

Is culture a (still) useful category of psychological and social analysis?

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The need to centralize culture in research and practice is now well-established in sport psychology and spans different genres of our discipline. Yet, in spite of some precious gains made in the last decade, the culture concept and the uses of it in sport psychology have already arguably become limited and stifled. Setting this observation within historical patterns of culture study witnessed in other disciplines (e.g., anthropology, cultural studies, organizational management), we offer a theoretical critique that outlines the possibility for the death of culture as a meaningful concept in Organizational Sport Psychology and Cultural Sport Psychology. Subsequently, we argue for the continued usefulness of culture and, how, in spite of many infirmities, it remains an essential concept for the analysis of psychological and social life. For culture to remain intellectually vital in these analyses (and in the development of competent cultural practice) though, it must be positioned differently, and with more theoretical variety and rigor. To support our arguments, we close with 5 (not exhaustive) recommendations that can help to secure the future of culture in sport psychology.

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Since the first publication of the International Journal of Sport Psychology 50 years ago, it would appear that culture, as a key concept in sport psychology, has flourished. The turn towards culture, which has occurred over the last decades (Ryba, Schinke, & Tenenbaum, 2010), highlighted the lack of attention to culture and cultural identities in our research and interventions (e.g., Butryn, 2002; Duda & Allison, 1990; Gill, 2001; Krane, 1994). Since that time, scholars have challenged taken-for-granted Eurocentric ways of knowing that dominated the field (such as knowledge production primarily from a white, able-bodied, heteronormative male perspective) and called

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for greater cultural inclusivity, awareness, and competence in our research and practices (Krane & Waldron, 2020; Ryba, Stambulova, Si, & Schinke, 2013). The importance of culture has only sharpened as sport becomes increasingly transnational and multicultural, inevitably bringing together people with diverse backgrounds (such as nationality, race, ethnicity, class, socioeconomic status, gender, religion, sexual orientation, dis/ability, language, and so on) (Ronkainen & Blodgett, 2020; Ryba, Schinke, Stambulova, & Elbe, 2018).

The rapidly growing genre of Cultural Sport Psychology (CSP) emerged as a response to these developments and as a means to engage with topics of sociocultural difference, cultural diversity, and marginalized identities (McGannon & Smith, 2015; Ryba & Schinke, 2009; Ryba et al., 2013; Schinke & Hanrahan, 2009). It is a genre premised on the idea that “culture shapes how we think, feel, and behave; we cannot step outside culture, thus to ignore it would be to miss a key matter that shapes people’s self-identities and lives” (McGannon & Smith, 2015, p. 79). From this culturally reflexive lens, CSP has taken up a politically and ethically driven agenda, and has engaged with issues of representation, ethics of difference, sociocultural justice, and culturally competent practice across a range of topics. These include, for example, talent development (Ronkainen & Ryba, 2019); the application of psychological skills (Hagan Jnr & Schack, 2019); performance and well-being (Sarkar, Hill, & Parker, 2015); career development and transitions (Stambulova, Ryba, & Henriksen, 2020), and identity negotiations, cultural transitions and acculturation (Schinke et al., 2019).

Meanwhile, in the performance enhancement discourse of sport psychology, an interest in organizational culture has also steadily grown. In this guise, culture is most often viewed as means to understand and influence organizational and team issues that effect on-field performance and wider operational excellence (Cruickshank, Collins, & Minten, 2014, 2015; Henriksen, 2015). Competency in this domain has been heralded as essential for effective contemporary sport psychology delivery, and indeed, even to the evolution and future of the profession (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012; Eubank, Nesti, & Cruickshank, 2014; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011; Nesti, 2010; Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018). By developing expertise in organizational culture, sport psychologists can shed the shackles of one-to-one work with athletes (i.e., the application of mental skills or counseling) and take up the role of ‘cultural architect’, working with and across groups to design and facilitate desirable culture change (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012; Cruickshank, Collins, & Minten, 2014, 2015; Eubank et al., 2014; Eubank, Nesti, & Littlewood, 2017).

