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Title: Three team and organisational culture myths and their consequences for sport psychology research and practice

Year: 2020

Version: Accepted version (Final draft)

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Please cite the original version:

McDougall, M., Ronkainen, N., Richardson, D., Littlewood, M., & Nesti, M. (2020). Three team and organisational culture myths and their consequences for sport psychology research and practice. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 13(1), Article 147-162.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1750984X.2019.1638433>

Three Team and Organisational Culture Myths and their Consequences for Sport Psychology Research and Practice

Abstract

In this article, three prevailing myths about team and organisational culture – an increasingly popular topic in applied sport psychology research and practice - are identified, reviewed and challenged. These are; that culture is characterised only by what is shared; that culture is a variable and therefore something that a particular group has; and that culture change involves moving from the old culture to an entirely new one. We present a challenge to each myth through the introduction of alternative theoretical and empirical material, and discuss the implications for sport psychology research and practice. The intent of this endeavour is to stimulate debate on how to best conceptualise and study culture. More broadly, we aim to encourage sport psychologists to consider team and organisational culture in new and/or varied ways, beyond current conceptualisations of consensus, clarity, integration and as a management tool to facilitate operational excellence and on-field athletic success.

Keywords: Elite sport; applied practice; realism; interpretation; conflict

Three Team and Organisational Culture Myths and their Consequences for Sport

Psychology Research and Practice

Myths, in at least in one sense of the word, are beliefs and ideas that are widely held but which are ultimately false, exaggerated or idealised (Cohen, 1969). As they are told and re-told, myths are perpetuated and over time often become the starting point for all discussion in a particular area. It is only when subjected to empirical scrutiny and critical evaluation, that they are revealed as tenuous and less definite than they originally seemed or was claimed.

There has been a tradition of challenging well-established perspectives, or *myths* in sport psychology. For instance, Professor Lew Hardy in his Coleman Griffith Address and subsequent article (1997) outlined the myths of applied consultancy work. Hardy challenged existing thought in three areas; that cognitive anxiety is always harmful to performance and should be reduced whenever possible; that outcome goals and ego orientations have a detrimental effect on a number of performance-related variables, and that internal visual imagery is more beneficial to performance than external visual imagery. More recently, Professor Dave Collins - on award of the 'DSEP Distinguished Contribution Award for 2013' and in the related paper (2014) - described 'Three More Myths of Applied Sport Psychology Practice'. This comprised a constructive challenge to the widely held assumptions that we *are* an applied science; that we *are* focused on client experience; and lastly, that we *do* have a secure basis for development through our literature base. Challenging myths is an essential endeavour because it is through the critical appraisal of current literature, that we can ensure 'our educated guesses are truly educated' (Hardy, 1997, p. 291). Moreover, it is a process that can 'stimulate debate' and 'take things forward' (Collins, 2014, p. 37). In this article, we build on this important tradition and challenge

three myths in an area that increasingly fascinates both research and applied sport psychologists – team and organisational culture.

While we acknowledge that some authors (e.g., Cruickshank et al., 2013a, 2013b) have attempted to delineate their research on team/performance department culture from an organisational level focus, our review incorporates sport psychology literature from both team culture and organisational culture levels of analysis.¹ We do this, firstly on the grounds that we focus on and describe observed commonalities that link this literature in terms of definition, conceptualisations and operationalisation of the culture concept regardless of the level of analysis (e.g., singular, shared entity, focus on unity and as a performance tool of management). For instance, and as an example of necessary conflation, sport psychology researchers have acknowledged their reliance on Edgar Schein's well-cited definition (cf. Cruickshank & Collins, 2012) and conceptualisation (cf. Henriksen, 2015) of organisational culture to ground and advance empirical research at the team level within sport. The development of team culture literature in sport psychology and subsequent culture change research (e.g., Cruickshank, Collins, & Minten, 2013, 2014, 2015) has therefore been abstracted from ideas of organisational culture in other domains. Thus, no matter the level of foci, sport psychology researchers who have attempted to use culture for performance enhancement reasons cannot shed these associations and origins. Secondly, as we have noted, regardless of the precise line of cultural inquiry (team, performance, department, organisation), the extant team and organisational culture literature in sport psychology has been bound by a similar research agenda, which has typically been one of performance enhancement and culture change. There are other commonalities: Most of it has been explicitly leader-centric and managerialist, whereby scholars have developed a

view of culture as a singular, uniformed and easily manipulatable entity. These commonalities bind the body of work and we think challenge the idea that team and organisational culture are completely separate lines of inquiry. Given that we focus closely on these congruities in the myths we present and challenge, we feel it is appropriate (and necessary) to refer to both team and organisational culture literature within sport psychology as part of our broader critique. We therefore primarily adopt the term *culture* throughout the article but make distinctions to guide readership and denote the level of analysis, or particular focus of research, where appropriate.

