

**A Longitudinal Study of Power Relations in a British Olympic Sport Organisation**

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## Abstract

The purpose was to examine the power relations during a change of culture in an Olympic sports organisation in the United Kingdom. We conducted a 16-month longitudinal study combining Action Research and Grounded Theory. Data collection included ethnography and focus group discussion (n=10), with athletes, coaches, parents, and the national governing body. We supplemented these with twenty-six interviews with stakeholders, and we analysed data using grounded theory. The core concept found was power relations further divided into systemic power and informational power. Systemic power (e.g. formal authority to reward or punish) denotes how the NGB sought to implement change from the top-down and impose new strategies on the organisation. The informational power (e.g. tacit feeling of oneness and belonging) represented how individuals and subunits mobilised coalitions to support or obstruct the sports organisation's agenda. Olympic sports organisations should consider the influence of s power when undertaking a change of culture.

*Keywords:* Conflict, power, elite sports, organisational psychology

### A Longitudinal Study of Power Relations in a British Olympic Sport Organisation

Research recognises that organisational culture can influence talent development in sport (Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018) since the convergence of evidence points to the organisational context as having the potential to impact on individuals' well-being and performance (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). Culture could, thus, both nourish and malnourish those participating in sport (cf. Henriksen et al., 2019; Schinke, Stambulova, Si, & Moore, 2018). The International Olympic Committee consensus statement (see Bergeron et al., 2015) asserts that there is an urgent need to extend our understanding of how culture influences youth development.

Existing research highlights organisational culture's influence on performance outcomes at the Olympic games (cf. Greenleaf, Gould, & Dieffenbach, 2001), talent development (cf. Henriksen, Larsen, & Christensen, 2014; Henriksen, Stambulova, & Roessler, 2010), performance leadership (Arnold, Fletcher, & Molyneux, 2012), and athlete thriving (Brown & Arnold, 2019). Organisational life in sport is, therefore, a growing research area in sport psychology (cf. Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018) and sport management (cf. Maitland, Hills, & Rhind, 2015).

So far, organisational culture research has, for the most part, adopted a leader-centric approach to culture (cf. Maitland, Hills, & Rhind, 2015). A recent review by Wagstaff and Burton-Wylie (2018) observed that 70% of sports research used this perspective. However, Meyerson and Martin (1987) explain that using this perspective risks neglecting the social processes that might produce conflict or change. Furthermore, Girginov (2006) explains that a limitation of this line of research is that focusing on leaders might give an impression of consistency.

Instead, Alvesson (2017) suggests that researchers should probe underneath the surface (e.g. backstage politics and behind the scenes social processes) to examine the social complexities of organisational life. There is a potential for extending our collective knowledge by focusing on the social processes that occur as cultures change over time. Probing the underlying processes

could help understand what drives and facilitates people's and organisation's behaviours in sport (Girginov, 2010).

### **A longitudinal study into a change of culture in elite sports in the United Kingdom**

It is time to extend organisational culture research because the sports sector is under more scrutiny than ever before due to several examples of destructive cultures in sport (cf. Daniels, 2017; Grey-Thompson, 2017; King, 2012). This article is a part of an extensive longitudinal study aiming to unpick the complexity of a change of culture in elite sports in the United Kingdom (UK).

One study (Feddersen, Morris, Littlewood, & Richardson, 2020) focused on how a destructive culture emerged and perpetuated in a sport. The findings in that study showed that the severe conflict could lead to a destructive culture if mitigated by subprocesses of rationalising and legitimising destructive behaviours. A second study (Feddersen, Morris, Abrahamsen, Littlewood, & Richardson, 2020) examined the influence of macrocultural change (e.g. changing norms and political context for elite sports) on national governing bodies (NGB) in the United Kingdom. Doing so involved focusing on interorganisational systemic power relations between NGBs and governing sports organisations (e.g. UK Sport; GSO).

The substantial contribution of this article is that it adds empirical insights into the nuances of systemic and informational power relations. The current article is focused on an analysis of power relations, and we focus on the entanglement of intraorganisational power relations. Focusing on power relations during a change process is a unique contribution to the field. It is unique because it probes the processes that occur beneath the surface of an organisational culture, which is made possible by the longitudinal data. The purpose of the current study is to examine the power relations during a change of culture in an Olympic sports organisation in the United Kingdom. The research questions were to examine (1) a change of culture process in an Olympic sport, and (2) the power processes that regulate the change process.

## Conceptual Framework: Organisational culture

Referring to Meyerson and Martin (1987), we treat the organisation (i.e. the Olympic sports organisation) as a culture. According to Alvesson (2017) and Helin, Hernes, Hjorth, and Holt (2014), such a view provide us with the opportunity for a rich analysis of the 'behind-the-scenes' organisational life. As suggested by Mannion and Davies (2016), focusing on an organisation as a culture allows us to research inconsistencies and disagreements. For the current study, we treat the setting as an open system, which means that studying culture entails studying the collisions and conflicts with subunits outside NGB-1. In line with Meyerson and Martin (1987), there are many sources of cultural content, and the current study draws attention to diffuse and unintentional sources of change as well as how subunits negotiate change processes.