Why then, with culture now centralized and appearing to flourish as a key concept across different domains of the discipline, is this paper necessary? And why now? First, flourishing, we think, ought to refer not only to the acceptance of a concept, or to the quantity of studies that refer to and use it, but to how intellectually vibrant and practically vital those uses are. Echoing some of our previous work (McDougall, Ronkainen, Richardson, Littlewood, & Nesti, 2020; McDougall & Ronkainen, 2020; Ryba, 2017; Ryba, Ronkainen, & Lee, 2020) and recent critiques (Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018, 2019), we are concerned by the current trajectory of culture study in sport psychology. There is the possibility of stagnation/decline through a number of common defects: for example, vague use of the term corresponding with limited explication and uses of the concept; often rendering studies and practices theoretically and culturally superficial, which only exacerbates the notorious gap between research and culturally competent practice.

Our concerns – about the fate of culture – are also grounded within well-observed (historical) patterns of the decline of enthusiasm for the culture concept in disciplines where it has long been a key concept (e.g., anthropology, cultural studies, organizational and management studies). These wider observations offer a base to examine whether culture is (still) a useful dimension for psychological and social analysis. Specifically, we argue that in sport psychology, a gradual rigor mortis has already set in because we are in the process of replicating past mistakes made in other disciplines. Consequently, and in agreement with recent commentary (McDougall & Ronkainen, 2019; Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2019), we suggest more must be done if the fate of culture in sport psychology is to be secure.¹ Before considering some of the problems and possibilities of culture, and its potential for ‘death’, we first detail some of the inherent complexity of the culture concept. Then, and seeking to avoid replicating a common mistake, we subsequently outline in detail what we think culture is and how we are using our understanding of it to ground and advance our arguments.

¹ We are cognizant that CSP and organizational culture research have been parallel, but siloed areas of research. Our discussion of culture within these genres is not an attempt to conflate them or intended to suggest that they are easily reconcilable. We do suggest, however, in line with recent discussions (cf. McDougall & Ronkainen, 2019; Ronkainen & Blodgett, 2020; Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2019), that there are opportunities for both research tracks to compliment one another. Moreover, it is our belief that as a community of culture scholars, we can all take heed of the culture lessons already learned in other disciplines as we try to navigate tricky cultural waters and chart new courses.

Culture — A Grande Idée

Even in anthropology, which in many ways represents the intellectual origins of culture as a modern concept, the term culture, has no set or widely agreed upon meaning (Alvesson, 2002; Sewell, Jnr, 1999). In an infamous early attempt to collate and clarify the meanings of culture, anthropologists Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn (1952) uncovered 164 competing definitions of culture. Definitions spanned (and variably emphasized) domains of history (heritage and tradition), psychology and cognition, behaviour, language, society and structure, symbols, learning and adaptation to the environment, normative rule, and so forth. Having declared that they had no desire to add a 165th definition, Kroeber and Kluckhohn nevertheless proceeded to add one, that still managed to straddle a number of properties and complexities: “Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols... the essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas and especially their attached values” (p. 181).

The meanings and uses of culture have only become more heterogeneous as the study of culture has expanded across the social sciences and humanities and it is well-known that just because two researchers are interested in culture, or at least use the term, does not mean they are talking about culture in the same way (Alvesson, 2002; Schein, 2004). Faced with the theoretical complexity of culture and an almost overwhelming diffusion of meanings, academics – materialists, structuralists, functionalists, Marxists, feminists, ideationalists, critical theorists, positivists, realists, rationalists, interpretivists, social constructionists – have all had their say and waged ‘culture wars’ (Kuper, 1999; Geertz, 1973; Martin, 2002). Though the social anthropologist Adam Kuper quipped “not many dead” (Kuper, 1999, p. 1), some may have wished they were, as battleground arenas of ontology, epistemology, method and representation were contested and re-examined continuously.

Is culture a scheme, a system, some sort of framework? A complex whole; an organic superstructure that represents a whole way of life? Or made up of interconnecting parts that somehow work together and must be considered separately in order to cut culture down to size and make it more useful? What properties or family of concepts actually comprise culture (e.g., values, beliefs, behaviours, rituals, habits, norms, rules, practices, ‘symbols’ etc.)? Is culture completely homogenous, shared in by all the members of a group? An integrating mechanism — the social glue that holds an otherwise diverse group of people together? If so, then where and how does diversity and difference fit with our images and ideas of culture? What and where are

