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Walking the Middle Line: Organizational Culture Work in Sport

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ABSTRACT

Organizational culture is typically perceived a variable that organizations “have” that can be manipulated for a competitive advantage. Conversely, some scholars hold the view that organizations “are” the culture and are consistently and dynamically shaped by members. Drawing from 20 months of organizational culture work in a military sports team, we illustrate how SPPs might go beyond a functionalist approach to organizational culture work. We establish our own stance on the organizational culture debate and describe our work across five phases. We conclude by offering several recommendations for practitioners working on organizational culture.

KEYWORDS

Applied sport psychology; change management; long-term intervention; subjectivist-interpretivist approach; team performance; values

Over the past decade, sport psychology scholars have increasingly argued that individuals within elite sport (e.g., athletes, coaches, support staff) do not operate in a vacuum and that many determinants for well-being and performance organizational in nature (see Wagstaff, 2019). In turn, there has been a noticeable shift within the field of sport psychology from focusing primarily on individual psychological strengths to a greater acknowledgement of wider contextual influences on performance and wellbeing (see Schinke & Hanrahan, 2009; Wagstaff, 2019). As part of this shift, organizational culture (OC) has gained prominence and is something that sport psychology practitioners (SPPs) and their clients wish to influence in high-performance contexts. Nevertheless, a lack of conceptual consensus between the sport psychology research community poses a significant challenge for practitioners seeking to plan and deliver OC interventions. In this article we critically discuss two approaches to OC, before presenting 20 months of culture work.

Organizational culture in sport

Scholars have connected OC with effective organizational functioning (e.g., Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009), talent development (e.g., Henriksen, 2015;

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Storm et al., 2022), and performance outcomes at Olympic Games (e.g., Gould et al., 2002; Greenleaf et al., 2001). Prominent within such literature is the view that it is not simply physical, technical or tactical ability that constitutes success, but also the preparation and performance environment, which SPPs have long been encouraged to consider when working to achieve desirable outcomes (see Wagstaff, 2016). Despite the growing prominence of OC within the academic literature and the scope of SPPs' applied work, there currently exists no conceptual consensus on what OC is in the sport context or how to “do” culture work. Indeed, numerous definitions, perceptions and approaches are presented within the OC literature. While scholars have noted this conceptual vagary and encouraged researchers and SPPs to seek conceptual congruence (e.g., Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018), ambiguity regarding the “what” and “how” of OC work in sport remains, thereby creating challenges for SPPs planning and delivering OC work (e.g., Henriksen, 2015). With such difficulties in mind, the aim of this research is to provide a clear and illustrative account of culture work that can be instructive for OC work.

Approaches to organizational culture in sport

A primary conceptual distinction that exists within sport and the broader OC literature concerns whether culture is something organizations “have” or something organizations “are” (Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018). Initial work in sport has tended to reflect a functionalist approach whereby organizations are considered to “have” a culture (e.g., Henriksen, 2015). In line with this approach, OC has been characterized as a “variable or attribute that is both affected by and affects other organizational variables” (Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018, p. 39). In practice, those professionals (e.g., SPPs, coaches, organizational leaders) adopting a functionalist approach aim to assist organizations with “creating”, “removing”, or “developing” their culture. Specific strategies for such approaches are varied, yet typically they involve understanding what culture an organization “has” before attempting to manipulate it and create new desirable shared elements, such as values and behaviors (e.g., Henriksen, 2015). Typically, individuals adopting a functionalist approach do so in pursuit of a desirable outcome or competitive advantage from culture work.

A functionalist approach to culture may be commonplace in applied practice, but has been criticized by scholars. For instance, McDougall et al. (2020) recently challenged the functionalist approach through articulation of three common OC “myths”. First, OC is typically characterized only by what is obviously shared (e.g., shared beliefs, expectations, assumptions within a system) and as such SPPs frequently strive toward an exclusive

consensus of values, beliefs, meanings and expectations across organizational members. In contrast, McDougall et al. argued that given organizational members have unique backgrounds and experiences, the notion of a single shared culture is reflective *only* of consensus values, beliefs, meanings, expectations, and so forth, may be “unrealistic and even harmful” (p. 13). Second, a functionalist approach tends to perpetuate the myth that culture is an independent variable that organizations can mechanically manipulate. Here, McDougall et al. argued that culture can also be seen as a root-metaphor for group understanding, organically constructed by people; or more simply, the organization can be seen as the culture rather than “having” one. The final myth is that the functionalist approach typically involves discarding aspects of an “old” culture in the process of change and moving toward an entirely new one; for example, Henriksen (2015) described a “ritualistic goodbye to the old culture” by burning posters that displayed associated behaviors (p. 149-150). Conversely, McDougall et al. argued that cultures will always retain elements of historic importance, meaning and tradition that are valued and protected by organizational members. In other words, rather than being simply cast aside, cultural meanings “bleed” into any attempted process of cultural change because they are so often deeply engrained in the social and historical fabric of the culture of a sport organization. In challenging these myths, McDougall and et al., encouraged SPPs to approach culture in ways that go beyond the limitations of such functionalist conceptualizations.