From this position, culture is not assumed to be a priori controllable (Mannion & Davies, 2016). It is, instead, differentiated (Meyerson & Martin, 1987). The critical part of this organisational culture analysis was, therefore, how subunits met, collided, waged conflict, mediated, and found consensus. We pay attention to non-leader centred sources of change (Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018). Our conceptualisation of the culture obliges us to recognise that power relations may influence the change process (Morgan, 2011). This perspective on culture links cultural change to diffuse processes (e.g. power relations) and unintentional sources (e.g. changes to policy or funding; Meyerson & Martin, 1987).

Mannion and Davies (2016) explain that there are two distinct types of change. First and second-order change. First, a change *in* culture. This process represents cultural continuity where a culture adapts by capitalising on history and traditions. Second, a change *of* culture. In contrast, this process stands for a radical break with the past to overhaul a stagnant or deficient culture. This type of change is radical and often invoked in response to a growing crisis or deficiency in the existing culture (Mannion & Davies, 2016).

**Power relations in organisational cultures.** Power relations might be one of the critical features in organisational change (Amis, Slack, & Hinings, 2004) and organisational culture change (Cruickshank, Collins, & Minten, 2015). Heinze and Lu (2017) suggest that examining power in sports governing bodies may shed light on the underlying processes of institutional change. Considering organisational cultures, Alvesson (2017) argues that power relations could be a key feature for understanding the social processes in changing organisational cultures. Power in organisations has been suggested being power plays between people or used for instruments of domination (cf. Morgan, 2006b). Understanding power relations may be critical to understanding how individuals and groups react during change (Dowling, Leopkey, & Smith, 2018).

With this in mind, we assume that power is an interdependent relational capacity emerging from the continuous interactions between people (Foucault, 1979). Frisby (2005) asserts that noticing entrenched power relations and who occupy positions of power can generate a deeper understanding of culture in sports organisations. A key assumption in this paper is, therefore, that the organisation culture studied is best viewed by the changing power relations. Research from other contexts (e.g. architectural companies and prisons) suggests that power could come in the form of 'silent hierarchies' in groups (e.g., informal leaders) and 'invisible walls' (e.g., between senior and junior staff; Brown, Kornberger, Clegg, & Carter, 2010), and as an attribute that individuals can wield to control others (Scruton, 2016).

French and Raven (1959) suggested a typology for six bases of power: reward, coercive, legitimate, expert, referent, and informational power. This typology has been widely used in management and organisation studies (Gearin, 2017; Munduate & Bennebroek Gravenhorst, 2003; Tang, 2019), physical education (e.g. Lyngstad, 2017), and sport psychology (Potrac & Jones, 2009; Rylander, 2015; Turman, 2006). Yet, the bases of power are rarely easily divided as they are in theory. Further, they are viewed as a resource that individuals can use or wield to change

beliefs (Lyngstad, 2017). As mentioned above, we assume that power is relational, capillary, emerging from continuous interactions and not a resource. French and Raven's (1959) typology does, however, provide labels that are helpful to explain different bases of power.

Morgan (2006a) suggests that examining power relations should involve examining different interests because it can help identify subunits (e.g. groups or individuals) and conflict. We, therefore, consider the importance of various subunits in the sport. In line with Martin and Meyerson (1987), we assume that the organisation is an arbitrary boundary a collection of subunits. We also assume that different subunits could shed light on the unique features of how power relations influence change (Mannion & Davies, 2016).

Subunits could represent orthogonal subunits that accept the change happening around them (Mannion & Davies, 2016). Subunits might be counter-subunits representing disagreements (e.g. conflicting interests). It is possible that some subunits emerge as a response to changes that are aligned to their interests, thus amplifying and supporting other cultures (Mannion & Davies, 2016). So, knowledge of the negative constraining aspects of organisational culture might illustrate why conflict arises. Examining how subunits meet could also show how ambiguity and complexity form how culture emerges over time from everyday interactions of dynamic power relations (Bonder, Martin, & Miracle, 2004).

## Method

The Participatory Inquiry Paradigm framed this study (Heron & Reason, 1997). Adopting a participative epistemology, we integrated Action Research (AR) for researching change (Duus, Husted, Kildedal, Laursen, & Tofteng, 2014) and Grounded Theory (GT) for theorising processes (Holt, 2016)<sup>1</sup>. Integrating AR and GT allowed the first-author to be involved in the change process,

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on Grounded Theory, please refer to (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

which moves science beyond observing what 'is' (cf. Gergen, 2015) and rethinks research as an active, constructive process. We included GT because it is a transparent method that illuminates how the analysis process links to findings, which is an issue AR has been criticised for in the past. Integrating GT and AR helps us make the analysis of change (AR) more transparent and illuminate the processes that regulate change (Dick, 2007).

We are focused on the social processes that influence the change process rather than evaluating the 'success' of the change. In adopting a participative approach, we aimed to engage the participants in unravelling the social processes as they occur (Gergen, 2015). Bringing AR and GT together in this study means that the quality criteria include a democratic research process and using all the core elements of GT to enhance the iterative analysis at critical points (e.g. theoretical sampling).

### **The Olympic Sports Context in the United Kingdom**

The sports governance in UK talent development includes a range of support agencies (see Grix and Phillpots 2011). The two most relevant organisations in the current study were UK Sport and Sport England, which act as critical paymasters to Olympic sports in the UK (cf. Houlihan & Green, 2009). Other organisations relevant to the study were the English Institute of Sport (EIS), which provides sport science support services; the Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme (TASS) supporting dual-career athletes; and UK Coaching, which oversees the development of coach education. As a part of the larger study, we analysed the macroculture in British Olympic sports, which showed that “political will had shielded Olympic sports from societal changes. However, macrocultural changes to social standards and the power of athletes highlighted that the organisational culture was increasingly deficient and required radical changes” (Feddersen, Morris, Abrahamsen, et al., 2020). Pertinent to the case organisation (see below) was that UK Sport and Sport England used their influence to provoke change.



