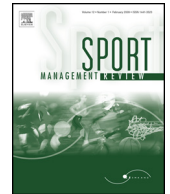




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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Sport Management Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/smr

Review

Organisational culture in sport – A systematic review

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 January 2014

Received in revised form 6 November 2014

Accepted 9 November 2014

Available online 23 January 2015

Keywords:

Organisational culture

Sport

Systematic review

Coaching

Management

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper was to systematically review the study of organisational culture in sport. The choice of research paradigms, methods, interests, perspectives, and definitions and operationalisation of organisational culture used in 33 studies was examined. This highlighted the variety of ways that culture has been studied in sport and the range of interests explored in the research, including informing athlete development, the link between the strength of culture and organisational performance and understanding the forces driving organisational diversity. Unlike the wider organisational culture literature, there has been a preference in sport to assume that culture was a variable to manipulate in an organisation. The opportunity to widen approaches to study organisational culture in sport is discussed, such as broadening the methods used to conduct studies, including both coaches and athletes in the population studied and using the fragmentation perspective, where ambiguity and conflict are considered in understanding culture.

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1. Introduction

London 2012 provided a fitting example of the prominence that sport organisations place on organisational culture. The London Organising Committee for the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG) had the unenviable task of “structuring the team that’s staging the Games – an organisation that needed to grow from a handful of people, to be the size of a FTSE 100 company at Games time” (Deloitte, 2012, p. 3), in just eight years, citing the shaping of its culture as a key element of its success (Deloitte, 2012). At an interview, a LOCOG project manager highlighted the taken-for-granted nature of organisational culture as a concept, in describing it as “representing our country on a global stage, delivering a superb Games, inspiring individuals to take up more sport and enabling a great legacy. It’s about team spirit, a can-do attitude and leadership” (Edworthy, 2012, n.p.). The concept of organisational culture is girded in the everyday vernacular in sport, framed as reinforcing conceptions of common management organisational problems (Girginov, 2010) and is used to explain anything from coaching behaviour (e.g. Cushion, 2001) and leadership (e.g. Fletcher & Arnold, 2011) to delivering sport organisational change (e.g. Cruickshank & Collins, 2012).

There is a small but growing body of research examining organisational culture within sport (Girginov, 2006; Kaiser, Engel, & Keiner, 2009; Schroeder, 2010a). Sport organisations and their coaches, athletes and members seem to be promising subjects for the study of organisational culture. Sport organisations are commonly associated with specific values and a great

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variety of symbols, stories, myths and rituals. These characteristics are viewed as some of the principle components of an organisation's culture (Slack, 1997). Yet, Kaiser et al. (2009) contend that scientific discussion on the culture of sport organisations is “still in its infancy” (p. 298). However, they argue that research on the topic is fragmented, as it has not been co-ordinated. Thus research is often restricted to illustrating generalised concepts of organisational culture supported by examples from sports, rather than emerging from sport-specific contexts and disciplinary knowledge. This paper aims to systematically review the literature on organisational culture in sport to understand how organisational culture has been studied.

2. Studying organisational culture

The body of research on organisational culture was introduced into organisational analysis in the late 1970s (see for example Harris & Ogbonna, 1999; Martin & Meyerson, 1988; Pettigrew, 1979; Trice & Beyer, 1984). To date, the concept of organisational culture has been defined, operationalised and analysed in different ways by researchers. This is not surprising given that organisational culture is a complex phenomenon (Alvesson, 2002); Taylor, Irvin, and Wieland (2006) describe the study of organisational culture as “the battleground of competing paradigms that influence how researchers conceptualise phenomena, use methods to collect and analyse data, and represent their findings” (p. 305). Martin (2002, p. 56) suggests three key building blocks that help to “summarise the content of any cultural portrait”: the research paradigm and methods; the perspective on, definition and operationalisation of culture; and the research interest of the study. These three building blocks for understanding culture are briefly outlined below.

2.1. Research paradigm and methods

Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p. 183) define a paradigm as “a basic set of beliefs that guide action.” Research has often adopted the view of organisational culture presented in the popular management literature that assumes the organisation has a culture and that there is an objective reality to culture, which can be measured and attributed to the organisation. Culture, when studied from this ontological and epistemological stance, could be viewed as a *variable* (cf. other aspects of organisational functioning such as job satisfaction or employee engagement). Culture is understood through measurement, such as quantitative questionnaires and the results used to manipulate the relationship between organisational culture and outcomes, in order to impact how the organisation operates (Smircich, 1983).

However, alternative paradigmatic approaches to organisational culture such as a social constructivist, poststructuralist or critical realist framing (Guba, 1990), often using qualitative data collection methods such as observation, action research and ethnography have also been adopted. Unlike the first conceptualisation, where the organisational culture is deemed a variable for manipulation and regulation and where research gives priority to prediction, generalisability and control, alternative paradigmatic approaches may instead conceptualise organisational culture as *the setting*, in which behaviour, social events, institutions and processes become comprehensible and meaningful (Alvesson, 2002). This opens up a more subjective epistemological basis for study.

2.2. Perspective on, definition of and operationalisation of culture

A second building block to understand organisational culture is the choice of perspective or lens through which culture is viewed. The perspective on culture adopted shapes how research defines and operationalises the organisational culture under study.

Martin and Meyerson (1988) developed the three-perspective framework to explicate and decipher what has, and has not, been learned from a specific study. The three perspectives are termed integration, differentiation and fragmentation, each with a complementary view in relation to their orientation to consensus, relation among manifestations and treatment of ambiguity. Although the framework has been positioned as a meta theory and is a useful tool to understand organisational culture (see for example Taylor et al., 2006), Martin (1992) is at pains to point out that the boundaries of these three perspectives are permeable and are to be used to describe the primary emphasis of a study rather than pigeonhole or oversimplify the characteristics of a piece of work.

Allied to the perspective used is the definition of organisational culture adopted in a study. For example, when using the integration perspective, Martin (2002) suggests that most definitions of culture include an explicit focus on what is shared (e.g. Smircich, 1983, p. 56). This implies a singular notion of culture in organisations, whereby culture is that which is clear and uncontested. In contrast, some definitions stress conflict between opposing points of view, a differentiation perspective. From the differentiation perspective, there may be no organisation-wide consensus; rather a consensus exists within sub-cultural boundaries, so that ambiguity in this domain is “relegated to the boundary” (Martin, 1992, p. 83). In the third perspective, fragmentation, even the word *shared* can be a source of disagreement between researchers. Martin (1992) suggests that the fragmentation view of culture reveals a loosely connected web of individuals who may change positions on a variety of issues, so that “their involvement, their sub-cultural identities, and their individual self-definitions fluctuate, depending on which issues are activated at a given moment” (p. 153).

The perspective used to study organisational culture, and its definition, is operationalised in each study. Martin (1992) argues that although researchers may state their conceptualisation of culture, it is the cultural manifestation that

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