Moreover, and acknowledging that the meanings of ‘culture’ are numerous and debated (Geertz, 1973; Martin, 2002) for the purposes of this paper, we use the term to refer broadly to cultural symbolic phenomena that people interpret and ascribe meaning to (Alvesson, 2002; Geertz, 1973; Maxwell, 2012). In this way culture is fundamental to an understanding of everyday practices, ideas, events, structures and processes, but is also the setting in which such phenomena are grasped and found meaningful (Alvesson, 2002).

In our critique of identified myths, we draw on critical realist positioning, combining ontological realism (the world is how it is) and constructivist epistemology (our theories and explanations are social constructions) (cf. Maxwell, 2012). From this perspective then, we assume that culture is real – it is embedded in the action and processes of real life and has consequences for how we live and see ourselves (Ortner, 1999) – but that our knowledge of it is far from straight forward and inevitably predicated on interpretation. Consistent with many forms of realism, we do not seek a single ‘correct’ or authoritative understanding (Maxwell, 2012) of culture; but do think it critical that the sport psychology community, still in the early stages of research in this area, searches rigorously and creatively for theories and interpretations

that can more accurately explain, depict and make novel use of the culture concept. We consider this a vital endeavour, since a) the myths identified, suggest there is a general complacency that underlies the uniform approaches to team and organisational culture within sport psychology, and b) because the very fate of culture is argued to hinge on its uses and the diversity with which it is located and examined (cf. Alvesson, Kärreman, & Ybema 2017; Ortner, 1999). Where appropriate, we also integrate critique from explicitly interpretive positions (e.g., Alvesson, 2002; Geertz, 1973; Smircich, 1983) that have contributed to challenging positivist conceptualisations of culture. While different in ontological positioning, realist (critical or otherwise) and interpretivist scholars with social-constructionist preferences share assumptions about complexity of social phenomena and theory-laden knowledge, and realist conceptualisations of culture are often in many ways similar to those advanced in interpretivism and postmodernism (Maxwell, 1999, 2012). Research and commentary from these approaches have consistently offered original critique and alternatives to stagnant and well-worn conceptualisations and accounts of culture. They retain the capacity to do the same for sport psychology research into team and organisational culture.

Team and Organisational Culture Study in Sport Psychology

The study of culture in the performance enhancement discourses of sport psychology has emerged from the growing realisation that individual-focused ‘traditional’ methods of sport psychology were limited in their capacity to help applied practitioners to understand and influence team and organisational performance issues (e.g., Hardy, Jones, & Gould, 1997, Jones, 2002; Nesti, 2004). A number of scholars have since highlighted that expertise in team and organisational culture, as it relates to performance, is necessary for effective sport psychology

delivery (e.g., Cruickshank & Collins, 2012, 2013; Cruickshank et al., 2013, 2014, 2015; Eubank, Nesti, & Cruickshank, 2014; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011; Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; Henriksen, 2015; McDougall & Ronkainen, 2019; Nesti, 2010; Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018, 2019); particularly at the elite-professional levels of sport where more than the application of mental skills techniques is demanded (McDougall, Nesti, & Richardson, 2015; McDougall, Nesti, Richardson & Littlewood, 2017; Nesti, 2010). Working in a broader capacity across the team or organisation, the sport psychologist has often been portrayed as an agent of culture change, intentionally influencing culture (or at least supporting others, such as performance leaders in this task), to facilitate athletic and operational excellence (e.g., Cruickshank & Collins, 2012, 2013; Cruickshank et al., 2013; Eubank et al., 2014; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011; Henriksen, 2015).

While the literature on team and organisational culture has grown steadily, a preoccupation with how to use culture for high performing ends has preceded more focused attempts at first trying to understand what culture is or might be. Aside from some recent attempts to clarify the concept and expand its meaning(s) (McDougall et al., 2017; McDougall & Ronkainen, 2019; Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018, 2019), a number of assumptions about culture (i.e., the myths we will subsequently outline) seem to have been widely accepted within sport psychology without much discussion. This typical line of inquiry has arguably fostered a superficial appreciation of what is widely regarded as a notoriously complex concept (cf. Alvesson, 2002; Geertz, 1973; Martin, 2002; Schein, 2010). As McDougall and Ronkainen (2019) noted, shallow understandings of culture operating in tandem with leader-led and managerialist perspectives have already contributed to considerable intellectual stagnation within

organisational and management culture scholarship. They urged the sport psychology community to be mindful of this point and to recognise that as a discipline we are presently travelling on the same path that led to decline (both in volume and intellectual vitality) in organisational studies almost three decades ago. Alongside Wagstaff and Burton-Wylie (2019), they further recommended that sport psychology scholars do not oversimplify culture, and continue to cultivate a deeper appreciation of it, its foundations, and the variety of perspectives that be used to understand and communicate its meanings.

