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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

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

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

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

42 three myths in an area that increasingly fascinates both research and applied sport psychologists
43 – team and organisational culture.
44 While we acknowledge that some authors (e.g., Cruickshank et al., 2013a, 2013b) have
45 attempted to delineate their research on team/performance department culture from an
46 organisational level focus, our review incorporates sport psychology literature from both team
47 culture and organisational culture levels of analysis.[1] We do this, firstly on the grounds that we
48 focus on and describe observed commonalities that link this literature in terms of definition,
49 conceptualisations and operationalisation of the culture concept regardless of the level of
50 analysis (e.g., singular, shared entity, focus on unity and as a performance tool of management).
51 For instance, and as an example of necessary conflation, sport psychology researchers have
52 acknowledged their reliance on Edgar Schein's well-cited definition (cf. Cruickshank & Collins,
53 2012) and conceptualisation (cf. Henriksen, 2015) of organisational culture to ground and
54 advance empirical research at the team level within sport. The development of team culture
55 literature in sport psychology and subsequent culture change research (e.g., Cruickshank,
56 Collins, & Minten, 2013, 2014, 2015) has therefore been abstracted from ideas of organisational
57 culture in other domains. Thus, no matter the level of foci, sport psychology researchers who
58 have attempted to use culture for performance enhancement reasons cannot shed these
59 associations and origins. Secondly, as we have noted, regardless of the precise line of cultural
60 inquiry (team, performance, department, organisation), the extant team and organisational culture
61 literature in sport psychology has been bound by a similar research agenda, which has typically
62 been one of performance enhancement and culture change. There are other commonalities: Most
63 of it has been explicitly leader-centric and managerialist, whereby scholars have developed a

64 view of culture as a singular, uniformed and easily manipulatable entity. These commonalities
65 bind the body of work and we think challenge the idea that team and organisational culture are
66 completely separate lines of inquiry. Given that we focus closely on these congruities in the
67 myths we present and challenge, we feel it is appropriate (and necessary) to refer to both team
68 and organisational culture literature within sport psychology as part of our broader critique. We
69 therefore primarily adopt the term *culture* throughout the article but make distinctions to guide
70 readership and denote the level of analysis, or particular focus of research, where appropriate.
71 Moreover, and acknowledging that the meanings of 'culture' are numerous and debated
72 (Geertz, 1973; Martin, 2002) for the purposes of this paper, we use the term to refer broadly to
73 cultural symbolic phenomena that people interpret and ascribe meaning to (Alvesson, 2002;
74 Geertz, 1973; Maxwell, 2012). In this way culture is fundamental to an understanding of
75 everyday practices, ideas, events, structures and processes, but is also the setting in which such
76 phenomena are grasped and found meaningful (Alvesson, 2002).
77 In our critique of identified myths, we draw on critical realist positioning, combining
78 ontological realism (the world is how it is) and constructivist epistemology (our theories and
79 explanations are social constructions) (cf. Maxwell, 2012). From this perspective then, we
80 assume that culture is real – it is embedded in the action and processes of real life and has
81 consequences for how we live and see ourselves (Ortner, 1999) – but that our knowledge of it is
82 far from straight forward and inevitably predicated on interpretation. Consistent with many
83 forms of realism, we do not seek a single 'correct' or authoritative understanding (Maxwell,
84 2012) of culture; but do think it critical that the sport psychology community, still in the early
85 stages of research in this area, searches rigorously and creatively for theories and interpretations