An alternative to a functionalist approach is a subjectivist-interpretivist approach that conceive organizations “are” the culture. SPPs who align with this approach attempt to “understand what being part of an organization means to those who operate within it and the processes by which this meaning is understood and enacted” (Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018, p. 39). Those who adopt a subjectivist-interpretivist approach tend not to consider culture as a variable to be manipulated or measured, nor as something that can be created by leaders or consultants in a design like approach (see McDougall et al., 2020; Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018). Instead, operating from a subjectivist-interpretivist base means to concentrate more on the expressional, ideational and symbolic aspects of organization (Smircich, 1983). Such work involves focusing on the subjective and intersubjective creation of meaning in organizations and working out how these meanings order and orientate people to the world, propelling them toward shared action (Alvesson, 2002). Furthermore, moving beyond the assumption that culture is singular and *only* includes what is obviously shared may allow SPPs to discover uniquely characterized subcultures that oppose each other within the same organization (Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018) and enable more dynamic, lasting and impactful culture work.

A number of scholars are increasingly supportive of a subjectivist-interpretivist approach to OC, yet, a cursory glance at the extant literature in sport indicates a dearth of practice-related work that demonstrates conceptual coherence using such approaches. In the following section we outline the work of the first author undertaking culture work and hope to offer both an alternative to the functionalist approach but also an insight into the complexity of doing this “at the coalface” in performance sport.

Organizational culture work

The SPP and philosophy of practice

The SPP in this work (first author) was in their final year of a Sport and Exercise Psychology Professional Doctorate (Prof Doc). The Prof Doc is a doctoral qualification approved by the Health and Care Professions Council, and on completion, the degree confers eligibility to register as a Practitioner Psychologist. Throughout their training, the SPP worked with individuals, teams, and organizations at professional and semiprofessional levels across various sports, as well as in an organizational capacity within military policy development. The SPP’s work was underpinned by a pluralistic philosophy, described by Cooper and McLeod (2011) as a belief that “different clients are likely to benefit from different therapeutic methods at different points in time, and that therapists should work collaboratively with clients to help them identify what they want from therapy and how they might achieve it” (p. 7–8). Thus, a key tenant of the SPP’s pluralistic philosophy was to engage in shared decision-making processes with the client, who in this work was an organization.

Context

At the time of writing, the first author had been providing a sport psychology service across a range of UK military sports for several years. Similar to many Olympic and national systems, military sport has both central and satellite locations, whilst specific sports programs are decentralized. Within the UK, military sport exists as a semiprofessional entity through government funding and private sponsorship. Also, similar to some other national systems, military sport revolves around one annual event, an Inter-Services competition between the Navy, Army and Air Force.

The context for this culture work was a military netball team which consisted of a team manager, head and assistant coaches, strength and conditioning coach, performance analyst, and approximately thirty athletes. The team (*all* aforementioned individuals) assembled on a monthly basis

for a three-day training camp, notwithstanding the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions which were in place for the first three months of the OC work. The pandemic also meant that the next Inter-Services competition was scheduled for 20 months after the initial request for psychological support.

Needs analysis and establishing our approach

The Head Coach made initial contact with the first author after learning about the offer of sport psychology services to UK military sports. In the initial meeting between the SPP, Head Coach and Manager, the team representatives requested support with “creating a new team culture” in order to enhance the professionalism of the training environment. Specifically, the Head Coach and Team Manager expressed their discontent that some athletes were often late to training sessions, unorganized during camps, and lacked commitment by choosing other social activities (e.g., weddings, birthdays) over attending camps. The leaders of the sport organization shared their desire to change these “unprofessional” behaviors by creating a new culture that would result in the athletes naturally behaving with a greater professionalism, such as being on time, organized, and in regular attendance.