Our primary aim within this paper is to support a progression of understanding of culture by identifying and challenging three myths that have gathered significant traction within the team and organisational literature. These are: that culture is defined and characterised *only* by what is shared; that culture is a variable and therefore something that a group *has*; and finally, that culture change involves creating a completely *new* culture. We offer observations constructively in the hope they will stimulate debate and dialogue among scholars and practitioners and encourage others to question taken for granted threads that run through the spine of our discipline's team and organisational culture literature.

Myth 1: Culture is Defined and Characterised 'Only' by what is *Shared*

There is almost complete consensus in the performance discourses of sport psychology literature that culture is characterised purely by what is *shared* (e.g., Bailey, Benson & Bruner, 2017; Cruickshank & Collins, 2012, 2013; Cruickshank et al., 2013, 2014, 2015; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011; Henriksen, 2015; McCalla & Fitzpatrick, 2016). In a study of performance leadership, Fletcher and Arnold referred to culture as 'shared beliefs and expectations' (2012, p.

228), while Bailey and colleagues (2017, p. 228) in an examination of the organisational culture of CrossFit used the extensively cited work of organisational scholar Edgar Schein (2010) to define organisational culture as:

a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaption and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (Schein, 2010, p. 18)

Cruickshank and Collins (2012) also drew upon the scholarship of Schein to help define team culture as ‘a dynamic process characterised by the shared values, beliefs, expectations, and practices across the members and generations of a defined group’ (p. 340). This latter definition is one that has been utilised frequently in research and commentary (including our own), as a base from which to further examine ideas of team and organisational culture and associatively ideas of culture change (e.g., Cruickshank et al., 2013, 2014, 2015; Eubank, Nesti & Littlewood, 2017; McCalla & Fitzpatrick, 2016; McDougall, et al., 2015; McDougall et al, 2017).

Following these definitions, successful cultures, at any level of analysis (e.g., team, performance department, organisation), are argued to be ones built on the creation and regulation of shared cultural elements such as beliefs, expectations, values and practices (e.g., Bailey et al., 2017; Cruickshank & Collins, 2012, 2013; Henriksen, 2015). Themes of unity, togetherness, cohesion, coherence, clarity and commonality of goals and vision are frequently extolled (e.g., Bailey et al., 2017, Cruickshank & Collins, 2012, 2013; Cruickshank et al., 2013a, 2013b, 2014, 2015; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011; Henriksen, 2015). There are now also specific courses of action,

models and guides to best practice that performance leaders (and supporting sport psychologists) can adopt to maximise these themes to facilitate a high performing and ‘shared in’ culture (Cruickshank et al., 2013, 2014, 2015; Henriksen, 2015).

The precise strategies and practices recommended within these guidelines and frameworks to engender a high performing culture within a team or organisation are varied, spanning a range of planning, evaluation and management activities that help to promote shared perceptions and acceptance of change (Cruickshank et al., 2014, 2015; Henriksen, 2015). Such activities include, for instance, embedding ‘agreed’ upon group values into day-to-day existence and behaviours (Henriksen, 2015); the subtle and covert shaping of the physical, structural, and psychosocial context in which culture members make choices (Cruickshank et al., 2014); and increasing political influence through seeking social allies and cultural architects and aligning the perceptions of key personnel (Cruickshank et al., 2014, 2015). Those who toe the line and live the desired values will likely be rewarded (Henriksen, 2015). Conversely, it is suggested that some cultural members should be ignored so as to subliminally create shared expectations and adherence to the focus and principles of the performance programme (Cruickshank et al., 2014). From this view, culture involves ‘singing from the same hymn sheet’ (Cruickshank et al., 2015 p. 46), and is labelled as ‘the way things are done around here’ (Cruickshank & Collins, 2013, p. 9; Cruickshank et al., 2013b, p. 323), ‘the way we do things here’ (Bailey et al., 2017, p. 2) or ‘how we do things’ (Henriksen, 2015, p. 146).

This way of describing culture is a cross-discipline commonality indicative of excessive reliance (either knowingly or unwittingly, but often unacknowledged) upon structural-functional traditions that were developed within British social anthropology (Radcliffe Brown,

1952) from the social theory of Emile Durkheim (1893). Central to this school of thought is the idea that social systems have a high degree of cohesion and stability, with unity, consistency and harmony characterising relationships between members of a given group or society. While anthropology and sociology became increasingly critical of this idea of culture, structural-functionalism found new life in its profound, even overbearing influence on the rapid development of the organisational culture concept in the 1980s (Meek, 1988; Ouichi & Wilkins, 1985). It is highly visible in the lifetime work of influential organisational culture authority Edgar Schein (cf. 2010), and therefore often present within a significant body of academic literature that adopts Schein's work as an intellectual default position from which to consider culture. In essence, the premises of structural-functionalism – while not always translated faithfully – have been melded to a distinctly managerialist approach which has seen the concept of culture frequently equated with social cohesion on the one hand and group functioning and effectiveness on the other (Meek, 1988).