the boundaries of culture and how can we tell where one ends and another begins? Is culture singular, as in each group has only one culture — a singular essence that defines who they are and what they stand for or is it more accurate to speak of culture(s)? Can we generalize from one culture to another and should we compare and contrast cultures, evaluating them against each other? Or can cultures only be understood and judged according to their own internal workings and the rules of the societies that produced them? Is culture static or dynamic? How do they change and by what design? Does culture exist in the minds and mental processes of cultural participants? Does it reside in the unconscious and is therefore tacitly learned? Or is culture public, symbolic and interpretable? How is culture different from related concepts like society, structure, meaning, identity and community? To what degree are people culturally determined? Do ideas of power, resistance and hegemony fall within the sphere of culture and the analysis of it, and if so, then how? How do researchers and practitioners, among this conceptual morass, even begin to access culture and figure out what constitutes evidence of a culture? Can we represent culture only through description or are we also obligated to interpret, and seek explanations, and how can we possibly communicate our cultural understandings to an audience, academic or otherwise, in a way that fairly represents both those that are studied and our views as the researcher?

It is striking that sport psychology has largely bypassed many of these difficult questions and debates. Culture, no matter how quickly one wishes to operationalize it, is a concept with substantial historical and conceptual ‘baggage’ (which to ignore, is, of course, to invite another kind of problem). We draw on our shared interests across a range of traditions in anthropology, cultural studies, cultural psychology, philosophy and organizational studies to ground our understanding of culture in a fundamental concern for meaning, and the making and interpretation of it (cf., Alvesson, 2002; Hall, 1980; Geertz, 1973; Ortner, 1999; Ricoeur, 1986; Shweder, 1990; Smircich, 1983; Williams, 1981). Culture, in this sense, provides the collective means of sensemaking and interpreting, and of constructing meaning and attaching significance to experience - thus structuring, guiding, and shaping human feeling, interactions, and endeavours (Geertz, 1973; Hammersley, 2018). The making and interpretation of meanings, as we refer to these processes, is not only confined to the symbolic realm and neither do we think meanings reside only in the head and in the cognitive: rather, meanings are also public (Geertz, 1973) and “organize and regulate social practices, influence our conduct and consequently have real, practical effects” (Hall, 1997, p. 3).

The focus on ‘shared meanings’ can be problematic, sometimes giving

the impression that 'culture' is always 'whole', internally coherent, and predicated on only consensus. There have also been concerns in anthropology that the centralization of meaning can relegate issues and themes of power, hegemony and inequality to the periphery of culture analysis (cf. Ortner, 1999). Hence, we are appreciative of approaches that blend a central concern for meaning with an overt acknowledgement of difference, the possibility for multiple cultural interpretations, and a critical, political edge (e.g., Alvesson, 2002; Ortner, 1999).

While there is substantial variation in how meaning-centred approaches are conceived and used, they have provided a basis for culture scholarship across the social sciences (Hammersley, 2018) and from a psychological lens (e.g., D'Andrade, 1984; Markus & Hamedani, 2007). In CSP, there is a growing influx of culture research projects that have used meaning-making processes to generate contextualized understandings of previously marginalized topics (Ryba et al., 2010; Schinke & McGannon, 2014; Stambulova & Ryba, 2013). We have also used a meaning orientation in previous work to challenge simple cause and effect relations and the listing and categorization of distinctive 'key' traits, beliefs and behaviours that are taken to define a group and how they see the world (McDougall et al., 2020; Ryba, Haapanen, Mosek, & Ng, 2012). This positioning is consistent with important foundations of meaning-orientated traditions, such as Geertz (1973), that have continuously positioned the search for the meaning(s) in culture against a variety of positivist and functionalist perspectives. At their worst, these perspectives are the antithesis of meaning-based approaches, because they offer weak social explanations and cultivate the view of society as a machine or system, in which complex human intentions and cultural formations only really matter in terms of their effect on that machine or system (Ortner, 1999).

The Death of Culture?

The fate of culture and its decline as an intellectually vibrant and useful concept has been seriously contemplated before in other disciplines with more established histories of culture scholarship including anthropology (e.g., Fox, 1999; Ortner, 1999), cultural studies (Turner, 2012) and organization and management studies (e.g., Alvesson, Kärreman & Ybema, 2017; Calás & Smircich, 1987). Often the ethical and political ramifications of cultural research have been lifted to the forefront with the problematization of not only what can be known, but what implications the scientific project has for people who are affected by that knowledge. As already noted, the diver-

sity of the definitions and uses of the culture concept have contributed to the fragmentation of knowledge bases, with the various critiques questioning whether we can productively and ethically talk about ‘cultures’ at all.