While the initial request was to help “create a new team culture” (i.e., a functionalist request), this contrasted with our personal views on culture (i.e., a subjectivist-interpretivist offer). At this juncture the SPP risked taking a binary approach to decision-making, that is, collude with the Head Coach’s functionalist request, something we felt would render the organization unable to sustain their culture work, or to challenge this perspective and risk imposing our views on the client and a potential miss-match between the organizational expectations and the SPP’s service provision. In practice, the SPP walked a somewhat pragmatic middle-line, and instead of an either-or stance, the work integrated elements of both functionalist and subjective-interpretivist perspectives. This blurring of different approaches to culture is somewhat inevitable as practitioners attempt to adopt a subjective-interpretive approach within organizational conditions that are typically quite functional and managerial (McDougall et al., 2020). Moreover, a “middle ground” affords opportunity for more critical and culturally aware, innovative practices that recognizes the realities of organizational context and demands (McDougall et al., 2020).

At the outset of the working relationship, the SPP aimed to detach the Head Coach and Team Manager from their initial, purely functionalist perspective of culture. The primary focus was to educate by raising awareness of the basic arguments relating to OC (see McDougall et al., 2020)

and making space for them to understand and question each perspective, thus enabling an openness toward incorporating more subjectivist-interpretivist ideas into the work. Of notable discussion was that of individual backgrounds, such as athletes of different nationalities, or the distinction between the civilian Head Coach and military athletes. Further, the Team Manager, a Serviceperson, detailed meaningful elements of the wider military culture relating to identity (e.g., military rank), traditions (e.g., marching), language (e.g., military slang), and a general way of life (e.g., deployments). Such discussions revealed that these elements were deep-rooted in military history and, for the Team Manager, represented a sense of pride, purpose and inclusion. Exploration of the OC perspectives using contextually specific examples resulted in the Coach and Manager identifying limitations of a functionalist approach, such as assuming sharedness across individuals or irradicating meaningful historic elements.

Phase 1: Understand, educate, and empower (month 0 - 6)

The aim of Phase 1 was to collaboratively understand the historic and present team culture and subcultures, educate all individuals within the system beyond a functionalist understanding, and empower the team to take responsibility for the work. In doing so, the intention was to leave the system in a better place with the ability to self-regulate. Of primary importance was to set the tone that the SPP was not a “guru” delivering a culture change intervention but would work with the team to help them understand themselves and each other, and how they influence their cultural context. That is to say, an intervention would not be done *to them* but co-developed *with them*, allowing the team to deliberately shape their culture through actions but also be aware of how everyday actions do this.

Introduced as the team sport psychologist, the SPP became emersed within the programme by integrating into training and meetings, conducting classroom sessions and interviewing team members. As part of the team’s education, the SPP first introduced the functionalist and subjectivist-interpretivist perspectives and allowed the team to develop supportive and counter arguments for each. The team also explored the behaviors within their own culture. Discussions were particularly emotive as team members described a history of undesirable behavioral norms. To illustrate, the team cited that athletes in positions of power (due to their military rank and experience) were “allowed to do what they want”, referring to their influence over previous coaches, team selection and training activities. The team also shared examples of poor communication, such as “snapping at each other” or “rolling their eyes after a mistake”. Such behaviors were deemed as undesirable by many within the team as they perceived them

to negatively impact team cohesion, enjoyment, and performance outcomes. Prompted by questions such as “what helps you perform your best” or “what gives you the edge over your competitors,” behaviors also emerged that the team wanted to protect and retain. The team were particularly passionate about their strong off-court bond, evidenced by social activities during and outside of camps.

Phase 2: Uncover values and explore behaviors (month 6 - 9)

To ensure the characterization of OC reached beyond only what was obviously shared, the SPP used Martin's (2002) three perspectives framework to unearth multiple interpretations within the system. The SPP simultaneously held perspectives of: (1) integration (i.e., consensus across members), (2) differentiation (i.e., consensus within, but conflict between, subcultures), and (3) fragmentation (i.e., ambiguity and a lack of consensus between individuals). Specifically, during Phase 2 a balance was found between the belief that organizational members are unlikely to all share the same values simply by creating a list, but also that the team might not be entirely fragmented.

Phase 2a: Uncover Individual Values. The aim of uncovering individual values was to set initial expectations that beliefs may not always be shared and to illuminate fragmentation within the team. To facilitate the exploration of individual values, the SPP posed questions to each team member, for example “what is most important to you” or “what do you stand for.” These same questions were then asked in the context of their sporting environment, for example “what is most important when you are at netball?” Team members shared their unique values and the SPP kept a record of all general and context specific values to return to throughout the subsequent Phase 2 work.