86 that can more accurately explain, depict and make novel use of the culture concept. We consider
87 this a vital endeavour, since a) the myths identified, suggest there is a general complacency that
88 underlies the uniform approaches to team and organisational culture within sport psychology,
89 and b) because the very fate of culture is argued to hinge on its uses and the diversity with which
90 it is located and examined (cf. Alvesson, Kärreman, & Ybema 2017; Ortner, 1999). Where
91 appropriate, we also integrate critique from explicitly interpretive positions (e.g., Alvesson,
92 2002; Geertz, 1973; Smircich, 1983) that have contributed to challenging positivist
93 conceptualisations of culture. While different in ontological positioning, realist (critical or
94 otherwise) and interpretivist scholars with social-constructionist preferences share assumptions
95 about complexity of social phenomena and theory-laden knowledge, and realist
96 conceptualisations of culture are often in many ways similar to those advanced in interpretivism
97 and postmodernism (Maxwell, 1999, 2012). Research and commentary from these approaches
98 have consistently offered original critique and alternatives to stagnant and well-worn
99 conceptualisations and accounts of culture. They retain the capacity to do the same for sport
100 psychology research into team and organisational culture.

101 **Team and Organisational Culture Study in Sport Psychology**

102 The study of culture in the performance enhancement discourses of sport psychology has
103 emerged from the growing realisation that individual-focused 'traditional' methods of sport
104 psychology were limited in their capacity to help applied practitioners to understand and
105 influence team and organisational performance issues (e.g., Hardy, Jones, & Gould, 1997, Jones,
106 2002; Nesti, 2004). A number of scholars have since highlighted that expertise in team and
107 organisational culture, as it relates to performance, is necessary for effective sport psychology

108 delivery (e.g., Cruickshank & Collins, 2012, 2013; Cruickshank et al., 2013, 2014, 2015;
109 Eubank, Nesti, & Cruickshank, 2014; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011; Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009;
110 Henriksen, 2015; McDougall & Ronkainen, 2019; Nesti, 2010; Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018,
111 2019); particularly at the elite-professional levels of sport where more than the application of
112 mental skills techniques is demanded (McDougall, Nesti, & Richardson, 2015; McDougall,
113 Nesti, Richardson & Littlewood, 2017; Nesti, 2010). Working in a broader capacity across the
114 team or organisation, the sport psychologist has often been portrayed as an agent of culture
115 change, intentionally influencing culture (or at least supporting others, such as performance
116 leaders in this task), to facilitate athletic and operational excellence (e.g., Cruickshank & Collins,
117 2012, 2013; Cruickshank et al., 2013; Eubank et al., 2014; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011; Henriksen,
118 2015).

119 While the literature on team and organisational culture has grown steadily, a
120 preoccupation with how to use culture for high performing ends has preceded more focused
121 attempts at first trying to understand what culture is or might be. Aside from some recent
122 attempts to clarify the concept and expand its meaning(s) (McDougall et al., 2017; McDougall &
123 Ronkainen, 2019; Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018, 2019), a number of assumptions about
124 culture (i.e., the myths we will subsequently outline) seem to have been widely accepted within
125 sport psychology without much discussion. This typical line of inquiry has arguably fostered a
126 superficial appreciation of what is widely regarded as a notoriously complex concept (cf.
127 Alvesson, 2002; Geertz, 1973; Martin, 2002; Schein, 2010). As McDougall and Ronkainen
128 (2019) noted, shallow understandings of culture operating in tandem with leader-led and
129 managerialist perspectives have already contributed to considerable intellectual stagnation within

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

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

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

146 There is almost complete consensus in the performance discourses of sport psychology
147 literature that culture is characterised purely by what is *shared* (e.g., Bailey, Benson & Bruner,
148 2017; Cruickshank & Collins, 2012, 2013; Cruickshank et al., 2013, 2014, 2015; Fletcher &
149 Arnold, 2011; Henriksen, 2015; McCalla & Fitzpatrick, 2016). In a study of performance
150 leadership, Fletcher and Arnold referred to culture as 'shared beliefs and expectations' (2012, p.

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

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

158 Cruickshank and Collins (2012) also drew upon the scholarship of Schein to help define
159 team culture as 'a dynamic process characterised by the shared values, beliefs, expectations, and
160 practices across the members and generations of a defined group' (p. 340). This latter definition
161 is one that has been utilised frequently in research and commentary (including our own), as a
162 base from which to further examine ideas of team and organisational culture and associatively
163 ideas of culture change (e.g., Cruickshank et al., 2013, 2014, 2015; Eubank, Nesti & Littlewood,
164 2017; McCalla & Fitzpatrick, 2016; McDougall, et al., 2015; McDougall et al, 2017).

