are perceived to support an extensive focus on short-term and measurable results at the expense of long-term and outcome-oriented results. The boundaries between the independent and self-determinative regional- and local-level authorities are considered to hinder communication and collaboration between public organizations serving the same groups of citizens. However, it is the jurisdictional boundaries between professional groups and their specific knowledge perspective, insights of local challenges and the current state of the citizens they meet that are sought to comprehensively identify, define and address local social sustainability challenges.

We need a common focus on where we are heading all in all. It is not enough to work in different directions or silos with complex problems; we need each other's skills for long-term systematic work. If our efforts are not in sync, we will not get the same results. We need the different perspectives to understand that solutions and analysis are always connected. (Strategist D)

The target image is to gather previously separated professional groups and expertise in order to identify, discuss, and/or address local societal challenges from a range of different angles.

Another example is how we should handle the growing number of school absenteeism and school refusal

behaviour in certain groups of youth, we need to gather perspectives on this matter and address it from as many angles and knowledge bases as possible. (Strategist F)

Examples include gathering the police, social workers, community engineers, and storekeepers in areas of high crime rates to discuss possible interventions, or to establish platforms for collaboration amongst school teachers, social workers, and child healthcare centres to intervene at multiple levels for children and families in need.

We are now addressing major concerns of human trafficking and prostitution in our municipality. My job has been to gather representatives from the police, social services, security personnel and politicians from our crime preventive council to work together on this issue. (Strategist L)

Brokering

Whereas bridging describes a relatively unproblematic connection between actors that does not require the strategist to perform tasks beyond bridging such groups, the brokering strategy means helping different actors to understand each other. This includes navigating the gaps amongst different organizations, knowledge bases, and logics, as well as those between professionals and politicians on different levels of government.

In the formal, hierarchical organization that we are used to, there are rules and structures for how we should behave and act in relation to each other. In the horizontal structures we are creating, there are simply no rules [...] As I work across the silos and gaps of the organization, it is clear that what we are aiming for is not just the bridging of regulation and legislation; it means forging together very different perspectives, constructions, and interpretations of people. All of these clashing perspectives are channelled through me—I am the instrument of coordination. (Strategist D)

The strategists describe conflicts amongst different views of knowledge, interests, norms, and different jurisdictional boundaries in the collaborative processes where they are involved and they describe themselves as 'translators', 'messengers', and 'instruments'. Their work seems to largely involve listening, interpreting, and translating between actors to get everyone 'on board the same train'. Within this brokering strategy lies a large amount of translation between different occupational groups, not only in terms of language but regarding ways of thinking.

When different groups meet across borders they have very different ways of thinking and working. I have to consider all of them, utilize different legislation, take different political objectives into account and professional knowledge and identities as well [...] Social services will have their own way of understanding problems. Just look at all the laws and clauses they refer to; they put boundaries on anything that is not within their area of expertise. In school, other ideas are considered most important, and they refer to the school law of course. I have to be a chameleon, listen and adapt and still try to get everyone on the same track forward. (Strategist B)

Strategists either broker these actors' different perspectives or facilitate these actors' meetings. Rather than striving for consensus, the strategists point out the importance of constantly inviting new perspectives into the discussion.

In well-functioning processes you usually have a broad consensus, but that is not necessarily what we want from our collaborations, I try to create a friction. When the honeymoon is over and you have actual different perspectives that meet, that's when the good stuff happens. And it's painful sometimes, difficult at other times, but when we look back at such processes we have usually taken a big step forward. (Strategist G)

Forming accountabilities

The fact that the strategists have no organizational or professional decision-making authority means that they are dependent on organizational aspects, such as goals and plans, to perform their work. Consequently, forming accountabilities is a connective strategy that builds conditions for other connective strategies, by making other actors accountable for goals and plans within the strategists' area. In this way, the strategists form an arena in which they are more likely to have influence. Consequently, they work hard to form accountabilities by writing texts that will be included in plans, and presenting statistics and results that illustrate problems that need to be addressed. Even if they carry more of an administrative role regarding goals and plans, they are part of forming these accountabilities, partly through all of the above-mentioned strategies.

I think my most important task is to make sure that my work is included in the municipality's overall management system. Because we have no mandate to make decisions or perform our job ourselves, we need

to get a structure in place with goals that the municipality adopt, which can then be broken down for us to work with and to lobby for [...] I cannot work in a vacuum! (Strategist J)

Contextual dependence

The connective strategies presented above are relational, which means that the strategists themselves are not in full control of them. The outcomes of the strategies, as well as which strategies can be pursued, depend upon the actors to that they relate. Other actors' perceptions and understanding of what social sustainability is, as well as other actors' perceptions of the enacting strategist and what they believe a cross-sector strategist 'should' pursue in their work, affect the strategies. Notably, the cross-sector strategists' work is largely dependent on how professional actors view public health and social sustainability, and the extent to which these actors believe that it relates to their own work and jurisdiction. Some strategists face difficulties in this regard, since public health as a policy problem has shifted over time from managing individuals and lifestyles (operative level) to handling living conditions and society (strategic level). If other actors are not aware of this shift or acknowledge this change, the preconditions for the strategies are poor and the striving of cross-sector strategists remains an ideal.