The Challenge

In the described conceptualisation of culture, there is limited room for contestation, ambiguity and variability of interpretation. For example, in a critique of Cruickshank et al.'s (2013) study of culture change within a professional sport team, Gilmore (2013) observed that the creative capacity by which group members as culture-makers can resist the dominant culture is missing from the account. It is an omission that we believe extends throughout sport psychology team and organisational culture research to date. Yet, as Gilmore (2013) noted, athlete autobiographies are replete with stories of resistance and rebellion to cultural and managerial regimes. Elite sport environments are also consistently distinguished as socially

complex, volatile and ridden with conflict and unique flows of power (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012; Cruickshank et al., 2014; 2015; Nesti, 2010); characteristics that would seem to necessitate a closer cultural inspection of contestation and uncertainty. However, it seems as though anything not clearly shared in by all group members is viewed in performance enhancement discourses as somehow lying *outside* of culture. The implicit assumption is that culture is a naturally homogenized and homogenizing phenomenon and that anything that is not ‘shared’ in is not cultural, but rather a ‘temporary’ blip to be managed out on the road to unity.

There are other established traditions in wider culture scholarship that resist such neat presentations of culture. For instance, in his phenomenally influential book *Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), anthropologist Clifford Geertz declared that ‘nothing has done more to discredit cultural analysis than the construction of impeccable depictions of formal order in whose actual existence nobody can quite believe’ (p. 18). Indeed, anthropologists have become increasingly at ease with the need to rethink culture in terms of being a singular, shared set of meanings that distinguish one culture from another (Abu-Lughod, 1997) and have offered persistent theoretical and empirical challenges to this outdated conceptualisation (cf. Maxwell, 2012). In organisational domains, many well-known culture researchers have also been sceptical of definitions and accounts of culture that are devoid of attention to difference, variability, conflict, contestation and ambiguity (e.g., Alvesson, 2002; Martin, 2002, 2004; Meyerson & Martin, 1987; Wilmott, 1993). Joanne Martin, for example, suggested that what the shared culture position actually offers is ‘a seductive promise of harmony and value homogeneity that is empirically unmerited and unlikely to be fulfilled’ (Martin, 2004, p. 7). In cross-cultural literature (e.g., Triandis, 1995), scholars have also pointed out that conflict and variability of

interpretation are not only present but also sometimes valued in individualistic cultures (the main context of team and organisational culture research in sport). These challenges denote a common critique directed at ‘impeccable’ accounts of culture; that a concept of culture wed to ideas of consensus and clarity is simply too undifferentiated, too homogeneous. Given various forms of social difference and inequality, how could everyone within a group hold the same worldview and orientation towards it (Ortner, 2005)?

The implication of this challenge is that regardless of the unit of cultural analysis (e.g., team, performance department, or organisation), the conceptualisation and operationalisation of culture must include more than what is coherent and shared simply because cultural members interpret, evaluate and enact it in various ways. Many organisational management researchers have therefore recognised the purposeful existence and development of sub-cultures and countercultures which can support, contest, or be indifferent to *the* culture articulated and espoused by upper management (e.g., Martin, 2002). Elite sport, having undergone rapid professionalisation and expansion within global economies and multicultural societies, are increasingly acknowledged as diverse - occupationally, demographically and culturally (Nesti, 2010; Ronkainen & Blodgett, in press; Ryba, Schinke, Stambulova & Elbe, 2018). It follows that the existence of multiple subcultures imbued with alternative interpretations of how things are - rather than one unitary culture - is likely in most sporting contexts. We may also reasonably add that people are usually part of a number of cultures (both within and outside of an organisation or team) and derive their identity(s) and values from many sources. Various identities and identifications can include, for instance, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, politics, religion, spirituality, family, class, and meaningful experiences (Blodgett, Schinke, McGannon & Fisher,

2015). Cultural learning and the identities that stem from these important sources are unlikely to be completely dissolved, forgotten or entirely ignored, even in the face of managerial processes and the forceful promotion of a unitary culture and a ‘way things are around here’ philosophy.