165 Following these definitions, successful cultures, at any level of analysis (e.g., team,
166 performance department, organisation), are argued to be ones built on the creation and regulation
167 of shared cultural elements such as beliefs, expectations, values and practices (e.g., Bailey et al.,
168 2017; Cruickshank & Collins, 2012, 2013; Henriksen, 2015). Themes of unity, togetherness,
169 cohesion, coherence, clarity and commonality of goals and vision are frequently extolled (e.g.,
170 Bailey et al., 2017, Cruickshank & Collins, 2012, 2013; Cruickshank et al., 2013a, 2013b, 2014,
171 2015; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011; Henriksen, 2015). There are now also specific courses of action,

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

175 The precise strategies and practices recommended within these guidelines and
176 frameworks to engender a high performing culture within a team or organisation are varied,
177 spanning a range of planning, evaluation and management activities that help to promote shared
178 perceptions and acceptance of change (Cruickshank et al., 2014, 2015; Henriksen, 2015). Such
179 activities include, for instance, embedding 'agreed' upon group values into day-to-day existence
180 and behaviours (Henriksen, 2015); the subtle and covert shaping of the physical, structural, and
181 psychosocial context in which culture members make choices (Cruickshank et al., 2014); and
182 increasing political influence through seeking social allies and cultural architects and aligning the
183 perceptions of key personnel (Cruickshank et al., 2014, 2015). Those who toe the line and live
184 the desired values will likely be rewarded (Henriksen, 2015). Conversely, it is suggested that
185 some cultural members should be ignored so as to subliminally create shared expectations and
186 adherence to the focus and principles of the performance programme (Cruickshank et al., 2014).
187 From this view, culture involves 'singing from the same hymn sheet' (Cruickshank et al., 2015
188 p. 46), and is labelled as 'the way things are done around here' (Cruickshank & Collins, 2013, p.
189 9; Cruickshank et al., 2013b, p. 323), 'the way we do things here' (Bailey et al., 2017, p. 2) or
190 'how we do things' (Henriksen, 2015, p. 146).

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

194 1952) from the social theory of Emile Durkheim (1893). Central to this school of thought is the
195 idea that social systems have a high degree of cohesion and stability, with unity, consistency and
196 harmony characterising relationships between members of a given group or society. While
197 anthropology and sociology became increasingly critical of this idea of culture, structural-
198 functionalism found new life in its profound, even overbearing influence on the rapid
199 development of the organisational culture concept in the 1980s (Meek, 1988; Ouichi & Wilkins,
200 1985). It is highly visible in the lifetime work of influential organisational culture authority
201 Edgar Schein (cf. 2010), and therefore often present within a significant body of academic
202 literature that adopts Schein's work as an intellectual default position from which to consider
203 culture. In essence, the premises of structural-functionalism – while not always translated
204 faithfully – have been melded to a distinctly managerialist approach which has seen the concept
205 of culture frequently equated with social cohesion on the one hand and group functioning and
206 effectiveness on the other (Meek, 1988).

207 **The Challenge**

208 In the described conceptualisation of culture, there is limited room for contestation,
209 ambiguity and variability of interpretation. For example, in a critique of Cruickshank et al.'s
210 (2013) study of culture change within a professional sport team, Gilmore (2013) observed that
211 the creative capacity by which group members as culture-makers can resist the dominant culture
212 is missing from the account. It is an omission that we believe extends throughout sport
213 psychology team and organisational culture research to date. Yet, as Gilmore (2013) noted,
214 athlete autobiographies are replete with stories of resistance and rebellion to cultural and
215 managerial regimes. Elite sport environments are also consistently distinguished as socially

216 complex, volatile and ridden with conflict and unique flows of power (Cruickshank & Collins,
217 2012; Cruickshank et al., 2014; 2015; Nesti, 2010); characteristics that would seem to necessitate
218 a closer cultural inspection of contestation and uncertainty. However, it seems as though
219 anything not clearly shared in by all group members is viewed in performance enhancement
220 discourses as somehow lying *outside* of culture. The implicit assumption is that culture is a
221 naturally homogenized and homogenizing phenomenon and that anything that is not 'shared' in
222 is not cultural, but rather a 'temporary' blip to be managed out on the road to unity.