## Case Organisation

The case organisation, NGB-1, governs a longstanding multi-event Olympic sport with approximately 15000 members. The sport is organised as a dispersed landscape of smaller clubs or with few athletes training with a personal coach. At the end of 2016, UK Sport declared that it was not probable that the sport would medal at the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games and, therefore, removed all funding from the sport. The funding cut meant that NGB-1 retrenched to core services (e.g. safeguarding, coach development) to ensure financial stability.

Assuming that the case organisation is an ‘open-system’ (Meyerson & Martin, 1987, p. 634), we analyse a change of culture in NGB-1 from the vantage point of the Talent Team. The Talent Team is a subunit in a larger organisation encompassing NGB-1 and the community within the sport. The Talent Team was hired on the back of two years funding from Sport England (April 2017 – April 2019) to fund a Talent Programme, with a provisional extension for another two years. Today, the organisation receives funding from Sport England for a talent development programme and from the UK Sport aspiration fund. We have gone to great lengths to protect the anonymity of the participants and the organisation. Yet, we strive to show a rich picture of the change of culture process.

## Data Collection Strategies

***Ethnographic observations.*** The first author was embedded in NGB-1 for sixteen months. This immersion entailed drawing together a meaningful portrait of events as they unfolded (Krane & Baird, 2005). These events were followed at the offices of NGB-1, Youth National Team camps, coach development courses, competitions, and public events. The first-author also carried out tasks of day-to-day operations linked to the action strategies presented below (e.g. season planning) and assumed the role of a critical friend (e.g. providing a 'mirror'; Costa & Kallick, 1993). The field

notes were expressed in memos inspired by the conditional/consequential matrix, and the analytical tool named the diagram (see Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

The ethnographic observations changed from the reconnaissance phase to the Grounded Action cycles. The aim of the reconnaissance was to describe the context before conceptualising the change processes (Holt, 2016). The observation guide in the reconnaissance phase was open and focused on who was in the context as well as their roles (e.g. Talent Manager, coach, athlete), motivations (e.g. why are you here?), and where the sport happened (e.g. clubs, regions, countries). In contrast, the aim of the cycles was to conceptualise change and the features that regulated this change. The observation guide in the cycles was driven by data (i.e., informed by previous data from focus groups, observations, interviews and documents) and focused on how people influenced change, why they carried out certain behaviours, and who could influence change (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

**Focus group discussions.** The first author carried out ten focus group discussions lasting from 40 – 130 minutes (see Table 1). The aim was to engage participants in dialogue and examine group interactions. Hence, being sensitive to interpersonal communication helped highlight subcultural understandings of the change process (Kitzinger, 1995). The first focus group discussion was carried out with the Talent Team. This discussion aimed to identify other relevant groups (e.g. who are the most important stakeholders? What should I ask them about?) and explore the context (e.g. what do I need to know about this sport?). The following groups included Parents of Athletes, Coaches, and Athletes (see Table 1). During these, we aimed to clarify meaningful experiences of previous talent programmes (e.g. what was good and bad about previous talent programmes) and the most salient perceptions of the context (e.g. what should I notice about your sport?).

Table 1.

## Overview of Participants.

Initial Sample	Group Label	N	Gender
<b>Focus groups</b>			
Talent Team	TT1	4	1 female, 3 male
Athletes	A1	7	3 female; 4 male
	A2	8	4 female, 4 male
Coaches	C1	3	3 male
	C2	3	1 female; 2 male
	C3	2	2 male
	C4	2	2 male
Parents	P1	10	6 female; 4 male
<b>Individual Interviews</b>			
Assistant Talent Manager	ATM	1	Male
Youth GBR Head Talent Coach	GBR	1	Male
Talent Manager	TM	1	Male
Theoretical Sampling 1	Group Label	N	Gender
<b>Focus groups</b>			
Parents of athletes in underserved areas	P2	2	1 female; 1 male
<b>Theoretical Sampling 2</b>			
<b>Individual Interviews</b>			
Heads of Talent from other Olympic sports		3	All male
Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme Advisor		1	Male
UK Coaching		1	Male
UK Sports		1	Male
Sport England		1	Female
English Institute of Sport		1	Male
UK University Sports Scholars Programme		1	Female
Theoretical Sampling 3	Group Label	N	Gender
<b>Individual Interviews</b>			
Members of counter subcultures		1	All male
<b>Theoretical Sampling 4</b>			
<b>Focus Groups</b>			
Talent Team	TT2	5	All male
<b>Individual Interviews</b>			
Talent Manager		1	Male
Head of Coach Development		1	Male
Management		1	Female

**Documents.** We collected official documents (e.g. policy documents, official papers describing the mission and structure, training programmes) from the NGB and clubs in the sport

to prepare the principal researcher for the first visit and to serve as supplementary data on how policies and regulation might change throughout the study.

**Semi-structured interviews.** The first author carried out twenty-two individual interviews (35-75 min) with participants (see Table 1). All interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide (cf. Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). The interview guide was developed from earlier data elicited from ethnography, focus groups, and the documents. Developing the interview guide from the data allowed the first-author to probe perceptions of the ongoing events of the change process (e.g. how do you experience the change?; who influenced the change process?; and who are the most influential individuals/organisations and why?).