Together, these ideas challenge notions of a single, shared, monolithic culture; highlighting the very premise as unrealistic and even harmful. For example, in cultural sport psychology (CSP) literature, it has been suggested that athletes negotiate their identities in relation to multiple sources; but that identity can become oppressed and marginalised within sport cultures or particular contexts, such as in the face of discrimination and social exclusion (Blodgett, Ge, Schinke & McGannon, 2017). CSP scholars (e.g., Schinke & Hanrahan, 2009) and applied practitioners (e.g., Nesti, 2004) within our discipline have therefore called for the development of more nuanced understandings of cultural variability in motivation, communication, and meanings that athletes ascribe to sport.

There are also concerns outlined in existing organisational culture literature that consultants who cultivate a perspective of culture based only on what is ‘shared’ risk developing a narrow approach replete with a number of cultural blind spots (cf. Maitland, Hills & Rhind, 2015; Martin, 2002). Specifically, these might include downplaying, dismissing or misunderstanding other types and sources of cultural content that are not shared, clear, or coherent (Martin, 2002). Without this broader view, the complexity of day-to-day cultural life as experienced by coaches, managers, and athletes with marginalised identities or lower status and authority is potentially excluded (Maitland et al., 2015). We suggest that Martin and Meyerson’s organisational culture scholarship (cf. Martin, 2002) and their distinction between integration (what is shared), differentiation (what is contested), and fragmentation (what is unclear and

ambiguous), is particularly useful for sport psychology researchers and practitioners who are looking for practical ways to consider culture beyond patterns of sharedness. For an excellent overview of this influential work and its adoption in wider sport literature, we also direct readership to Maitland et al.'s recent (2015) systematic review of organisational culture in sport.

Myth 2: Culture is a Variable and Therefore Something that a Team or Organisation *has*

In sport psychology team and organisational culture research and commentary, culture is primarily treated as something that a group *has* rather than as something a group *is* (i.e., that permeates its whole existence) (McDougall et al., 2017; Ronkainen & Blodgett, in press). In this way, culture is considered as something that a group has ownership over. As property of a group, culture is framed as a clear entity that is 'out there' in the environment, and therefore easily discoverable. In part, what renders culture discoverable is the distinct features and processes that it is assumed to be comprised of. In sport psychology, the most commonly identified core elements of culture are values, practices, expectations and beliefs that group members share (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012, 2013; Cruickshank et al., 2013, 2014, 2015; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011; McCalla & Fitzpatrick, 2016). It is through the identification of these, and similar elements, that culture is seemingly transformed from a slightly ethereal phenomenon with non-observable properties into something more concrete and that a group can 'possess'.

From this acceptance of a somewhat positivist view of social reality, culture has frequently been operationalised in a manner comparable to how experimental scientists treat variables. As a variable, culture can be isolated, regulated, mechanically manipulated and ultimately changed through strategy, planning and intervention to support the aims and agendas of decision makers. Research within this perspective primarily adopts a functional approach

(Alvesson, 2002), whereby the emphasis becomes how the cultural parts that comprise the whole (such as beliefs, values, and practices) function to maintain social control (Ouchi & Wilkins, 1985). Following in this structural-functionalist tradition, sport and organisational researchers have attempted to distinguish between cultures that are more or less functional (e.g., Cruickshank & Collins, 2012; Henriksen, 2015; Schein, 2010). Certain types of cultures are assumed to lead to desirable outcomes such as employee commitment, motivation, adherence to values and effectiveness. In this way, culture is framed as *the* critical variable to improve or reinvigorate performance.

The intuitive value of thinking about culture in this manner is continually reinforced by the sport media and performance leaders, who regularly espouse the benefits of getting a ‘strong’, ‘right’, or another particular type of culture in place as if it is easily manoeuvrable. At the same time, those who do not fit the idealised culture are often marginalised and could be labelled in various ways such as ‘team cancer’ (McGannon, Hoffmann, Metz, & Schinke, 2012) or lacking mental toughness (Coulter, Mallett, & Singer, 2016). Typically and in relation to Myth 1, this often revolves around the desire for *having* cultures that are underpinned and regulated by consensus, unity, and coordinated action.

The Challenge

Outside of sport psychology, many researchers discuss the idea that culture is a root-metaphor for group understanding. This means that a group *is* a culture, or rather, can be seen as if it is one (e.g., Alvesson, 2002; Smircich, 1983; Wilmott, 1993). Organisations then, for example, are therefore not ‘understood and analysed in material terms, of which culture is a *part*

but in terms of their expressive, ideational, and symbolic aspects' (Smircich, 1983, p. 348). This is a perspective more aligned to the way many anthropologists - especially from the 1970s onwards – have treated culture (Meek, 1988; Wilmott, 1993). It is also more commensurate with how researchers in the CSP movement – a distinct, yet parallel track to culture research in high-performance sport (e.g., Ryba & Wright, 2005; Schinke & Hanrahan, 2009) – have considered culture.