On one hand, already some decades ago, scholars questioned the classic concept of culture derived from American anthropology (as a whole way of life stemming from shared history and identity), questioning the utility and accuracy of attempts to analyze ‘bounded’ and ‘independent’ cultures in an increasingly multivocal and hybrid world (Abu-Lughod, 1997; Ortner, 1999). Scholars focused on transnationalism have emphasized the constant flow of people and cultural ideas and practices, arguing that contemporary mobilities “require reconsideration of how individuals are identified as part of a culture, a group or even a nation” (Özkazanç-Pan, 2019, p. 3). The traditional concept of culture, closely linked to nationality and/or ethnicity, has also been critiqued for constructing culture as a static and homogenous entity and for failing to account for other potential membership in various cultural groups that could be related to other denominators such as religion, gender, sexuality, and so forth (Piller, 2012).

In addition to the problems posed by transnationalism and hybridity of contemporary peoples’ belongings and identities, the traditional anthropological project of cultural analysis has been identified as ethically problematic in (often unintentionally) perpetuating cultural imperialism and colonialism. According to these critiques, an anthropological knowledge base has tended to construct non-Western people as ‘the Other’ and thus contribute to the reproduction of difference and marginalization. In her attack on cultural essentialism, Narayan (1998) rejected “the idea that there is anything that can solidly and uncontroversially be defined as “Indian culture” or “African culture,” or “Western culture” for that matter” (p. 102), while also insisting that the labels that are used for various so-called cultures are “fairly arbitrary and shifting designations, connected to various political projects that had different reasons for insisting upon the distinctiveness of one culture from another” (p. 93). Anthropologists – appalled by the realization that the foundations of their discipline had been laid on shaky moral ground and projects of power, and the capacity of their flagship concept to essentialize, stereotype and even damage whole groups of people – increasingly distanced themselves from the culture concept, or left behind older notions of it in favour or search of newer, more *just* ones. Relatedly, in a sport context, Ungruhe and Agergaard’s (2020) recent article “Cultural transitions? Transcultural and border-crossing activities among sport labor migrants” sought to destabilize the notions of ‘home culture’, ‘new culture’ and ‘acculturation’ while arguing that cultural transition research in sport emphasizes cultural difference

which “may not only contradict the lived experiences of people and their interaction but also reinforce ideas of cultural otherness and hierarchies” (p. 729). As an example, for them, the discussions of difference between African and European styles of football “reproduces colonial worldviews of an evolutionary difference between African and European ‘cultures’ more generally with problematic consequences for the social status of African migrants in Europe” (p. 730). Taken together, these critiques seem to be arguing that there is little rationale (or ethical justification) for anthropological and cross-cultural psychological research as it has been typically conceived.

On the other hand, scholars in cultural studies – which has informed much of the culture research in sport psychology – have voiced concerns about the field’s possibilities to survive as an academic domain. In his book *What’s Become of Cultural Studies?*, Turner (2012) presented the key criticisms and analyzed the ‘fallen’ state of the discipline, arguing that “cultural studies is becoming performative or even aesthetic, rather than political practice” (p. 174). According to these critiques, cultural studies – where cultural analysis often focuses on media content and other forms of cultural life – has failed to demonstrate its usefulness, impact and methodological rigor while also being vague about its disciplinary subject matter (Ang, 2013; Turner, 2012). Furthermore, critical voices argued that cultural studies had become institutionalized and focused on academic and intellectual interests, thus forgetting its foundations as a form of activism (Hesmondhalgh, 2013).

Finally, the future of culture as a useful concept has also been debated in organizational psychology and management. In a recent scoping review of organizational sport psychology, Wagstaff and Burton-Wylie (2018) pointed out that in the broader organizational management community scholars had labeled the topic “intellectually dead” (Alvesson et al., 2017, p.105). The comment drew a response (cf. McDougall & Ronkainen, 2019) that contextualized the death knell of organizational culture and how it had been predicted before in 1980s (Calás & Smircich, 1987), only a few short years after the concept of culture had burst on to the organizational academic and consulting scenes. Then, Calás and Smircich (1987) declared that organizational culture research was dominant but dead. It was a response to the unrelenting tide of studies underpinned by positivist, functionalist assumptions that had co-opted culture into a managerialist agenda concerned with the creation and maintenance of leader-inspired cultures of excellence. Organizational research that drew upon the interpretative symbolic traditions of Geertz, or that adopted a critical stance that pointed out managerial biases, relations of power, and challenged the very premise that culture could be managed, eventually became marginalized and redundant. Although the study of organiza-

tional culture “did not quite die, it perhaps limped on in a wounded form, before eventually falling out of vogue” (McDougall & Ronkainen, 2019, p. 15).