Following Weed (2017), we identified participants when anomalies appeared during the ongoing process of data collection and analysis (see Table 1). The first author conducted data collection from theoretical sampling during all cycles (Cycle 1: Theoretical Sampling 1; Cycle 2-4: Theoretical Sampling 2 and 3). Participants from theoretical sampling 2 participated in two individual semi-interviews. The interview guides were based on data collected earlier in the study focused on exploring inter-organisational conflict and power plays (e.g. how do you experience your relationship with UK Sport/Sport England?). We decided to conduct these interviews with at least two months between the first and second interview. Many of the participants explained that they did not have time to participate in the interviews in person. We, therefore, used Skype to overcome issues of distance and pressurised schedules (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014).

### **The Procedure, Analysis, and Rigour**

We carried out the main part of the research from July 2017 to November 2018 with some follow-up data during January to May 2019. It included two different processes. First, a reconnaissance phase that helped establish an understanding of the current working practices and context to identify change strategies (Gilbourne & Richardson, 2005). Second, four cycles, each

with an implementation and monitoring phase and a reflection and review phase (Feddersen, Morris, Littlewood, et al., 2020). The cycles were carried out in the following timeframe: (1) from September 2017 to November 2017, (2) from December 2017 to April 2018, (3) from May 2018 to August 2018, and (4) from September 2018 to November 2018. The first cycle started during the reconnaissance in September 2017. It did so because the Talent Team started the Internal Team Development and Youth National Team Camps in September 2017 due to funding lasting two years. The analysis in the first two cycles focused on describing the change of culture processes. The last two cycles included theorising the processes. All phases included interrogating for theoretical saturation (see Weed, 2017), refining actions by implementing and studying the ongoing changes.

**Reconnaissance.** We first contacted five Summer Olympic NGBs in May 2017 via email after obtaining ethical approval from the university's ethics committee. These NGBs were identified based on funding changes in the wake of the 2016 Olympic Games. We agreed to carry out the research with one NGB (NGB-1). NGB-1 had just received new funding for talent and elite programmes and expressed significant interest in understanding how to change the organisation.

**Establishing a research group.** The first step of the collaboration was to negotiate consent for the longitudinal study. Second, the first author established a research group, labelled *Talent Team*. The group consisted of six members: the Talent Manager, the Head of Coach Development, the Talent Administrator, The Assistant Talent Manager, the GBR Head Talent Coach and the first author.

The Talent Team was established to integrate participants as co-researchers throughout the process. We did so by outlining shared, and role-specific tasks based on Kildedal and Lauersen (cf. 2014, p. 86). In adopting a collaborative approach, we looked to engage the participants in dialogue and move the participants from a vague commitment to cultural guides. Sbaraini, Carter,

Evans, and Blinkhorn (2011) explain that this can enhance the research by having insiders engage in a sense-making process of which knowledge applied to their practice.

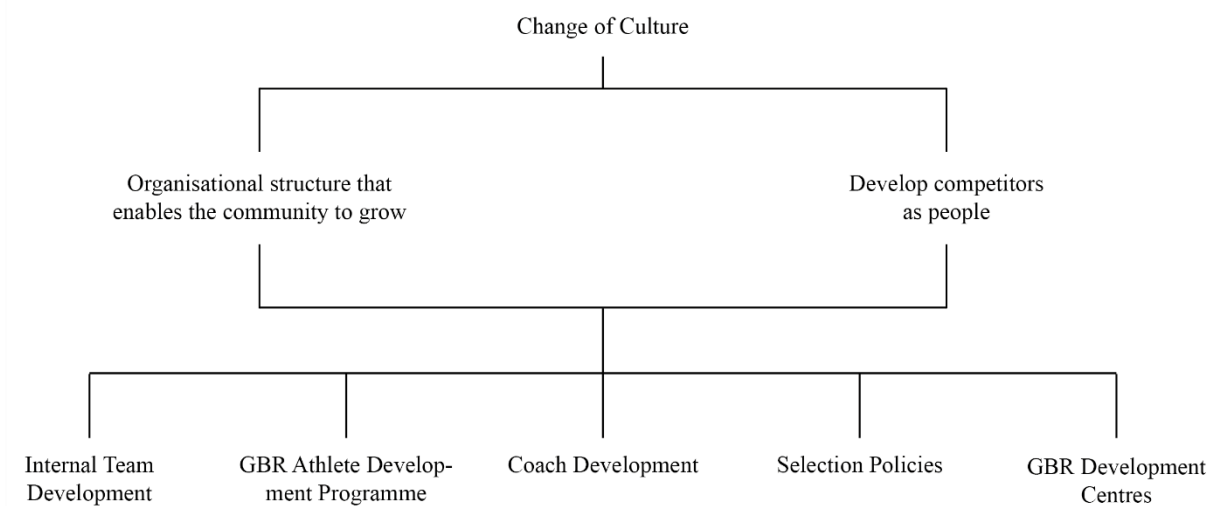
The first author was a part of the Talent Team in an advisory role, which included ethical demands on the researcher and the possible consequences for the participants (Löfman, Pelkonen, & Pietilä, 2004). Having participants and the first author in a research group shows a willingness to relinquish the unilateral control that researchers have traditionally maintained. Iphofen (2013) relinquishing control might create tension between the goals of the research and the aims of the organisation. The collaboration, therefore, included empowering participants to be active in the research (e.g., including participants in the analysis) and help them be forceful in following their individual interests rather than those of the research (e.g., mentioning that it was critical that their work with the NGB was more important than supporting the research).