The politicians in my council want to be seen and heard; that's it. They want us to spend money on things where we see direct results. They want activities where we hand out reflective vests to elderly people and I honestly think my politicians would prefer me to just lead gym classes and to hand out carrots in the park. (Strategist E)

On one hand, the strategies serve to achieve outcomes regarding social sustainability. On the other hand, they build conditions for future strategies and/or enable 'new' outcomes of existing strategies. This contextual dependence implies that different strategists working in different organizational contexts will have different preconditions for pursuing connective strategies. The studied strategists can almost be placed on a continuum ranging from expert knowledge of public health to focusing instead on the subjectivity of local societal challenges, which also affects what strategies they use or need to use in their work. How far this development has come depends as much on the strategist him/herself as it does on the specific municipal context and attached actors. Some of the strategists expressed frustration over other actors' views on social sustainability.

In municipalities where such an institutionalization process moves slowly, the governing politicians are described as being stuck regarding their will to arrange 'simple' activities, as in the quote presented above. In other municipalities, there seem to be growing insights into the concept of social sustainability.

Look at how my issues have developed over the years. Domestic violence is no longer a family matter—it's a political issue, a police issue, it's about crime and violence! Mental health and suicide are areas that have changed remarkably over the past 10 years. I raised the question of suicide prevention in 2008 and it was considered a non-issue; today it is a burning issue considered important to work upon cross-sectorially. The areas I have fought for over the years are no longer considered *my* issues; they are brought to the agenda by a whole community of people, professionals and politicians. (Strategist H)

DISCUSSION

Wicked problems and the construction of jurisdictional boundaries: What cross-sector strategists in Swedish public organizations do to develop connectivity.

The studied cross-sector strategists work to promote and monitor the strategic policy area of social sustainability into the practices of professional actors in local-level governmental organizations. It is in the face of constructing these problems as complex or 'wicked' (cf. Rittel and Webber 1973) that they become matters for the entire public sector and not the narrow responsibility of a single professional jurisdiction. In this sense, social sustainability is not seen as an 'elastic proto-jurisdictional settlement in-the-making' (Block et al., 2019: 594) consisting of weakly held problems that will make sites of inter-professional competition (Abbott 1988). Instead, the knowledge base of the strategic policy areas that cross-sector strategists work with is understood as 'inherently' fragmented and contested (Daviter 2019) and seen as constituting implicit or residual dimensions (Abbott 1988) of a multitude of professional jurisdictions, where the management of such problems should preferably also reflect such a diversity of knowledge views. This is to avoid fragmented or suboptimal action, as well as to develop innovative, flexible, and sustainable solutions to complex societal problems (Klijn and Koppenjan 2014; Krogh 2022). Accordingly, by *triggering* and *selling* certain ideas of the characteristics of social sustainability challenges, the work of cross-sector strategists intends to affect 'the

dictionary of professionally legitimate problems' (Abbott 1988: 44). Their task is to meet professional actors and to make them diagnose, make inference, and sometimes treat (Abbott, 1988) problems in connection to other jurisdictions (Block et al. 2019). But where can the authority of professional groups reside if not in their participation in rationality, acknowledged in the scientific approach of their discipline (Abbott 1988; Freidson 2001)? In the case of strategic policy areas, the expertise of the professional is expressed in their particular framing of the problem (cf. Schön 1963). This means that the professional groups that cross-sector strategists involve in their work must simultaneously *connect* in collaborative settings and *protect* already-established professional boundaries. By *bridging*, *brokering*, and *forming accountabilities* for such increased connections, the cross-sector strategists seek to support the establishment of embedded workspaces (cf. Noordegraaf 2014), as opposed to sheltered jurisdiction; an interactive zone where strategic action and decisions can be produced jointly and across jurisdictional boundaries. In the management of wicked problems, cross-sector strategists seek the knowledge bases of multiple professional actors so that professionals can pursue the organization of and control over work to address wicked problems (cf. Freidson 2001), but supposedly without removing the extraneous qualities of a problem (cf. Abbott 1998) and restricting it only to fragmented, professional relevant information.