Worryingly, in the culture-for-performance agendas of organizational sport psychology, we are arguably already treading the exact same path that organizational scholars walked over three decades ago (McDougall et al., 2020; McDougall & Ronkainen, 2019). Like those studies and theories that came to dominate organizational management and the lucrative world of consulting, culture is typically treated as a (and often the) critical performance variable. It can be deliberately created, managed and manipulated by those with authority and culture ‘know-how’ (e.g., leaders and supporting sport psychologists) for the purposes of engineering social cohesion and on-field athletic success (e.g., Cruickshank et al., 2014, 2015; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011; Henriksen, 2015). Culture is depicted as singular and uniform and there is scant consideration of issues (definition, essentialism, difference, ethics, power, representation, determinism) that other disciplines have wrestled with. Most studies have therefore adopted an instrumental view of culture that centralizes homogeneity and a common-sense functionalism that allows for simple associations to be made between people, their behaviour and social processes. Consequently, in the performance-enhancing agendas of sport psychology, culture research has arguably had little to do with obtaining a deep and layered understanding of collective values, traditions, rituals and ways of thinking, living and making meaning in sport contexts.

Problematically, in the applied domains of high performance sport, the intellectual decline of culture may be hard to prevent. Applied sport psychologists, like other professionals, operate in the market. They compete for a limited number of full-time positions in elite sport domains where the financial rewards for athletic success (and consequences for failure) are significant (Nesti, 2010). When the culture concept is applied more rigorously (with a deeper regard for the concept’s foundations and complexities) it can increase in theoretical interpretative power, yet quickly lose its practical focus and appeal (Alvesson, 1989). To align with expectations of elite sport, there is, therefore, a sizeable danger that practitioners sacrifice theoretical rigor and credibility in the interests of instrumentality.

We also question whether CSP may currently be a stagnating field. Whereas performance discourses have fetishized ‘sameness’, CSP scholars are skittish about homogeneity and link it (sometimes too closely) to essentialism. The CSP community instead pursue ideas of difference as the primary framework for cultural analysis. From a postmodern perspective, this strategy makes sense. The world is globalized, communities are fluid with porous

boundaries, and sport is transnational; facilitating the exchange of cultures and ushering in an era of multiple, hybridized, intersecting cultural identities (Blodgett, Schinke, McGannon, & Fisher, 2015; Ryba et al., 2018). Yet, with difference as the primary base for cultural analysis, a number of new implications (sometimes problematic) are introduced into the culture concept.

First, CSP scholars may be caught up in the business of describing a never-ending spectrum of categories of identity and intersectionality. This has led to many good descriptive studies about cultural difference and marginalization and calls to recognize different types of diversity, but little in the way of progress in theorizing, explanations, or development of culturally informed practices that can shape applied sport psychology delivery. For example, Oghene, Schinke, Middleton, and Ryba (2017) discerned that in sport acculturation research there is a lack of in-depth examination of culture and how it might contextualize migrant experience of transition. Arguably, this same observation applies to different strands of CSP scholarship, where, we note, there is often only a vague articulation of what culture is in the first place. Instead it seems that a focus on identities, intersectionality, or a person's experiences (rather than culture per se) constitutes the greater part of the CSP reflexive lens. The emphasis then, is often not really on culture or the study of it at all, but on acknowledging multiple, overlapping, and fluid self-identities, exposing hegemonic discourses, and dealing with the issues, politics and representations of identity and difference. At least in part, a lack of attention to culture has occurred because in the literature of CSP, culture has bled into identity to the extent that the two concepts are conflated and barely distinguishable at times. Still, just as it is a "poor strategy to separate out a cultural sphere and treat it in its own terms" (Kuper, 1999, p. 247), it is equally debilitating to lump culture and identity together under the one rubric for the purposes of psychological and social analysis. In principle, it undercuts the origins of Cultural Psychology, which grew from a focus on how culture underpins psychological processes and is enmeshed in relevant socio-historical contexts (Ryba et al., 2013).