***Analysis in the reconnaissance.*** The first author started open coding in June 2017 after obtaining organisational consent at the first meeting with the NGB. Memo-writing and introducing analytical tools from GT (i.e. the conditional/consequential matrix and the paradigm) helped conceptualise areas for change and a desired future state (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Kelle, 2007). The Talent Team discussed all concepts, and we identified new areas for consideration through theoretical sampling (cf. Weed, 2017): athletes in underserved areas and inter-organisational power plays (see Theoretical sampling 1 and 2 in Table 1).

***Ending the reconnaissance.*** The reconnaissance ended with identifying change strategies based on the findings (see Findings section). It was evident that all participants agreed that the sport needed to change the prevailing culture. The Talent Team, in collaboration with the management in NGB-1, therefore, formulated a strategy for a change of culture. The strategy entailed transforming the prevailing culture due to a perceived growing deficiency (i.e., conflict and lack of results at the Olympic games; Mannion & Davies, 2016). Others have described such

change as 'frame breaking' possibly involving sharp shifts in strategy, power, structure, and controls (Slack & Hinings, 1992).

The Talent Team formulated two overarching themes to guide their work. (1) *Organisational structure that enabled the community to grow* was a response to findings showing that the former centralisation of the sport to London had alienated the community in the sport. (2) the Talent Team also argued for *developing competitors as people* since previous talent and elite programmes in the sport had discouraged dual-careers. The Talent Team also formulated five change strategies to operationalise the change of culture: Internal Team Development, GBR Athlete Development Programme, Coach Development, Selection Policies, and GBR Development Centres (see).



First, the Talent Team development included recruiting an Assistant Talent Manager, a GBR [Event] Head Youth Coach, and identifying and recruiting contracted coaches. Second, setting up GBR Athlete Development Programme was a part of the funding conditions from Sport England. Doing so included developing a curriculum of technical, physical, tactical, and mental skills. Third, updating coach development and philosophy entailed redesigning the coach

education pathway and included continued personal development opportunities for identified coaches. Fourth, new Selection Policies designing new policies and strategies for selection youth national teams. Last, setting up GBR Development Centres aimed to decentralise the sport from London to have ongoing communication with influential individuals and clubs all over the United Kingdom. The ambition was to establish three centres during the spring of 2018 and in time for the 2018/2019 season.

**Implementation and monitoring phase.** The Talent Team implemented the change strategies during the implementation and monitoring phases. Yet, the focus of this research was to conceptualise power relations.

*Analysis in the implementation and monitoring phase.* We shifted the focus from describing the prevailing context during the first cycle to analysing the underlying process. All Talent Team members engaged in open coding in all implementation and monitoring of action phases. The focus in the first two cycles was to open brand-new concepts regarding the change of culture process. This process involved analysing the data for adaptive changes (e.g. stages and sequences of action) taken in response to changing conditions (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Power relations were not an explicit focus in the early data collection. However, the findings and memos during the first and second cycles suggested that power influenced change. We, therefore, focused on power relations during the last two cycles. These findings influenced the observation guide and interview guides to include a focus on power relations (e.g., what reasons do individuals and groups give for certain changes or non-changes?). In cycles three and four, the open coding process focused on adding any potential nuances to the emerging categories. This helped prevent early foreclosure by forcing the Talent Team to think outside the core categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

The practical approach was to carry out collaborative analysis at monthly meetings. In



adopting a participative approach, all members of the Talent Team discussed and compared new data to the earlier findings. This process aided us in creating analytical diversity. It also helped ensure our collective insights grounded the analysis (Smith & McGannon, 2018; Weed, 2017).

**Review and reflect.** The review phase at the end of each cycle allowed the Talent Team to engage with the data analysis and discuss the emerging findings. These discussions also provided new data vis-à-vis contradictory views in the group (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Here, the Talent Team could iterate these by assessing how they fit the evolving understanding of the organisation.

**Analysis in the review and reflect phase.** The Talent Team engaged in conceptualising culture change processes during this phase and doing so involved reflecting on and reviewing the change strategies. The Talent Team assessed the structural, process, and contextual fit (see Mannion & Davies, 2016) as a part of this process. Engaging cultural insiders helped open unique cultural nuances and insights by comparing new understandings to previous findings from the reconnaissance (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Going back and forth from concepts to categories indicated that counter subunits were crucial to the regulation of culture change processes. We identified and invited three individuals to take part in individual interviews. Yet, only one participant agreed given the sensitive nature of their behaviours (Theoretical Sampling 3; Table 1).