Phase 2b: Uncover Collective Values. The SPP presented the individual values back to the team, illustrating that whilst many values were multiply cited (integration and differentiation), others were only named by a single individual (fragmentation). The intention was to embed an understanding that fragmentation may exist and that embracing this may enable a more successful navigation through future challenges. Guided by the SPP, the team grouped individual values that appeared similar in meaning leaving four groups and several values that could not be grouped. For each group, the team decided on a word that encapsulated its superficial meaning and were consequently left with four collective values: (1) Commitment, (2) Unity, (3) Respect, and (4) Discipline.

Despite their “collective” nature, several team members expressed concern over the “sharedness” of these values. One of the team captains stated

that “discipline” and “respect” carried the same meaning and that there was not a need for both as they are enacted in the same way. Another individual of a non-British nationality contested passionately that “unity” was enacted by different behaviors in the present team (e.g., shouting encouragement, clapping) compared with her home country (e.g., quiet one-to-one conversations), of which several team members came from. The SPP allowed space for the concerns to play out and as each collective value was contested subcultures emerged as team members assigned differing meanings to each value. Moreover, subcultures appeared fluid and as each value was debated, different individuals sided with each other. The team failed to reach a truly shared consensus for any of the four values; therefore, where a functionalist approach which would treat any unshared elements as a temporary blip *outside* of the culture (McDougall et al., 2020), we perceived these to be *within* the culture.

Phase 2c: Explore Behaviors. The team went on to explore and understand behaviors associated with their individual and collective values. Once again, in alignment with Martin’s (2002) framework, the intention was to go beyond the notion of “how things are done around here” and accept a diversity of behaviors. To facilitate this exploration, the team discussed what we might see, feel, or hear in the context of training, competition, and away from the physical environment. One group proposed that “we can see a lot of people at training” (commitment), whilst another described that “we feel motivated when we encourage each other during matches” (unity). The SPP also posed questions such as, “if you were playing in a plain kit and no-one knew who you were, what would people watching say about you?” Here the team stated behaviors such as “they listen to each other” (respect) and “they are always on time” (discipline).

The team decided that the collective values did not diminish the importance of individual values that were not shared. As such, the team reflected on behaviors associated with their individual values and anticipated potential conflict with the collective values. Here, a mother expressed “family” as an individual value and described difficulty leaving her child to attending training camps, which directly conflicted with “seeing people at training” to enact commitment. Moreover, team members conveyed situations where behaviors may mistakenly appear to conflict with the collective values. For example, team members who were of non-British nationality stated that in their home country it is custom for training to pause if a player were to fall to the ground and described difficulty understanding that, in the current team, when training continued it was not a lack of unity being enacted. The team were unable to foresee how any behavior associated with their collective values could be enacted by every team member at all times. Thus, instead agreeing a list of behaviors to adhere

to we accepted that different elements of our culture may be shared (integration), shared by subgroups (differentiation), and only held by an individual (fragmentation).

Phase 3: Values, behaviors, and the environment (month 9–19)

Once the individual and team values had been established, in alignment with a pluralistic philosophy, the SPP and team engaged in shared decision-making communication about best approach to progress the culture work. Together, the SPP and team decided that workshops were no longer the most appropriate and, in turn, Phase 3 was characterized by a conscious shift away from classroom sessions and toward the everyday functioning of the programme. The team organically integrated new rituals and traditions into their daily practices covering training camps, competition, and away from the physical environment, thus providing opportunities for the collective values to be enacted by associated behaviors. Such changes included individuals nominating a “player of the match” (unity in competition), specific nutritional intake (discipline in training camps), remote training plans for circumstances where players are unable attend camps (commitment away from the physical environment), and listening to others (respect in training camps).

Throughout training camps, the SPP monitored the team as they dedicated time to reflect on their rituals and behaviors. The reflective sessions enabled the team to better understand their behaviors through a cultural lens and the way culture influenced them but also the way they influenced it. Over a ten-month period, the team reported several substantial changes regarding their enacted behaviors and the way the environment felt. The team cited rituals such as ice baths after training, stretching on court prior to sessions, eating healthy foods, and going to bed before midnight, all without prompting, created a general sense of increased professionalism. Moreover, during training camps phrases such as “it never used to be like this” or “this would never have happened before,” were frequently heard with reference to the aforementioned rituals.