The move against essentialism and culture as an enduring whole, its values shared in by all, has been supported by the epistemological choices of CSP scholars. While CSP is open to various epistemologies and methodologies (McGannon & Smith, 2015; Schinke et al., 2019), most CSP scholarship has favoured social constructionism as a base (Ronkainen & Blodgett, 2020). Opposed to functionalist, positivist accounts of culture, scholars from this perspective take seriously social actors' capacity to interpret, negotiate and make their cultural worlds through their constructions (McGannon & Smith, 2015). On the other hand, social constructionism can reduce culture to only constructions and place excessive faith in the critique that there are

no distinct cultures or ways of life anymore. In the extreme, this can leave culture as a 'mind-dependent' entity and minimize attention to material (the physical world of objects and practices) and social structural (e.g., class, economy, law, religion, rules, moral norms, ideologies) conditions. Yet in other traditions of culture study, attention to material and the structural can ground culture in the stakes of action and change and of real life. They are necessary for a fuller examination of the culturally informed actor living in a culturally infused, politically charged world (Ortner, 1999, 2006).

Social constructionism can also dull the critical edge of cultural analysis through a sometimes too close association with cultural relativism and the premise that there are no universally accepted truths or values. In this view, understandings and judgements are relative to the specific cultures that they arise in (Eagleton, 2016; Poortinga, 2016). According to Eagleton (2016), the general idea of cultural relativism is born of admirable ambitions of being open to other cultures and to avoid absolutizing and imposing our own values; rather than denouncing the headhunters, we must seek to understand them, placing their headhunting practices in their cultural context. Eagleton (2016) goes on, however: "if actions are acceptable once viewed in cultural context, then this may apply to our own behaviour as well. Colonising other nations, waging global warfare and poisoning the planet is just what we Westerners do" (p. 39). By the same token, a slide into unchecked cultural relativism in sport psychology arguably makes it harder to culturally critique (or argue for the reform of) elite sport environments that consistently place an obsessive and ruthless pursuit of performance excellence above issues of well-being, ethics, and a concern for who gets left behind or on the fringes.

In sum, although CSP and the study of organizational culture have emerged as discourses to evolve sport psychology research and practice, both genres, having made some precious gains, have been debilitated by problematic issues that could forebear the decline and death of culture as a meaningful concept. Both have been diverted to narrow tracks that are, in their own ways, each struggling to connect theory and practice and maintain the difficult balance between intellectual vitality and rigor with practical usefulness.

The Future of Culture Worth Fighting For

Despite being a deeply compromised concept, culture is real and ignoring it will not make it go away (cf. Alvesson et al., 2017; Clifford, 1988; Ortner, 1999). Culture expresses meaning and shapes it, and through meaning,

provides people with purpose and coherence and the symbolic resources to make sense of their world. In other words, the subject matter of culture is “part and parcel of social life. . . whether we choose to conceptualize it or not, study it or not, apply it or not” (Costas & Kunda, 2015, p. 116). Like Ortner (1999), we continue to believe that culture is a compelling concept that can be used flexibly, in a number of different ways, including powerfully, as political critique; and secondly, that the fate of culture may largely depend on these uses. Concisely (because space precludes), we offer some suggestions (that are not exhaustive, and moreover, require further dissemination) that we think can help prevent the decline of culture as a meaningful concept in sport psychology.

1. THE NEED FOR SPECIFICITY

Using the term ‘culture’ more specifically and avoiding simplifying its meaning is an essential building block to lift discussion and advance theory and practice in sport psychology. It immediately helps to counter the inclination to treat culture as a complex but amorphous whole or system. This usage seems to obscure a great deal more than it reveals (Geertz, 1973), is unsustainable in a modern world imbued with diverse perspectives and subjectivities (Ortner, 2006), and, we believe, feeds the development of atheoretical and de-contextualized cultural understandings. Instead, maximizing the utility of culture involves cutting the concept down to size (Geertz, 1973), which is only really possible if we are more specific about what we mean when use the term culture and outline more clearly the theories that guide us. This more careful (and humble) strategy can also aid in theory building by encouraging us not to talk past each other and to work out the strengths and limitations of the theories we draw on by forcing us to grapple with the inherent tensions within the concept and its applications. Being more specific about culture also allows us to differentiate and create touching points between related concepts (e.g., identity, society, structure, community, power, hegemony, ideology etc.). Without delineating these concepts, and then working out how they might ‘hang’ together, or not, we impoverish our descriptions and explanations of social life in sport contexts. Moreover, if we inflate the concept of culture to the point wherever everything in the world falls under the term’s umbrella and is therefore cultural (or primarily cultural) then we are left with little room for maneuver in our descriptions, analyses and portrayals of agentic social actors navigating complex social realities.

