A subculture of mental toughness in an Australian Football League club

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The current study aimed to provide a subcultural analysis of mental toughness in a high-performance context in sport.
Design: Using Schein's (1990) framework of organisational culture, an exploratory qualitative analysis, employing focus group and individual interviews, was used to investigate mental toughness in an Australian Football League club.
Method: Nine senior coaches and players participated in focus group and individual interviews. Photo elicitation was used as a method to capture mental toughness through the identification of prominent club artefacts. Participants were considered to have significant subcultural knowledge of their football club and were willing to describe personal experiences and perceptions of mental toughness through this cultural lens. Deductive and inductive analyses were conducted to capture the core themes of mental toughness across the disparate levels of Schein's organisational framework.
Results: Mental toughness was found to be a socially derived term marked by unrelenting standards and sacrificial displays. These acts were underpinned by subcultural values emphasising a desire for constant improvement, a team first ethos, relentless effort, and the maintenance of an infallible image. At its core, mental toughness was assumed to be an internal concept, epitomised an idealised form of masculinity, elitist values, and was rhetorically depicted through metaphors of war.
Conclusions: It may be difficult to understand mental toughness without giving attention to the contextual norms related to the term. Appreciating how people promote, instil, and internalise prized ideals coveted as mental toughness could be intriguing for future research in sport psychology.

For the past 15 years, scholars have been interested in better understanding the concept of mental toughness in sport. During this time, rigorous efforts have been made to advance what people mean by the term and to identify key attributes founding it. For many academics and sport practitioners, mental toughness expresses peoples' abilities to cope with adversity and perform well under stress (e.g., Gucciardi, Hanton, Gordon, Mallett, & Temby, 2015; Hardy, Bell, & Beattie, 2014). Inherent to this description is the assumption that mental toughness is something that people either have or can possess; in other words, it is a concept treated as something decidedly psychological, where toughness (or lack thereof) reflects a measure of a performer's character or personality. However, with growing interest in the field of cultural sport psychology (e.g., Schinke & Hanrahan, 2009; Schinke & McGannon, 2015), some scholars have recently suggested that mental toughness might not be what the majority of people think it is. These scholars have argued that mental toughness can be better appreciated as a social product, reflecting certain norms and ideals prized in sporting subcultures (Andersen, 2011; Tibbert & Andersen, 2015). Considering social perspectives of mental toughness takes a different approach to studying the term. For example, socially inclined scholars are less likely to concern themselves with knowing the psychological qualities comprising the mentally tough performer (e.g., see Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton, 2007) or how existing personality theories can help to explain mental toughness (e.g., see Hardy et al., 2014; Harmison, 2011). Instead, these individuals might be more intrigued by the origins and nuanced meanings attached to mental toughness; the various identities and behaviours promoting the term in particular contexts; or why, in the first place, mental toughness has become such a prevalent and loaded expression in contemporary sporting discourse.

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Since the early 2000s, scholars have been aware of the important role context plays in understanding mental toughness. The issues of sport-general and sport-specific research on the topic have been well documented (see Crust, 2008; Gucciardi & Gordon, 2011). The publication of certain mental toughness measures also reflects the gratitude some scholars have shown for contextual nuance (e.g., Cricket Mental Toughness Inventory, Australian Football Mental Toughness Inventory; Gucciardi & Gordon, 2009; Gucciardi, Gordon, & Dimmock, 2009b). However, while subcultural reports are evident in mental toughness literature (e.g., Bull, Shambrook, James, & Brooks, 2005; Coulter, Mallett, & Gucciardi, 2010; Sheard, 2013), overall, their mention has been fleeting or has lacked deeper scrutiny. For example, in their analysis of mental toughness in cricket, Bull et al. (2005) stated that they selected a participant cohort based on culturally held knowledge of what mental toughness signified in the English game, but without elaborating on what this cultural emphasis actually meant. Coulter et al. (2010) later made the same claim in their efforts to capture mental toughness in Australian soccer. Similarly, these authors offered no evidence or further insights regarding their cultural assertions.