223 There are other established traditions in wider culture scholarship that resist such neat
224 presentations of culture. For instance, in his phenomenally influential book *Interpretation of*
225 *Cultures* (1973), anthropologist Clifford Geertz declared that 'nothing has done more to discredit
226 cultural analysis than the construction of impeccable depictions of formal order in whose actual
227 existence nobody can quite believe' (p. 18). Indeed, anthropologists have become increasingly at
228 ease with the need to rethink culture in terms of being a singular, shared set of meanings that
229 distinguish one culture from another (Abu-Lughod, 1997) and have offered persistent theoretical
230 and empirical challenges to this outdated conceptualisation (cf. Maxwell, 2012). In
231 organisational domains, many well-known culture researchers have also been sceptical of
232 definitions and accounts of culture that are devoid of attention to difference, variability, conflict,
233 contestation and ambiguity (e.g., Alvesson, 2002; Martin, 2002, 2004; Meyerson & Martin,
234 1987; Wilmott, 1993). Joanne Martin, for example, suggested that what the shared culture
235 position actually offers is 'a seductive promise of harmony and value homogeneity that is
236 empirically unmerited and unlikely to be fulfilled' (Martin, 2004, p. 7). In cross-cultural
237 literature (e.g., Triandis, 1995), scholars have also pointed out that conflict and variability of

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

244 The implication of this challenge is that regardless of the unit of cultural analysis (e.g.,
245 team, performance department, or organisation), the conceptualisation and operationalisation of
246 culture must include more than what is coherent and shared simply because cultural members
247 interpret, evaluate and enact it in various ways. Many organisational management researchers
248 have therefore recognised the purposeful existence and development of sub-cultures and
249 countercultures which can support, contest, or be indifferent to *the* culture articulated and
250 espoused by upper management (e.g., Martin, 2002). Elite sport, having undergone rapid
251 professionalisation and expansion within global economies and multicultural societies, are
252 increasingly acknowledged as diverse - occupationally, demographically and culturally (Nesti,
253 2010; Ronkainen & Blodgett, in press; Ryba, Schinke, Stambulova & Elbe, 2018). It follows that
254 the existence of multiple subcultures imbued with alternative interpretations of how things are -
255 rather than one unitary culture - is likely in most sporting contexts. We may also reasonably add
256 that people are usually part of a number of cultures (both within and outside of an organisation or
257 team) and derive their identity(s) and values from many sources. Various identities and
258 identifications can include, for instance, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, politics, religion,
259 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

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

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

287 In sport psychology team and organisational culture research and commentary, culture is
288 primarily treated as something that a group *has* rather than as something a group *is* (i.e., that
289 permeates its whole existence) (McDougall et al., 2017; Ronkainen & Blodgett, in press). In this
290 way, culture is considered as something that a group has ownership over. As property of a group,
291 culture is framed as a clear entity that is 'out there' in the environment, and therefore easily
292 discoverable. In part, what renders culture discoverable is the distinct features and processes that
293 it is assumed to be comprised of. In sport psychology, the most commonly identified core
294 elements of culture are values, practices, expectations and beliefs that group members share
295 (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012, 2013; Cruickshank et al., 2013, 2014, 2015; Fletcher & Arnold,
296 2011; McCalla & Fitzpatrick, 2016). It is through the identification of these, and similar
297 elements, that culture is seemingly transformed from a slightly ethereal phenomenon with non-
298 observable properties into something more concrete and that a group can 'possess'.