2. SYNTHESIZING (NOT SEPARATING) CULTURAL SPORT PSYCHOLOGY (CSP) AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE SCHOLARSHIP

In some very noticeable ways, CSP and organizational scholarship are inverses of each other. CSP is culturally reflexive, focuses on issues of difference and marginalization from a critical lens and has struggled to make inroads with regard to practice (cf. Krane & Waldron, 2020; Ryba & Wright, 2005). Conversely, organizational culture scholarship is predominantly based on the recognition and development of consensus values, and is a performative endeavour, most clearly based in managerialist perspectives. These, somewhat rudimentary observations suggest that there are opportunities for these parallel but siloed areas of research to pay heed to each other and integrate elements from one that may benefit and inform the other. For instance, to date, sport psychology organizational culture scholars have done little to discriminate between different cultural values and understandings and (replicating management scholars) end up unreflectively disseminating the Westernized assumptions that are taken for granted in mainstream management and change theories (cf. Alvesson, 2002). Research in this area has been unmindful of the imperialistic foundations of the culture concept and how the theorizing and practical recommendations offered might even be seen to replicate the language of colonizers. Cultural members are made the objects of control. Plans for change are quickly implemented and sometimes ruthlessly enforced, revolving mainly, it seems, around increasing compliance and the reduction or removal resistance. Solutions are given in a universalistic manner stating that ‘practitioners should do X to optimize culture’. Yet, from a CSP-informed perspective, it is critical that organizational scholarship contextualizes these theories, findings and guidance within relevant cultural frameworks of meaning to engender cultural praxis. CSP can therefore sensitize organizational culture researchers to more careful cultural analyses that recognize different cultural values and identities and that avoids assuming and perpetuating ethnocentric guidelines for best practice. For CSP scholars, organizational sport psychology represents an opportunity to make significant inroads in a rapidly developing area of sport psychology with bountiful opportunities to implement cultural praxis that can have impact at an organizational level and on a wide range of sport personnel.

3. GETTING CRITICAL ABOUT DIFFERENCE

While the CSP community has challenged mainstream sport psychology assumptions with a view to culturally contextualizing research and interven-

tion, there is also a need to turn this critical-cultural gaze inward, and internally reflect on how to diversify CSP scholarship (Ryba et al., 2020). There is, perhaps a need to become more critical and pluralistic about the notion of difference itself. Not all difference is to be lauded (e.g., different forms of prejudice in a sport team are still problematic and to be expelled), just as not all consensus is destructive (unanimity on some issues – such as the need to end discrimination and abuse in sport – is obviously welcome and necessary). It is hard to achieve goals and make sustained progress without some solidarity and attention to what binds us (Eagleton, 2016). In a more pragmatic approach then, whether difference and the differences between people are beneficial or not ought to be a matter of investigation, not ontological fiat. Relatedly, Kuper (1999) noted that moving between cultural contexts does not automatically heighten the sense of difference and that many fine ethnographers are struck not by ‘otherness’, but by the continuities that exist between exotic field sites and their home-towns. Similarly, CSP research into transnational athlete migration has shown that some athletes adapt quickly, experiencing a sense of congruence between their own values and new, local cultural norms (Ryba, Stambulova, & Ronkainen, 2016). These observations perhaps speak to the moral consequences and limitations (potential for decline) of a concept of culture that rests primarily on an examination of difference (cf. the ‘difference dilemma’, Minow, 1985). It can, despite good intentions, perpetuate hierarchy, feelings of inferiority/ superiority and group misunderstandings rather than encourage communication across boundaries (national, ethnic, religion, identity) and prevent us from venturing beyond them (Kuper, 1999).