However, the openness of a jurisdiction to peripheral problems depends on whether the specific issue will fit the professional's own mapping of its jurisdiction (Abbott 1998), which is only poorly explained without considering the organizational context. In this case, essential contextual features include the incentives from politicians and managers to pursue cross-sector work. The more the 'connective ideal' was shared amongst stakeholders surrounding the strategist (politicians, managers, professionals), the more the cross-sector strategists filled the role of a support function in the connection between different jurisdictions, functioning as an intermediary occupation, supporting, facilitating, and process-leading the establishment of embedded workspaces to induce cross-jurisdictional problem solving. Importantly, the descriptions of the strategies used by cross-sector strategists suggest that professional actors may be incapable of connecting in the absence of such intermediary support functions. This affirms the importance of organizational aspects for supporting connectivity in professional contexts (cf. Noordegraaf and Brock 2021) and the rising academic focus on occupational groups that take on an intermediary role in managing and facilitating complex webs of relations (Anteby et al. 2016).

Professionalism viewed outside-in: Cross-sector strategists as mediators in the organization of work

The ‘connective ideal’ that is described in this piece resides in highly abstracted problems that encourage public organizations to consider a range of available frames emanating from previously separated spheres of abstract knowledge to diagnose, make inference and treat (cf. [Abbott 1988](#)) problems in their local context. While this call for changes in professional action noticeably emanates from the underpinning of formal horizontal policies ([Candel and Biesbroek 2016](#); [Tosun and Lang 2017](#)) and the state as a prime contingency of professionalism ([Freidson 2001](#)), the construction of such ‘wicked’ problems ([Rittel and Webber 1973](#)) emanates from a multi-level construction process in which several contingencies influence the realization of ideal-typical professionalism in the coordination of work vis-à-vis the logics of bureaucracy and the free market.

It is the esoteric knowledge base of professional groups that undergirds the power of the state, meaning that the organization and representation of occupations themselves, and the internal specialization and fragmentation of professionalism ([Freidson 2001](#)), take part in this construction process. State actions are rarely one-way coercive, but rather rely, by default, upon the competence and legitimacy of established professionalism as they ratify arrangements established by them. In a sense, even [Noordegraaf \(2020\)](#) himself serves as an influence in such processes, as he reifies connective professionalism as representing a preferable image of real-life professionalism linked to broader societal conditions and challenges. As illustrated in the present paper, the construction of wicked policy problems also takes place in the local organizational context, where the studied cross-sector strategists pursue different relational patterns of work—or connective strategies—depending on the degree to which this connective ideal is institutionalized and shared amongst key stakeholders.

Increased connections across jurisdictional lines are sought in relation to the social construction of the issue at hand and, perhaps more noticeably, as a means of addressing structural constraints as the bureaucratic logic, market-like New Public Management models and jurisdictional fragmentation fails in organizing work in light of such interpretations of societal problems. However, the bureaucratic model does offer considerable room for variation ([Freidson 2001](#)). The sought-after connectivity does not replace the bureaucratic hierarchy or detailed division of labour; rather, the studied cross-sector strategists put considerable effort into establishing the connective ideal amongst public managers and politicians to incentivize and form accountabilities to suit the collaborative settings.

Specialization and ‘protective’ professionalism remain, and executive and managerial authority are still exercised for the deliberate establishment and supervision of a division of labour, although they sometimes manifest in new forms. Notably, the level at which the umbrella term social sustainability is aggregated means that professional groups hold considerable flexibility in controlling and organizing the content of such work. While the studied cross-sector strategists uphold appointed offices to monitor strategic policy areas, they lack the vertical authority to perform any direct control in the horizontal organizational relations, but instead work to broker and facilitate such relations whilst keeping politicians and managers at what they deem an appropriate distance.

‘Protective’ and ‘connective’ professionalism

By considering the notion of ‘what is new here’, our contribution has focussed on the ‘changing social and cultural circumstances’ ([Noordegraaf, 2020: 208](#)) that call for changes in professional action towards a new connective ideal. Our empirical illustrations address [Noordegraaf’s \(2020\)](#) fundamental question of ‘*why* professional fields may be changing and connecting more to outside worlds’ [219], rather than advancing the assumption that professional identities and actions are in fact adapting or changing as an inescapable consequence of such changes. We leave such investigations to future studies and suggest the use of connective professionalism as a descriptive device to enable analysis of shifts in the practices ([Alvehus in Alvehus et al. 2021](#))—or perhaps novel understandings of the practices—through which ideal type professionalism can be maintained. In this sense, ‘protective’ and ‘connective’ professionalism (cf. [Noordegraaf 2020](#)) are models that co-occur ([Oliver and Avnoon in Alvehus et al. 2021](#)) and may sometimes represent two *mutually reinforcing models* with patterns that facilitate and contribute to the effectiveness of the other in making the organization and control over work performed by occupations. At other times, however, these models may represent *opposing models* or forces (cf. [Eyal in Adams et al. 2020a](#)). This means that a move towards either increased connectivity or protectiveness in professional action can compromise the strengthening of professionalism as a coordinating mechanism in the organization of work ([Freidson 2001](#)).