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

304 (Alvesson, 2002), whereby the emphasis becomes how the cultural parts that comprise the whole
305 (such as beliefs, values, and practices) function to maintain social control (Ouichi & Wilkins,
306 1985). Following in this structural-functionalist tradition, sport and organisational researchers
307 have attempted to distinguish between cultures that are more or less functional (e.g., Cruickshank
308 & Collins, 2012; Henriksen, 2015; Schein, 2010). Certain types of cultures are assumed to lead
309 to desirable outcomes such as employee commitment, motivation, adherence to values and
310 effectiveness. In this way, culture is framed as *the* critical variable to improve or reinvigorate
311 performance.

312 The intuitive value of thinking about culture in this manner is continually reinforced by
313 the sport media and performance leaders, who regularly espouse the benefits of getting a
314 'strong', 'right', or another particular type of culture in place as if it is easily manoeuvrable. At
315 the same time, those who do not fit the idealised culture are often marginalised and could be
316 labelled in various ways such as 'team cancer' (McGannon, Hoffmann, Metz, & Schinke, 2012)
317 or lacking mental toughness (Coulter, Mallett, & Singer, 2016). Typically and in relation to Myth
318 1, this often revolves around the desire for *having* cultures that are underpinned and regulated by
319 consensus, unity, and coordinated action.

320 **The Challenge**

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

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

331 From this alternative position on culture, the social world is conferred a far less concrete
332 (though not necessarily less real) status. As a more fluid and evolving entity culture is no longer
333 viewed as readily quantifiable or easily identifiable (Alvesson, 2002; Geertz, 1973; Smircich,
334 1983). Instead, it is seen as a creation of people; a product of the network of symbols and
335 meanings that cultural members negotiate, produce and reproduce over time (Alvesson, 2002;
336 Geertz, 1973; Meek, 1988; Smircich, 1983). Culture is thus assumed to be borne of social
337 interaction and deeply embedded in and entwined with the contextual richness of the social life
338 of cultural members (Meek, 1988; Smircich, 1983). It is the degree of this embeddedness that
339 renders culture less easy to discover and why it cannot be mechanically moved around (Meek
340 1988) as if it is a 'thing' in the natural world.

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

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

353 There is perhaps some valuable middle ground between these two traditions in the study
354 of culture that can be intentionally explored. Awareness and acknowledgement of alternative
355 positions *do* have practical implications for sport psychologists: Firstly, because theory *should*
356 inform our practices (and cyclically, practice should also inform theory, so that organic and
357 phenomenological everyday experiences of social actors within sport contexts are reflected in
358 research); and secondly because culture – no matter the orientation towards it - affects social
359 matters and people in deeply profound and practical ways. Moreover, if culture is not fetishised
360 as a variable, then it is immediately rendered messier, more complex, and troublesome. If not a
361 variable, then culture cannot be identified, controlled, or regulated (Alvesson, 2002; Martin,
362 2002; Meek, 1988) to the extent suggested in sport psychology culture change literature (e.g.,
363 Cruickshank et al., 2014, 2015; Henriksen, 2015). This, in turn, affects how sport psychologists
364 'sell' their culture expertise and indeed, their overall competency. Sport psychologists who are
365 less inclined to describe and operationalise culture as a variable may find that there is
366 substantially less receptivity to their culture views from sport organisations and performance
367 leaders who are seeking cultural solutions to practical problems (Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie,
368 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

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

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

410 Reflecting on the case study, the culture change (i.e., from old to new) was assessed as
411 successful by Henriksen (2015). One year after the new culture had been completely embedded,
412 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

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

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

453 With regard to this last point, sport psychologists must be mindful not to fall foul of a
454 progressive mindset, where new is always seen as better, and old is automatically thought of as
455 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.

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

530 **Notes**

531 [1] We direct interested readership to a valuable exchange on the matter (cf. Cruickshank et al.,
532 2013a, 2013b; Gilmore, 2013).

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