4. (RE) CLAIMING CULTURE AS A MODE OF BEING

One way to re-formulate the concept of culture is to let go of the assumption that culture refers to a stable set of values and beliefs that reside either within a singular individual or a group of people within a particular location, yet retain the view that culture remains fundamental to the constitution and development of the self. In this view, based in cultural developmental psychology and the pioneering work of Vygotsky and Luria (1930/1993), psychological processes are molded by sociocultural systems. A person’s mode of being is gradually forged in the dynamics of important social interactions (family, school, sport, laws) and is attuned to the numerous characteristics of the surrounding physical and sociocultural environment (Kitayama, Duffy, & Uchida, 2007; Ryba et al., 2016). Local contexts

are therefore integral to how people learn to think through culture, because individual traits, ways of being and sensemaking are constructed by and interwoven with specific cultural forms, such as language, customs, norms, values and artifacts, that are locally understood and to some degree shared. These cultural moorings of self, are, however, adaptive, flexible and emergent (Heft, 2013). Athletes (and other sport personnel) through encountering multiple cultural contacts and new local contexts are exposed to cross-cultural variations in the ways of feeling, thinking, and acting in relation to oneself and others. These experiences may result in ruptures of meaning and provide opportunities and imperatives for the development and expression of new psychosocial competencies (Ryba et al., 2018). Culture and a person's psychology are therefore neither static and unchanging, nor baseless since the self and culture are mutually constitutive and in the continuous process of shaping each other through dynamic interaction and in response to new contexts and cultural meanings (Markus & Kitayama, 2010).

Exploring culture as a mode of being opens up new ways of exploring important aspects of sport that are brought to the fore by the transnational flow of actors in sport (e.g., cultural transitions, acculturation experiences, issues of well-being and organizational issues). It gives greater attention to the influence of important socio-historic aspects of culture and avoids unnecessary separation of person and culture by providing opportunities to explore how people both create cultures and are shaped by them. Longitudinal research designs may be especially useful to demonstrate how these dynamic processes are mutually constituting in ways that are not conceptualized and constricted by linear views of causality (cf. Ryba, 2017).

5. THE INTRODUCTION OF PRACTICE THEORY

Practice theory is a diverse and unsettled family of theories with multiple influences and strands², that argue that social life is an ongoing production emerging from people's recurrent actions, or practices (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). In practice theory, the social world is not viewed as external to people or socially constructed by them but produced through everyday activity (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). A practice lens is enticing because it can promote a dialectic rather than dualistic view of many of the

² Good introductory overviews (and critiques) of the origins and developments of practice theory are provided by Ortner, (1984, 2006), Reckwitz (2002), and Schatzki (2001).

most fiercely contested dichotomies that permeate the study of culture: structure/agency; individual/society; body/mind; cognition/action; objective/subjective (Reckwitz, 2002) thus opening up new avenues and spaces for research and practice. Practice theory assumes, for example, that the practices of social actors are both constrained and enabled by social structures, or the global entity, we call the 'system', which at the same time, are susceptible to being changed through practices (Ortner, 1984; 2006). The framing and examination of this exchange through practice theory is a potentially liberating move for sport psychology because our disciplinary theorizations and studies can focus on the more constraining effects of culture. For instance, in the sometimes taken-for-granted assumption that culture is an ultimate framework, or guide for living that we can never step outside of. Consider, for instance, accounts of anonymous, culturally determined or socialized actors who act more or less consistently with the images and ideals of the dominant culture. That the system can be influenced by the practices of ordinary 'actors' is liberating, however, because if the world can be made, then logically it can be unmade, and then re-made (Ortner, 2006). Developing knowledge in this area could be vital for effective and democratic practical work that is geared towards social change – an agenda that is at the heart of CSP scholarship and that is often lacking in the performance enhancement discourses of sport.

Despite the promise of practice theories, they nonetheless require a fully developed idea or concept of culture because social transformation involves not only the changing of social structures and institutions, but the rupturing of the ways people see the world; their subjectivities and the meanings that they think, feel and act through (Ortner, 2006). The ongoing importance of culture, especially a concept modified in old-new formulations (Ortner, 2006) (e.g., that speaks to private and public meanings, what is shared and what is contested, local interpretations and global discourses, and that is politically conscientious and morally invested) is that it provides the substance of change. Such a concept can be usefully inserted into narratives and analyses of sport social change, injustices and inequalities that are layered under and within (not abstracted from) larger social and political goings on that permeate sporting worlds and lives. These are the types of analyses that bring culture (and issues of power, domination, equality, justice and resistance that practices weave through) to the forefront, because they constitute the grounds and stakes of action. They highlight frictions and clashes of meanings and convey the realities of people in the grip of circumstances and in the process of transforming them through practices. As Ortner noted, these types of uses retain a fundamentally

Geertzian view of social life and culture: “meaning-laden, meaning-making, intense, and real” (Ortner, 1999, p. 11).

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