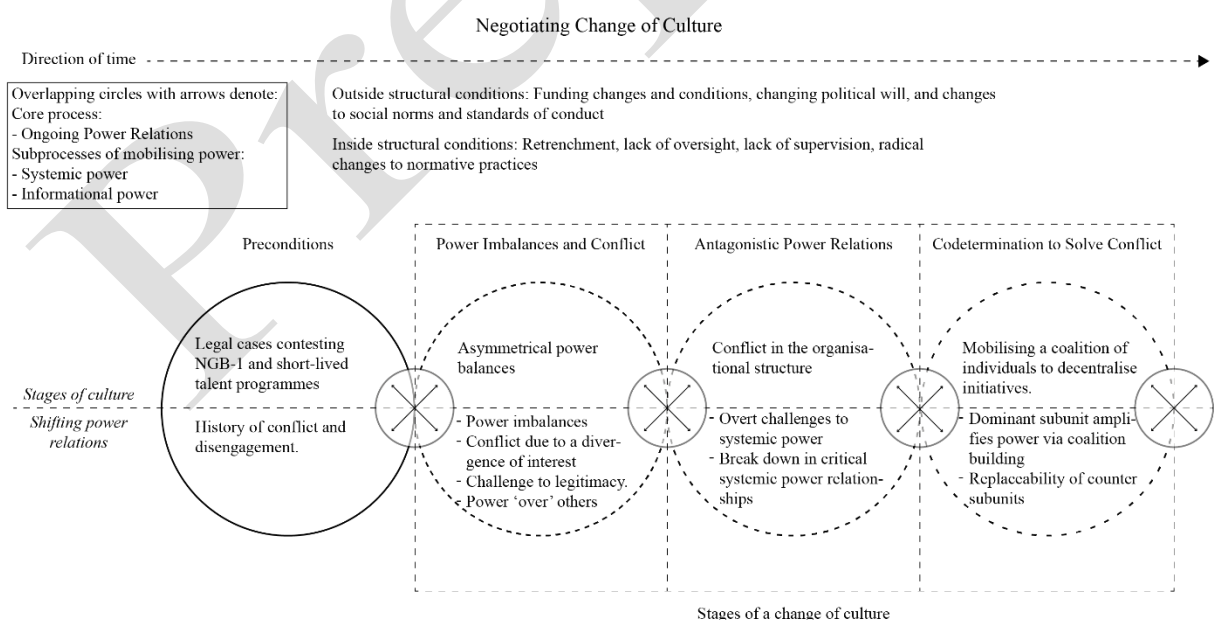
### **Terminating the Research**

The research ended when we experienced data saturation (Holt, 2016). The first author approached the rest of the Talent Team in August 2018 to interrogate for theoretical saturation. The Talent Team then went over the findings and discussed the relationships between the concepts and categories. The first author carried out two meetings with parents of athletes in September 2018; three individual interviews in September, October, and November 2018; and one Focus

Group with the Talent Team in November 2018 as a part of this process (see Theoretical Sampling 4; Table 1). We also carried out one meeting with participants from two other NGBs and GSO (participants identified in Theoretical Sampling 2). The aim of this meeting was to assess the theoretical fit and modifiability to the elite sports context in the UK (Weed, 2017). Finally, the first author's direct engagement with NGB-1 was terminated in November 2018.

## Findings

The findings in the current article showed that at the core of culture was a dynamic process where individuals and subunits constantly negotiated change. The findings were influenced by the longitudinal data, where we followed the changes as a series of successive events. A field note suggested: 'culture moves with events' (Field Notes, January 2019), which summarises a key finding regarding how all individuals and subunits in the sport were entangled and that power relations were at play in all situations. is an empirical model of the change of culture process, focusing on the key features of power relations. The following sections first outline the core concept of power relations and later shows how distinct types of power were entangled throughout the change process.



**Core Concept: Power Relations**

Our understanding of power was developed from the empirical data and represent an interdependent capacity to regulate the successive outcomes of the change process. The findings suggested that power relations were not a possession of an individual. Instead, power existed embedded in social relationships. The overlapping circles (see Figure 2) denote how power relations happened across stages of culture with no clear boundary between stages. The stages in Figure 2 represent the key features of power relations during the current stage. Going from one stage to the next thus represents a significant shift in the features of the power relations.

**Systemic power.** Systemic power denoted the perception of an organisation, group, or individual's right to create conditions, which might require adaptive changes. It was often formalised through targets from UK Sport or Sport England (e.g., number of top three placements in international competitions); policies (e.g., selection for youth national team policy); regulations (e.g., rules to enforce safeguarding); and organisational charts (e.g., an individual's formal position in a hierarchy, for example, a Performance Director or Chief Executive Officer). Systemic power relied on these formalised structures and perceived legitimacy to act as a general system of control and formal authority. For individuals, the systemic nature of an individual's right to create conditions for change for often related to their place in the organisation. We found three subtypes of systemic power: (1) reward power, (2) coercive power, and (3) expert power. On the one hand, rewards and expert power enabled NGB-1 and other NGBs to run talent and elite sports initiatives. In contrast, some of the features of systemic power were perceived as constraining change efforts and creating inertia:

But we are taking one step forward while we're on one of those things at the airport. You know. The moving walkways. And we're walking that way. But the moving walkway is actually going the opposite way to us. Slowly. (TT2)

**Reward power.** Reward power represents the perceived ability of to reward an organisation with resources (e.g. funding, time, power by association). This was explained by a Sport England participant: 'We would like to see that the collaboration with us provides governing bodies with a set of armour to justify their changes' (Sport England participant). The conditions from 2008 until December 2016 were characterised by funding and political will. The support was found to influence all participating NGBs and led to UK Sport and Sport England rewarding NGBs with funding. One participant from NGB-B explained: 'the political will that is behind that finance has been incredibly supportive for sports' (NGB-B).