However, notable exceptions to this tenet are the views of Andersen (2011) and Caddick and Ryall (2012), and recently, Tibbert, Andersen, and Morris (2015). These authors have provided useful insights into socio-cultural perspectives of mental toughness; in particular, they have critically challenged the idea that an underlying construct (comprising a set of psychological attributes) actually exists, instead proposing that mental toughness is a term used to promote certain subcultural ideals in elite sport. Andersen (2011) queried what people mean when they talk about toughness or being tough. He said that such language resonates with much of what is questionable in sport, suggesting that constructs like mental toughness "reek" of macho pathogenic cultures expressive of patriarchal hierarchies and intolerances for weakness. Caddick and Ryall (2012) called mental toughness "a pseudoscientific rhetorical construction, characterised by romantic notions of sporting idealism, elitist values, and metaphorical images of triumph and victory" (p. 2). They argued that despite its merits, mental toughness too often reflects a "fascistoid" ideology, inferring that athletes who fail to adopt elitist ideals of toughness end up being treated as less valuable and dispensable by sport society. Tibbert et al. (2015) led the first and (so far) only empirical study examining subcultural ideals linked to mental toughness. These authors tracked the experiences of a rookie Australian footballer over a yearlong period to gain insights of his acculturation into the norms and imperatives prized by his Australian Football League (AFL) club. Their findings showed that mental toughness meant conforming to certain standards indicative of hypermasculine cultures (e.g., ignoring injury, denying vulnerability, sacrificing individuality) — ideals that had to be met to gain acceptance and approval from the club's player and coaching hierarchy.

These reports by Andersen (2011), Caddick and Ryall (2012), and Tibbert et al. (2015) promote mental toughness as a measure of peoples' willingness to quietly endure the physical and emotional hardships associated with elite sport — where the strong (conformists) survive and the weak (non-conformists) get discarded. Andersen and Tibbert et al. reported that elite sporting subcultures often use mental toughness in such a way that demands athletes to learn and accept dominant masculine ideals and is a pretence to justifiably push (and abuse) people harder and for longer in the pursuit of success, despite the risks to personal health and well-being (e.g., injury, overtraining syndromes, distress, loss of identity) (also see Richardson, Andersen, & Morris, 2008; Young & White, 2000).

However, it is presumptuous to assume that all high performance contexts ratify mental toughness in the same way without prior knowledge of the ideals and expectations held in specific subcultures. For example, peoples' perceptions of mental toughness may differ considerably when operating in a climate of threat and intimidation versus one emphasising more compassionate and caring conditions (Tibbert et al., 2015). One might also expect different versions of mental toughness in contexts where people's development (not performance) is the priority, and where competition is less of a focus (see Gould, Griffes, & Carson, 2011). Traditionally, mental toughness has been studied through a psychological lens whereby interpretive (e.g., personal construct; Gucciardi, Gordon, & Dimmock, 2009a) and theoretical (e.g., hardiness theory; Clough, Earle, & Sewell, 2002) frameworks have been used to promote an internal, attribute-driven conceptualisation. Examining mental toughness from a social perspective might add conceptual breadth to this conventional approach. However, socio-cultural research is currently limited to the views of a single case study (see Tibbert et al., 2015) and broad critiques of the mental toughness literature (see Andersen, 2011; Caddick & Ryall, 2012). To progress research from this outlook, mental toughness could be examined within the confines of the unique cultures and climates of different sporting environments. This step might help to reveal the social forces at work in defining mental toughness, shaped, for instance, by the underlying assumptions and values that bind a sporting cohort together (i.e., group culture) and the recurring patterns of behaviour and attitudes that characterise "how things are done" in a particular performance climate (cf. Kuenzi & Schminke, 2009).

A subculture of mental toughness: an organisational perspective

Cultural perspectives of mental toughness might be examined at various levels of foci — from macro to micro systems of society. One possibility is to view mental toughness through the concept of organisational culture. Organisational culture refers to the unique social and psychological environment of an organisation (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). It can be defined as a collection of basic values and attitudes common to a social group that sets the standards expected of its members (i.e., how each should think, feel, and behave; Smith & Shilbury, 2004). The impact of organisational culture in high performance sport has recently received increasing levels of attention in sport psychology research. For example, various scholars have set about examining the key role organisational contexts play in preparing athletes for Olympic and world competition (cf. Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009); the critical factors underpinning the functioning of elite sporting organisations (e.g., Wagstaff, Fletcher, & Hanton, 2012); the leadership and practices required to create and regulate high performing cultures (e.g., Cruickshank, Collins, & Minten, 2014; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011); and the application of relevant theories to deliver sport organisational change (e.g., Cruickshank & Collins, 2012). Broadly speaking, this emerging body of literature asserts that climatic and cultural factors are associated with the optimal development of athletes, and elite performers' psychological states and processes (e.g., their motivations, emotions, and beliefs) cannot solely account for the onset and maintenance of peak performance (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). To date, scholars have largely overlooked the role of social and organisational factors for understanding and defining mental toughness, preferring instead to treat the term as an internal construct. While social factors are often reported as key mechanisms contributing to mental toughness development (e.g., see Bell, Hardy, & Beattie, 2013; Bull et al., 2005; Connaughton, Wadey, Hanton, & Jones, 2008; Crust & Clough, 2011), the norms and imperatives influencing how people construe mental toughness in particular sporting contexts is rarely explored. This cultural