One of the main criticisms directed at [Noordegraaf’s \(2020\)](#) conceptualization of connective professionalism is that it is described as an ideal, as in something preferable ([Saks in Adams et al. 2020a](#)). This fusion of empirical description and normativity states that professionals are actually becoming less protective and increasingly connected and that this movement should be viewed as a desired goal in light of a range of increasing societal

pressures. As we have illustrated in this paper, the normative claims made by Noordegraaf (2020) are widely shared as an ideal amongst several research disciplines, as well as in practice where the integration and coordination of policies serve to induce a rearrangement of professional and organizational boundaries (e.g., Guarneros-Meza and Martin 2016; Osbourne 2021). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that such increased connective practices are not always productive, there are examples in the literature of when they have been shown to be suboptimal, slowing down constructive decision-making, with little or no evidence that they handle or address the complexity of the societal problem at stake (Andersson 2016). Even though actors have knowledge of their interdependencies, engaging in joint action is extremely difficult and even prone to failure (Huxham and Vangen 2013).

How, where, and when changes in the relationships between 'protective' and 'connective' professionalism occur is, of course, a matter of empirical investigation and such changes do not occur in a vacuum. Rather, investigations of the relation between the models suggest that careful attention should be placed on the societal arrangements and surroundings (Noordegraaf and Brock, 2021) of professional action as mediators for the role of professionalism in the organization of work. Emphasizing professionalism without discussing its interaction with other mechanisms (free market values and bureaucracy) for coordinating work hinders the possibility of addressing Freidson's (2001) central questions of 'where it is both appropriate and reliable, and where it is not' [206] in relation to wider society. Therefore, it is questionable whether we agree with the 'connective ideal' described in our empirical study, or whether we yet embrace the idea that professionals are in fact becoming more connective to other spheres and actors. However, as illustrated in this paper, there are indeed surrounding forces to induce such connections.

CONCLUSIONS

This article illustrates the multi-level construction process that encourages public organizations to consider a range of available frames emanating from previously separated spheres of abstract knowledge to diagnose, make inference, and treat (Abbott 1988) complex societal problems in their local context. The studied cross-sector strategists pursue connective strategies in the form of *triggering*, *selling*, *bridging*, *brokering*, and *forming accountabilities* to promote and monitor issues related to social sustainability and seek to establish embedded workspaces (as opposed to sheltered jurisdiction) where strategic action and decisions can be produced jointly and

across jurisdictional boundaries. Even if these strategies are not to be seen as general for all occupational groups that pursue connective strategies, they show how societal arrangements and surroundings (Noordegraaf and Brock 2021) of professional action mediate the role of professionalism in the organization of work. In the studied case, the need for such practices is grounded in the interpretation of societal problems as 'wicked' problems (Rittel and Webber 1973) and the view that the management of such problems should reflect a diversity of relevant knowledge views and values to develop innovative, flexible, and sustainable solutions to complex societal problems (Krogh 2022). This particular interpretation of societal problems serves to affect professional groups to simultaneously 'connect' in collaborative settings and 'protect' their established professional boundaries while allowing for professionals to pursue the organization of and control over work (cf., Friedson 2001) without removing the extraneous qualities of a presumed 'wicked' problem by restricting it to fragmented professional knowledge.

This contribution expands on the concepts of protective and connective professionalism by highlighting that the calls for changes in professional action towards connectivity are now part of the formal organizational structure of public sector organizations, manifested in the formalized work of cross-sector strategists in Sweden and the growing prevalence of horizontal policy areas across national settings. This development suggests the incapability of professional actors to connect in the absence of intermediary support functions and affirms the importance of organizational aspects for supporting connectivity in professional contexts. Employed as a theoretical concept, connective professionalism point to the ways and forms in which professionalism can be maintained (or not) in contemporary organizational contexts. It can provide the analytical tool to better analyse professional work in settings understood as increasingly complex and interdependent, where there are growing calls for inter-professional collaboration and intensifying engagement in preventing problems rather than simply treating them.

This particular study was performed in Sweden, where the number of policy problems that are formulated as complex and in need of policy integration and cross-sectoral work has increased significantly over the past decades. However, current research suggests that this phenomenon is also part of an international development (Candel and Biesbroek 2016; Tosun and Lang 2017), including the increased importance of strategists in public sector management (Noordegraaf et al. 2014). Further research should investigate this development in other national contexts and sectors and contribute to the

promising venue of research of comparatively studying practices that emerge across contexts and their effects on professional work. To further deepen the understanding of the societal arrangements that mediate the role of professionalism in the organization of work, research taking an ‘outside-in’ perspective on professionalism into account can spur important insights into the ways and forms in which professionalism can be maintained (or not) in contemporary organizational contexts.

FUNDING

This article received funding from Jan Wallanders och Tom Hedelius stiftelse (Grant no P20-0216).

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