**Coercive power.** Coercive power represented the perceived ability of an organisation to threaten punishment (e.g. removing funding or access to experts). Reward power was often connected to coercive power since funding from UK Sport, and Sport England often came with formalised targets (e.g. ranking at the Olympic Games, the number of athletes on the talent pathway). The coercive nature of the systemic power relations was that NGB-1 felt compelled to oblige with the targets set by UK Sport prior to the 2016 Olympic Games and by Sport England during the time we carried out the study. Coaches in the sport explained that NGB-1 had followed the targets set out from UK Sport and focused on a subset of the events in the sport. Yet, having a narrow focus was perceived to harm other events in the sport:

There has been a regime up until now. I don't know what the idea behind it was. I remember speaking to someone saying if the goal was to destroy [an event], you could not have done a better job (C1)

**Expert power.** The expert power denoted the perception of an organisation's or a person's expert knowledge within a salient area of interest. To athletes, this included support services from the EIS and UK Coaching: '[NGB-1] wasn't really involved during this time. It was rather the English Institute of Sport and my conversations with their Performance-Lifestyle Advisor' (Field

433 Notes, April 2019).

434       **Informational power.** In contrast to systemic power, we found that informational power  
435 was relatively discrete and rarely formalised. The main feature was that informational power  
436 existed as an interdependent capacity in the relationships between individuals, subunits, and  
437 organisations. It emerged in interactions to produce and/or obstruct change. We found five  
438 subtypes of informational power: (1) referent power, (2) mobilising power, (3) expert power, (4)  
439 reward power, and (5) coercive power. All subtypes of informational power involved how  
440 individuals and groups processed information.

441       **Referent power.** Referent power referred to a level of attraction (e.g. desire to be associated  
442 with) and a feeling of oneness (e.g., perception of relatedness) with other individuals or subunits.  
443 For example, in conceptualising *mobilising power*, it became evident that individuals (e.g. coaches  
444 and athletes) and subunits created coalitions around similar interests (e.g. feeling of oneness).  
445 Parents of athletes also explained that there was a desire to be associated with certain coaches. The  
446 reason was parents' and athletes' idiosyncratic views of what a high-level coach was (e.g. gender,  
447 nationality). The exchange below exemplifies differences in how parents attribute referent power  
448 to a coach:

449       Parent 1: Don't ask [my son], he is really unhappy. He is not liking it. It doesn't fit  
450 him, the style of coaching from, I don't know what the coach is called.

451       Parent 2: Whereas if you ask [my daughter], she would say it's fantastic. "Mum,  
452 mum, can he coach me when we come again, I want some lessons from him" (P2)

453       **Mobilising power.** Coalitions of enhancing individuals and subunits established through  
454 mobilising networks might provide a source of power to all the involved. We found that cultivating  
455 such alliances influenced the change process since it was a way to develop an informal organisation  
456 to either support or counter the proposed changes. An example of how individuals mobilised

against the Talent Team's proposed updates to the policy for selecting youth national teams involved external actors mobilising a coalition of stakeholders (i.e. parents of athletes, volunteer selectors, and coaches) to stop the implementation. Several stakeholders experienced a loss of social position (e.g. resources, place in hierarchy) and mobilised around a similar interest in stopping the changes.

**Expert power.** Informational expert power was similar to systemic expert power, albeit not formalised. An example was the principal researcher's role in NGB-1. The findings and collaboration with the Talent Team afforded the principal researcher with considerable influence to suggest avenues for change, as exemplified by this excerpt from the field notes:

'It turns out that I [principle researcher] now have a significant role in the Talent Team. ... Next year's season plan was based on my recommendations, and I seem to have the power to direct the avenues [NGB-1] should follow. It also seems like I have more influence with some coaches than the Talent Manager. (Field Notes, March 2018)

Furthermore, when asking individuals and subunits about their perception of the principal researcher's role, they often explained that the Talent Team referred to the research to increase the legitimacy of their work.

**Reward power.** In contrast to systemic reward power, informational reward power existed at a personal level. The excerpt below illustrates how the Talent Team lacked the financial support to reward athletes and instead had to appeal to others' perception of their ability to reward them with influence and the hope of developing:

Before we would impose. Say, right, this is a training programme. Come. Do it here at these times, and we will give you some money. We have no carrot to say come and do this. We don't really have stick either. All we have is, actually, if we

do this together, we will all get better, and it is a little bit of carrot, but it's not an easy financial carrot. (Field Notes, May 2018)

**Coercive power.** Coercive power denotes abusing power relationships at a personal level to force other individuals (e.g. athletes or coaches) or subunits to assert or amplify their social status. Individuals engaged in coercive power relations through manipulation or other destructive behaviours, as described in this excerpt from the field notes:

A [Coach] recently berated [NGB-1 employee] so much that he [NGB-1 employee] had to take two weeks off. Another NGB employee explained that the [coach] had shouted at him and acted physically threatening because of proposed changes to the calendar for the forthcoming season. (Excerpt from Field Notes, May 2018)

#### **Entanglement of Power Relations During a Change of Culture Process**

The following provides examples of the entanglement of power relations during the change process.

**Preconditions.** The preconditions refer to the prevailing context (e.g., changes, conflict, culture) prior to the study. NGB-1 had a long history of a lack of credibility due to vocal critique from athletes, coaches, and other stakeholders within the sport (Figure 2). Conflicts between NGB-1 and athletes had previously led to legal cases contesting NGB-1's selections for major international tournaments, athletes changing nationality, and the failings of two past short-lived (Sixteen months and Fourteen months) talent development programmes. The short-lived talent programmes meant that coaches and athletes had little trust in NGB-1 and their ability to create sustainable initiatives: 'We have seen a lot of different programs come and go. ... I like what I have seen today. But if you're asking me to put my house on it? I'm pessimistic' (C1).

