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Steven Rynne

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Culture Change in a Professional Sports Team: Shaping Environmental Contexts and Regulating Power

A commentary

Steven Rynne
The University of Queensland
School of Human Movement Studies, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia
E-mail: srynne@hms.uq.edu.au

INTRODUCTION

Cruickshank et al. provide an interesting account of elite sporting culture, having chosen professional rugby union club Leeds Carnegie as the site for their investigation. In their article, they promote a perspective on cultural change that is very different from the majority of top-down processes described in sport management and sport psychology domains. Theirs is a more textured analysis of cultural change in a professional sport environment that, in a number of ways, serves to advance the empirical research base in this area.

BEYOND SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

When making sense of what they encountered at Leeds Carnegie, Cruickshank et al. mentioned that certain theoretical approaches simply did not allow them to consider the process of change in ways that satisfied them: "While high performing cultures are central to the sustained success of professional sports teams, sport psychology currently offers limited understanding on how they can be actualised" (p. 271). I found this comment to be a fundamentally important point. In considering their research further, I found it interesting to note their comment that "enduring cultural change requires *people* to change" (p. 274, original emphasis). Consequently, the opinion I formed when reading their work was that they are advocating a more thorough consideration of the individual and the social (variously referred to as person/environment, agency/structure, agency/affordances) in discussions of high-performance sports coaching cultures.

STRUCTURE VS. AGENCY

The proposed interdependence (or lack thereof) between the person (agency) and the environment (structure) has been a long-term source of discussion and tension in the fields of sociology, pedagogy and psychology. Billett et al. [1] noted that although there are different emphases, much of the deliberations privilege one or the other of these contributions (i.e., social structures or individual agency). The clear preference of Cruickshank et al. for a more holistic consideration of the change process, meant that they found the majority of sport psychology literature (that tends to privilege individual contributions to learning and development) quite limited for their purposes. This brings us to what I consider to be the valuable contribution that this paper makes – attempting a more

holistic consideration of change as a problematic and political process.

Sporting workplaces are fitting sites in which to consider issues of agency and structure because they involve individuals with unique personal histories, enacting behaviours and processes within social and physical structures that have historical and cultural geneses. A relatively recent development in the literature related to sport has been the increasing use of the fields of sociology, pedagogy and psychology to provide different ways to understand and examine sport and physical activity. As a result, 'traditional' practices (such as in coaching) are being challenged and alternative ways of operating are being proposed and evaluated. Culture change in sporting workplaces represents one such area of inquiry.

WORKPLACE LEARNING AND CULTURE

As coaches and others participate in their sporting workplaces, they are also typically engaging in learning [2, 3]. Learning comprises two dimensions: individual learning and the remaking of cultural practices [1]. While Cruickshank et al. do not focus on individual learning, they do attempt to account for the individuals' and organisation's roles in remaking the culture of Leeds Carnegie. The strong focus on the contributions that AK and NB make as individuals and as providers of key affordances to players is prudent given that these two people had the capacity to shape the array of experiences the players were able to access during their time at Leeds Carnegie. It is also commendable that the authors chose to include the perspectives of players in their research as it is important to consider not just what is afforded, but how, in turn the players elected to engage, construe and construct what was afforded to them. The reason that these multiple perspectives are so valuable in a holistic consideration of the workplace culture is because neither the social suggestion (affordances) nor individuals' agency alone is sufficient to advance learning and the remaking of cultural practices.

AGENCY AND AFFORDANCES

As Billett et al. [1] note, a key premise of the duality comprising relational interdependence is that agency and affordances are individually insufficient to understand learning and cultural practice. When individuals engage in sporting work, they also engage in a process of remaking the associated cultural practices at particular points in time and through access to particular forms of social suggestion. In contrast to the heavily top-down and exogenous processes of change outlined in many management domains [4], this cultural change does not occur through some faithful and mechanical reproduction of what is being suggested socially. Rather, it occurs through individuals' engagement with, construal of, and construction of those practices, albeit mediated by social and cultural norms. Further to this, it is the players' contributions to this process that are important as new cultural needs arise, such as in the case of new management at Leeds Carnegie and the series of promotions and relegations that the club endured.

This is where the authors' adoption of a decentred approach is of such value. As noted by Bevir and Richards [4], such an approach considers networks of people (such as those at Leeds Carnegie) to be constructed by many actors and in relation to the diverse traditions and practices that exist in that setting. The interdependence between the individual and the environment is highlighted in the following quote: "An individual's beliefs, desires or actions cannot be simply read-off from allegedly objective social facts about them. Rather, they construct their beliefs against the background of a tradition or discourse, and often in response to dilemmas or problems" [4, p.7]. In adopting this position, decentred theory encourages researchers to investigate the ways in which networks are shaped and reshaped

through the activities of particular individuals [4]. This has certainly been attempted by Cruickshank et al. through their consideration of multiple actors and their open-ended approach to questioning.

SITUATED AGENCY

It appears, however, that the authors have largely used a decentred 'lens' through which to report on this particular case. While this is entirely appropriate, if a decentred approach had have been adopted earlier in the design and conduct of the study it would have been possible to provide an account that was even more decentred in spirit. For example, it would have been wonderful for there to have been a greater emphasis placed on the examination of the beliefs, meanings, traditions and discourses of the team as well as the changes associated with them (i.e., how networks were made and remade). Similarly given the judicious recruitment of participants in this study, a more decentred approach in the experimental design would have allowed a greater emphasis on the situated agency of individuals. Finally, decentred theorists strongly advocate the use of ethnography in the exploration of cultural phenomena. An account that was more ethnographic in nature could have conceivably been quite generative in relation to Leeds Carnegie.

CHANGE AS A PROBLEMATIC AND POLITICAL PROCESS

However, this was not the approach that Cruickshank et al. adopted and rather than these comments being a critique of their work, they are suggestions for future work adopting a decentred approach. Because, having noted there were other ways that the authors may have conducted and presented this research, the article still makes a contribution to our understanding of club culture. The emphasis on change as a problematic and political process is important. The authors' comment that the change process was not comprised of "strict linear steps but instead an integrated, holistic, and dynamic process" (p. 286) matches well with contemporary work in sports coaching literature such as that characterising coaching as chaotic [e.g., 5] and as complex interpersonal relationships [e.g., 6].

CONCLUSION

This article gives cause for the reader to consider cultural change in ways that are quite distinct from the dominant management and psychological perspectives. The use of a decentred approach in the analysis of the case was certainly an interesting and generative way of examining a professional sporting team and future research may look to adopt this perspective in more fundamental ways. I appreciated being exposed to decentred theory through this article and found that it resonated well with the approaches my colleagues and I have previously adopted in considering the work and learning of high performance sports coaches in their respective workplaces [e.g., 2]. However, as Cruickshank et al. note, it is important to be vigilant and somewhat cautious when applying business-based frameworks to performance sport settings.

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