From this alternative position on culture, the social world is conferred a far less concrete (though not necessarily less real) status. As a more fluid and evolving entity culture is no longer viewed as readily quantifiable or easily identifiable (Alvesson, 2002; Geertz, 1973; Smircich, 1983). Instead, it is seen as a creation of people; a product of the network of symbols and meanings that cultural members negotiate, produce and reproduce over time (Alvesson, 2002; Geertz, 1973; Meek, 1988; Smircich, 1983). Culture is thus assumed to be borne of social interaction and deeply embedded in and entwined with the contextual richness of the social life of cultural members (Meek, 1988; Smircich, 1983). It is the degree of this embeddedness that renders culture less easy to discover and why it cannot be mechanically moved around (Meek 1988) as if it is a 'thing' in the natural world.

Neither is culture seen as something that can be imported into a group or created by leadership or consultants with expertise (Meek, 1988), as culture change researchers in sport psychology have been inclined to imply (e.g., Cruickshank et al., 2014, 2015; Henriksen, 2015). Rather, because all members of a group are culture makers (Gilmore, 2013), its creation is emphasised as layered and complex, rather than originating or developing from any one person or source (Meek, 1988). Proponents of the root-metaphor view of culture are thus inclined to

play down the leadership-driven practical usages of culture that are sought by management; a pursuit that many culture purists have historically deemed unworthy of academic attention (Wilmott, 1993). Although this outlook may seem pessimistic and even combative, the link between culture and group performance - while seemingly intuitive – has been elusive, difficult to establish and lacks empirical support (Gregory, Harris, Armenakis & Shook, 2009; Siehl & Martin, 1990).

There is perhaps some valuable middle ground between these two traditions in the study of culture that can be intentionally explored. Awareness and acknowledgement of alternative positions *do* have practical implications for sport psychologists: Firstly, because theory *should* inform our practices (and cyclically, practice should also inform theory, so that organic and phenomenological everyday experiences of social actors within sport contexts are reflected in research); and secondly because culture – no matter the orientation towards it - affects social matters and people in deeply profound and practical ways. Moreover, if culture is not fetishised as a variable, then it is immediately rendered messier, more complex, and troublesome. If not a variable, then culture cannot be identified, controlled, or regulated (Alvesson, 2002; Martin, 2002; Meek, 1988) to the extent suggested in sport psychology culture change literature (e.g., Cruickshank et al., 2014, 2015; Henriksen, 2015). This, in turn, affects how sport psychologists ‘sell’ their culture expertise and indeed, their overall competency. Sport psychologists who are less inclined to describe and operationalise culture as a variable may find that there is substantially less receptivity to their culture views from sport organisations and performance leaders who are seeking cultural solutions to practical problems (Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018).

Although the harder realities of elite sport may seem incompatible with this alternative concept of culture, we believe that cultivation of this perspective also affords an opportunity for sport psychologists. A less mechanistic conceptualisation of culture need not be mutually exclusive with the view that it is important and influences people. Nor does it mean that aspects of it cannot be shaped by individual action (Meek, 1988). Conceivably, sport psychologists may actually be able to deploy their culture expertise more effectively once they have accepted culture cannot be consciously manipulated as a whole, and that it does not stop and start on command. Centralising meaning making and prioritising understanding above concerns with function (e.g., Geertz, 1973) can also inspire both subtle and deep analyses of culture that manage to tease out the contextual richness, cultural diversity as well as the importance of subjectivity and the agency of intentional social actors (e.g., Ortner, 1999). From a consulting perspective, this point of difference with the ‘culture-as-a-variable’ view is substantial. It suggests that the central concern is not to locate culture and link it to other analytically distinct variables, but to understand how culture is already interwoven with and influencing important practical matters such as leadership, strategy, group member behaviour and team/organisational performance.

Myth 3: Culture Change Involves Creating a *new* Culture

Central to the functional concerns of team and organisational culture scholars in sport psychology is the process of culture change and in particular, the move towards a *new* culture. It is a fascination induced by growing interest in organisational and management processes, performance leadership and the need for sport psychologists to be more effective with groups (e.g., Cruickshank & Collins, 2012; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011). Culture change is viewed as a

way for performance leaders and supporting sport psychologists to meet unrelenting demands for success and avoid the consequences for not delivering it, such as termination of employment (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012). According to Cruickshank and Collins (2012), this process typically involves a change *in* culture (i.e., doing what's already being done but better) or a change *of* culture (i.e., introducing new principles/practices). It is in the latter that the idea of an entirely new culture is most evident. Change and successful optimisation of an underperforming culture depend on group member acceptance that the *old* (singular) culture is no longer working or supporting goal attainment, or that the new culture is more rewarding or appealing (Cruickshank & Collins, 2013; Henriksen, 2015).

