How culture and context inform practice in sport psychology

A cultural lens on talent and career development in sport (symposium)

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Publication date:
2019

Document version
Accepted manuscript

Citation for published version (APA):
Abstract of Contribution 757

**ID: 757**

**Symposium**

**Topics:** Built environment

**Keywords:** context driven practice, talent development, organisational culture, elite sport

**How culture and context inform practice in sport psychology: A cultural lens on talent and career development in sport**

**Chair(s):** Louise Kamuk Storm (University of Southern Denmark)

Sport psychology and talent development are social practices embedded in cultures and contexts. The term context-driven sport and exercise psychology practice (CDP) was recently introduced in sport psychology literature (Schinke & Stambulova, 2017), which is building on cultural sport psychology. This trend looks beyond the athlete in both research and applied practice, which contrasts with universal models for talent development and culture-blind curriculum-based sport psychology interventions. The contextual and cultural understanding of career pathways, talent-development environments and athletes holds the potential to enrich our understanding of how culture shapes and influences athletes, which has direct implications for stakeholders such as coaches or practitioners.

CDP requires an understanding of a given site, beyond its people, which will be illustrated through five case examples. The first paper can contribute an analysis of a Danish talent academy, while the second focuses on developing developmental pathways and is an investigation of athletic talent-development environments in American underserved communities, focusing on how athletes were able to successfully navigate those difficult childhood experiences. The third paper looks at organisational cultures in the United Kingdom, and how a change of culture process might be underpinned by ambiguity and ongoing power relations between subcultures. The fourth paper offers a unique insight into athletic talent development in Iceland and how the government’s investment in elite sport has benefited Icelandic people outside of sport. The final paper presents a case of applied practice in a Danish context and illustrates how organisational awareness and sensitivity is key in CDP.

**presentations of the Symposium**

**Understanding a Danish talent academy, beyond its people: A cultural lens**

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University of Southern Denmark

Context-driven sport psychology practice is based on a thorough analysis and understanding of the athletes and stakeholders’ cultural contexts with a particular focus on the local cultures (Stambulova & Schinke, 2017). The paper explores the organisational culture of a particular Danish talent academy (as perceived by their cultural leaders and the researcher). The analysis is drawing upon 6 months of weekly participation in the environment. The data acquisition is based on participatory action research design. The cultural analysis (Schein, 2010) was integrated as a part of creating an optimal environment for talent development. This paper presents the results and the process. The academy is centred around a strong community of leaders and coaches, however, tensions occurred. The basic assumptions of the environment were: “Talent is curiosity, openness and ‘displaying courage like a man’”, “good relationships and conditions for learning and development”, and “we have a responsibility to develop our environment and adapt to the local culture. Our existence depends on local acknowledgement”. We discuss how the CDP included three mutual influential processes: self-reflexivity, contextual awareness and the process of becoming and being a cultural insider.

**Empowering youth athletes against the odds: Successful talent-development environments in underserved communities**

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The research on the career pathways of professional athletes is well established in sport psychology, yet this field is lacking insight into the lives of athletes whose formative years were spent primarily in an American underserved community (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014). Using the Holistic Ecological Approach as a framework, this PhD project’s aim is to begin to understand how professional athletes were able to circumvent the environmental hardships and still reach the professional level of their chosen sport (Henriksen, 2010; Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017). This study involved in-depth, biographical interviews with N = 10 professional athletes who overcame significant adversity. Through the analysis of the data, many commonalities emerged. Key transitional and existential relationships, an understanding that sport was a way out of hardship and an ability to shift and persist through adversity, were key themes identified in the data. However, considering multi- and equifinality, no two lives are exactly the same and life stories can converge and diverge at many different junctions. Thus, this presentation will contain a brief summary of two athletes who overcame many of the same obstacles, reached a similar level in their sport, yet it is clear that their environment shaped them in drastically different ways.

“Quite aggressive assaults on us to start off with”: Culture change in a national performance pathway in the United Kingdom

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Most research in organisational culture in sports has considered culture through an integration lens by employing retrospective or cross-sectional study designs. This challenges inquiry to examine the ambiguity of organisational culture (Maitland, Hills, & Rhind, 2015). This study aimed to illuminate how a change of culture process unfolds in a performance pathway in the UK.

We combined Action Research and Grounded Theory in a 16-months longitudinal study with one governing body (NGB) of an Olympic sport (Dick, 2007). The primary data collection was ethnographic observations supplemented by ten focus groups, two with athletes
Results showed that changing political will influenced structural conditions imposing changes to ring-fenced funding. The community within the sport perceived these changes as a threat to normative practices (e.g., coaching) and disengaged from the NGB. We operationalised change through (a) decentralised development hubs, (b) youth national team-camps, and (c) selection policies. The core concept of the change process was ongoing interdependent power relations. Counter subcultures contested the change through manipulation, deception, and isolation. The change was supported by amplifying subcultures through empowerment, building trust, and collaboration.

This study provides insights into how change of culture process occurs in real-time and the newfound understanding of the influence of structural conditions could help sports organisations to know how and why subcultures contest strategic change initiatives.

Why does Iceland invest in youth sport for all?

Dadi Rafnsson
Reykjavik University

Why does Iceland invest so heavily in youth sports for all? In recent years, Iceland has regularly qualified for major tournaments in male and female football, basketball, handball as well as other sports punching far above its weight in the process. During the last World Cup in Russia, Iceland captured the attention by competing with the world’s best football teams despite having a population smaller than many cities. Icelandic taxpayers invest handsomely in youth sports and activities, providing their local sports clubs with facilities and their children with vouchers for sports participation. In turn, all sports clubs must allow everyone to train with them, regardless of ability. This ensures that in a small country with a population of fewer than 350,000 people, they are less likely to lose out on talent that can propel them to compete with larger, more populated countries. However, this commitment to sport at the elite level has proved beneficial in many aspects of the Icelandic society and the investment has been credited with contributing to drastically lower alcohol and tobacco consumption amongst teenagers in Iceland. In this presentation, I will discuss the results of my PhD project which help to answer questions such as: When did Iceland decide to invest in youth sports for all? What were the main cultural drivers for this to happen? Does it have partisan political support?

That did not go as planned! Reflections on service delivery in Danish professional football

Carsten Hvid Larsen
University of Southern Denmark

Studies within organisational psychology in sport and the experience of practitioners point to the fact that working within an environment means providing services where there are other distracting influences, such as organisational stress, change, pressure, external demands, media intrusion, contract negotiations and the presence of agents (Nesti, 2010). Moreover, researchers highlight the existence of poor employment practices having direct and indirect implications for on-field performance following organisational changes (Wagstaff & Larner, 2015). This presentation highlights that practitioner’s need to be aware of how results affect organisational changes (e.g., changing coaches) and how organisational changes affect his or her services in a professional sports organisation. There is a need for practitioners to integrate the notions of self-reflexivity and cultural sensitivity into his or her professional philosophy when entering a professional sports organisation, and having an eye on several “logics” operating in the organisation. In good times, logics co-exist peacefully and it might seem to be a strong and coherent culture, but in “crisis” and adversity, they cannot co-exist and in soccer, the “short-termism” will apparently prevail. Thus, the similar organisational set-up can act differently according to shifting situations and processes within the club. Practitioners entering a professional organisation need to have some political acuity because the contexts are changing. These circumstances imply that the practitioner needs to know that changes will occur when results are poor.