Moving beyond the notion of “how things are done around here,” the team also noted instances when behaviors appeared to conflict with the collective values that represented a fragmentation that was accepted *within* the culture. To illustrate, the team introduced a new tradition of a team meal on the penultimate evening of each training camp which most, but not all, members participated. Members not present at the team meal offered various reasons for not attending, such as tiredness or having to work. Whilst a functionalist lens may interpret this an unacceptable behavior due to its conflict with “unity,” the team allowed it to be a part of the team culture.

Elements of historic importance, meaning and tradition that were still present were also acknowledged, such as all wearing light/dark kit on each training day, that to many gave a sense of inclusion and identity, much like the military uniform that has long held similar meaning to Service personnel.

Phase 4: Empower (month 19–20)

Phases 1-3 progressed until the Inter-Services competition which marked the end of the season. At this point, the final month was dedicated toward empowering the team to take responsibility for their culture beyond our current work. The reflective spaces described in Phase 3 had become a tradition in their own right and were identified as an opportunity to continue to view systemic processes through culture. The team also acknowledged that culture is a complex, immeasurable, fluid and evolving entity that required continual exploration. To highlight the unstable nature of culture, the team discussed future circumstances that may cause change, for example new team members who bring their own individual values into the environment; thus enabling the team to be more accepting of diversity and be adaptable in the face of new challenges. Finally, the team shared how each individual has influenced the culture, demonstrating that our culture work has not been created by leadership or the SPP and does not stem from any one source, but is instead something to which all continue to contribute.

Reflections and recommendations for a pragmatic approach to culture work

In this manuscript we have attempted to encourage pragmatic OC work that prioritizes co-development with clients, complexity and nuance of theory-to-practice implementation, and conceptual pluralism. Specifically, we provide an example of how SPPs may meet the demands of organizations who seek to develop their culture for a competitive advantage whilst going beyond the limitations of functionalist approaches. While we did not treat OC as a “measurable” variable, we have reflected on our work and sought feedback from various individuals at different levels within the organization, and these provide the foundation for several applied practice recommendations.

Overall, individuals in the organization provided positive feedback. To elaborate, the Head Coach and Team Manager expressed that they perceived the culture work to be a success as the reflective sessions enabled the team to take ownership of their culture and behave in ways that aligned with their individual and team values. Further, the athletes

described feeling more educated on OC and empowered to continue to attend to their culture. Critically, while those in organization were generally content with the 20-months of work, many perceived that it did not signify the end of their OC journey. This feedback provided by the athletes and staff represented a learning beyond a functionalist approach, as they presented OC as an on-going understanding exercise as opposed to a variable they now “had” that could be “used”.

Central to applied OC work is establishing a perspective and sharing this with the organization. Like other SPPs (e.g., Henriksen, 2015), at the outset we were challenged by the lack of a conceptual consensus and specific strategies for OC work. Whilst this poses difficulties, given the complexity of OC a one size fits all approach may be impractical. Instead, trainee and established SPPs alike might choose to familiarize themselves with the concepts of culture (see McDougall et al., 2020; Wagstaff, 2016, 2019; Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018) before designing their work, not least due to the principle that research and theory *should* inform practice.

Another key component of OC work is the inclusion of *all* organization members, something SPPs have cited as limiting to their culture interventions (e.g., Henriksen, 2015). By including all members we empowered the team to take responsibility for the culture work. Whilst we perceived this to have benefits, we did endure additional challenges, not least due to the decentralized nature of the organization. The inconsistency of individuals in attendance at camps, largely due to injury or work commitments, often meant capturing information (e.g., individual values) outside of the physical environment and back-briefing the team as the work developed. It also meant finding creative ways of maintaining a consistent focus on the work away from the physical environment, for example, collective values printed on remote training plans. SPPs who work in decentralized sport settings, such as Olympic or national systems, may face similar challenges; nevertheless we recommend that SPPs strive to include all organizational members when undertaking culture work.

Finally, the functionalist request to “create a new culture” is perhaps typical of what SPPs face at the outset of a working relationship. Moreover, SPPs who are less inclined to conceive culture as a variable might find that performance leaders who seek a competitive advantage are less receptive to their view (Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018). Nevertheless, “selling” an approach underpinned by functionalist assumptions may be problematic. Our work illustrates an example of how an approach to culture can be negotiated and co-developed with an organization through education and by allowing them to explore different perspectives using real life examples from their context. We recommend that SPPs strive to go beyond functionalist limitations and embrace the complexity that is organizational culture.

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