For instance, in a detailed case study of culture change in the Danish orienteering team, Henriksen (2015) repeatedly referred to the shift from the old culture to a new culture. He described 'the rocky road to the new culture' (p. 146), 'designing the pillars of the new culture' (p. 147), and a 'ritualistic goodbye to the old culture' (p. 149). During the change journey - spanning initial needs assessment to change program evaluation - anything that opposed this change was cast as villainous, while the new values to be inculcated into the team were heralded as better and heroic. New values described were ultimately positive, inspiring and agreed upon, and became accepted as the team's espoused values. For culture change to succeed, it was advised that these espoused values must be enacted by team members in daily practices and normal routines so that they become part of the team's identity and basic assumptions.

Reflecting on the case study, the culture change (i.e., from old to new) was assessed as successful by Henriksen (2015). One year after the new culture had been completely embedded, the program was evaluated, with group members in agreement that the problematic old culture

was no longer a troublesome characteristic of the team. In other work, Fletcher and Arnold (2011) also articulated ‘the creation of a culture’ (p. 234); as do Cruickshank and colleagues across a number of articles, while emphasising that the process of culture change is never-ending (Cruickshank et al., 2014, 2015).

The Challenge

The myth being perpetuated here is that culture change involves moving from an *old* culture to an entirely *new* one. This is an appealing, but a particularly misleading myth, even if it is meant in more symbolic, rather than literal terms. Wider literature and theory from anthropology, sociology and organisational management offers several points of understanding that do not support the premise of culture shifting so completely whenever some form of change or new practice is implemented (e.g., Martin, 2002; Meek, 1988). While recognising that culture is not a static entity, but fluid, importantly, all cultures nonetheless retain elements that have been historically important and that support the group’s existence, growth, and sense of meaning and tradition (e.g., Geertz, 1973; Schein, 2010).

Sport lends itself easily to the sourcing of such examples. The New Zealand All Blacks are unimaginable without the Haka. In football, the legendary *This is Anfield* sign that Liverpool FC players ritually touch as they take the field has endured redesign, restoration and refinement of tradition, but has nonetheless remained (both physically and with regards to symbolic performance). For instance and most recently, Liverpool FC manager Jurgen Klopp ordered players *not* to touch the sign before a game. It was his opinion that the current squad of players - in trying to emulate the glory of previous generations - must earn the right to touch the sign as

they take the field. In this example, new practice indicates how cultural meaning is preserved even in the face of new and amended practices and rituals.

Cultural symbols and artefacts are valued and protected by a group because they relate to identity (Hatch, 1993), traditions, customs and a *way of life* (Harris, 1964). As such, they will not be given up easily even under demands from authority, suggesting that culture cannot be changed as a whole and may not be malleable or entirely susceptible to leader or practitioner-led change. If some of these inner workings of culture seem incompatible with agendas of carefully planned change, then in part, this is because they are tied to concepts of structure, hierarchy power and resistance. By affording these ideas minimal attention, or grounding them primarily in leader-centric points of view, sport psychology literature – and particularly culture change literature - has arguably provided unrealistic expectations that practitioners can easily change a culture in deliberate ways, even into an entirely new one if that is what is required. The danger, however, of such an action-orientated approach, is that the sport psychologist risks misunderstanding the meanings that people in the sporting environment assign, which can lead to a loss of trust in the practitioner (Balague, 1999). Experienced organisational culture consultants try to access important cultural assumptions before seeking to change what they do not yet understand (Schein, 2010). Nesti (2010) referred to this in the context of sport psychology delivery and emphasised the importance of reading the cultural matrix and delivering a service that is *informed* by the existing culture.

With regard to this last point, sport psychologists must be mindful not to fall foul of a progressive mindset, where new is always seen as better, and old is automatically thought of as bad or somehow burdensome. The dangers of this type of thinking have been critiqued

456 extensively by some of our finest minds of the last few centuries, including Nietzsche, Erich
457 Fromm and Karl Marx, amongst others. In studies of culture and change – which in many ways
458 seek to bridge the past, present and future - traditions and history can also be viewed as (at least)
459 potentially good, powerful and worth preserving. To support the development of this type of
460 thinking, sport psychology researchers and practitioners might seek to first become more familiar
461 with the concept of culture itself and how its many forms, such as stories, myths, rituals and
462 language contain, carry and symbolise cultural meaning. Correspondingly, they will have to
463 sharpen the tools of interpretation that will help them to analyse and decipher layered cultural
464 symbols and what they might mean in terms of local knowledge. This could be done, for
465 example, through greater education and training in the ethnographic methods of the
466 anthropologist, or wider incorporation of contemporary organisational methods of understanding
467 complex environments, such as organisational sensemaking (cf. Weick, 1995). More generally, it
468 perhaps also speaks to the willingness and need to locate cultural analysis within and alongside
469 analyses of broader socio-political events and processes; which often necessitate attention to
470 forms of cultural history and ideas of struggle and change (Ortner, 1999). Work in this area may
471 benefit considerably from critical realist ideas of more *lasting* ideational and material structures
472 that constrain or enable the actions of individual actors. For example, Layder (2005) argued that
473 while social structures are undeniably created and shaped by human endeavours, they are noted
474 to pre-exist and endure beyond the lifespan of the individuals who create them through their
475 actions and intentions; and in this way are hard to change and not always readily apparent at the
476 everyday level of experience, meaning that we cannot be completely sure what the effects of our
477 actions upon them will be (as cited in Sealey, 2007). A critical realist approach to culture and

associated ideas of change therefore enables researchers to challenge positivist ideas of culture as a variable that is easy to isolate and modify, while encouraging greater focus on social structures, that while not always directly observable are nonetheless theorised and shown to be real with real consequences for the actors involved.

Concluding Remarks

In this article, we have identified three team and organisational culture myths that are consistently presented in sport psychology literature and have outlined their potential problematic consequences for research and practice. These are (1) that culture is defined and characterised only by what is shared; (2) that culture is a variable and something a team or an organisation has; and (3) that culture change involves a complete transformation from the old culture to an entirely new one. Unquestioned, these myths have the potential to constrain rather than broaden sport psychology understanding of culture. With this in mind, we have discussed alternative culture ideas and theories from wider sources of cultural research. We suggested that conceptualisations of culture must also include attention to what is different, contested and ambiguous; that culture is not a variable but rather permeates all aspects of the groups' existence; and lastly, that culture does not shift from an old one to an entirely new one whenever new practices and principles are introduced.

There are a number of ways researchers and practitioners could build on or examine some of these counterarguments, should they wish to. For instance, they could draw on the organisational scholarship of Martin and Meyerson (e.g., Martin, 2002; Martin & Meyerson, 1987) to garner a broader perspective on what might be considered 'cultural'; mitigating the

499 tautological risk of defining culture in terms of what is shared and obvious and then only seeking
500 out confirming evidence, while omitting the rest. Indeed, in sport psychology, CSP has emerged
501 in response to the need to engage with sociocultural difference and diversity (Ronkainen &
502 Blodgett, in press; Schinke & Hanrahan, 2009). In line with recent observations (McDougall &
503 Ronkainen, 2019; Ronkainen & Blodgett, in press; Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018), we suggest
504 that CSP literature and perspectives can become a valuable resource for sport psychologists
505 seeking to capture the ways in which culture is not necessarily shared within sport contexts.
506 Sport psychologists might also become more familiar with the anthropological essays and theory
507 of Clifford Geertz and the subsequent work that his interpretivist re-theorisation of the culture
508 concept inspired across the social sciences. Understanding this important movement and modern
509 iterations of it that address important issues of agency, power, identity and so forth, will help to
510 develop studies and applied practices capable of producing more rigorous, sophisticated and
511 ‘thick’ rather than ‘thin’ cultural analyses. More broadly, we encourage greater use of realist
512 approaches to the study of culture, which have been used effectively as a basis for noteworthy
513 social and cultural research in anthropology (e.g., Barth, 1987) and are increasingly utilised
514 effectively in organisation and management studies (cf. Fleetwood & Ackroyd, 2004). A
515 consideration of some of these suggestions can help to challenge the underlying positivist tones
516 within functional conceptualisations of culture that are dominating sport psychology research
517 into team and organisational culture: That is, that culture is a tool that leaders and sport
518 psychologists can use to easily manipulate the environment – and those in it – to achieve unity,
519 consensus and ultimately high performance on the athletic field and wider
520 operational/organisational excellence off it.

Finally, we reiterate the call for all culture scholars in sport psychology to outline more clearly, and thoroughly their epistemological position and what conceptualisation(s) of culture has informed their work (McDougall et al., 2017; McDougall & Ronkainen, 2019; Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018). This will sharpen our cultural dialogue and practices. Ultimately, perhaps this also speaks to the need to place greater emphasis on the philosophy upon which our understanding rests if we are to make some sense of the multifaceted, difficult concept that is culture. That is, while a diversity of theory is necessary to do justice to the variety, complexity, and richness of culture we must also start with reality; a phenomenology of culture that considers what it is before we compartmentalise, categorise, measure and try to utilise it.

Notes

¹ We direct interested readership to a valuable exchange on the matter (cf. Cruickshank et al., 2013a, 2013b; Gilmore, 2013).

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the anonymous reviewers for their time and constructive comments.

Disclosure Statement

There is no conflict of interest to report.

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