**Stage 1: Power imbalance and conflict.** The power relations during this stage were characterised by an asymmetrical power balance. The Talent Team attempted to use their formal authority through systemic power to implement a new athlete development pathway (see Figure 1). Lacking reward power, the Talent Team also tried to mobilise a coalition of supportive coaches to support the implementation. However, conflict arose between the Talent Team and many newly contracted coaches. We found that the conflict was because of a divergence of interest. Here, coaches argued that the new members in the Talent Team lacked understanding of the sport:

He [Talent Team member] says his job is to challenge me just to feel that I'm not like a dictator and I can do whatever I want. ... This is a guy who's a total idiot, and I don't want to be part of this. (Counter Power Broker)

The divergence of interest showed that the Talent Team lacked referent power with the newly contracted coaches (i.e. a feeling of oneness). Reflecting on this, the Talent Team attributed their lack of history as a part of the sport as a key issue:

'So we went through a lot of different coaches and working with a lot of different people, which is always challenging. Because we didn't have the history and people would say "What, you don't [do the sport]? That's the worst thing ever" (TT2).

**Stage 2: Antagonistic power relations.** The conflict from stage 1 carried over into the following stage and became explicit and overt. Some coaches and community leaders overtly challenged the formal authority of the Talent Team. One example was how the head of a training centre used his own systemic reward and coercive power to control scarce resources—in this case, access to training facilities:

We had booked on for all these camps here at the centre, and in effect, he goes through and just takes days out here and there. He just takes out [days] in the



middle for no other reason than killing the whole programme. (Field Notes, November 2017)

The background underpinning the head of the training centre's ability to control the access to training facilities was that the WCP at NGB-1 had invested some of the previous UK Sport funding in a prepayment for access. The prepayment tied the new athlete development programme to the training centre and put the head of the centre in a position of systemic power.

*Conflict in the organisational structure.* During this stage, we also found that some coaches used their personal alliances and referent power to challenge the Talent Teams systemic power by influencing the management in NGB-1. Countering the systemic power created a conflict between the management and the Talent Team. The coaches emphasised that old conflicts between the WCP and NGB-1 were carried forward by the new Talent Team. One individual in NGB-1 management reflected on this conflict after the end of the study:

Some governing bodies solely exist for the purpose of the World-Class programme. But that is not our organisation. The old World-Class programme had a sense of entitlement to them, and it seems like they brought the worst of their personalities into the sport. When it closed, and we hired the [Talent Team], I told [individual] that 'it will take years before this entitlement isn't part of [our sport]'.

(Field Notes, March 2019)

As shown by the excerpt, NGB-1 personnel understood that conflict was partly due to a perception of the Talent Team's misguided entitlement. NGB personnel explained that the entitlement was because of the Talent Team wanting to dictate the direction of culture change. One NGB-1 employee explained: 'Why would I help [the Talent Team member] when they don't help me?' (Field Notes, March 2018).

The Talent Team's relationship with the Board and Management remained as a critical regulator in this conflict and was in constant fragile flux. A member of the Talent Team described the friction: 'I feel like [Management] is trying to catch me out and set me up' (Field Notes, March 2018). The conflict influenced the organisational structure and limited the Talent Team's systemic power to implement initiatives for a change of culture.

**Stage 3: Codetermination to solve conflicts.** The Talent Team recognised the importance of building a coalition with stakeholders to successfully implement change initiatives. The Team also recognised the importance of regaining their position in the organisational structure and limit the systemic power of counter-subunits and individuals (e.g. the head of the training centre).

***Mobilising a coalition.*** Mobilising a coalition of individuals and subunits that supported the change initiatives involved decentralising the athlete development pathway by establishing GBR Development Centres around England. The coalition was built on codetermination of stakeholders including athletes' parents who emphasised dual-career opportunities; universities to create an alliance that afforded legitimacy to the Talent Team, and 'forward-thinking coaches.' We also found that building this coalition showed how a dominant subunit (i.e. the Talent Team) amplified their informational power by partnering with enhancing subunits. In contrast, counter subunits viewed the new coalition as a regime akin to the previous WCP:

It doesn't matter what's better. Everyone is going to say, or most of them, that it's perfect. Because these people didn't have a chance before to get close to the federation and now, they can't see anything else. It's like a regime that they run!

(Counter Power Broker)

Building the coalition and decentralising the athlete development programme also meant that the Talent Team was less reliant on the training centre that had previously controlled the access to training facilities. Being less reliant on this centre meant that the head of the centre was more

replaceable and held less systemic power because the Talent Team had spread the control over access to training facilities to their supportive coalition.

The Talent Team explained that some individuals were impossible to integrate into the programme, which made it necessary to consider the replaceability of certain individuals. The reason was that their repeated transgressions and engagement in counter behaviours were perceived to come with substantial psychological and resource costs to NGB-1:

That's that lack of clarity of purpose, and also the poor behaviour of the coach, to be perfectly honest. They're no longer in the group because that was creating a drag on a system because you're trying to get people aligned (TT2)

#### **Towards A Working Model for Examining Change of Culture Processes**

The findings of the current study and previous articles from the same study (cf. Feddersen, Morris, Abrahamsen, et al., 2020; Feddersen, Morris, Littlewood, et al., 2020) structured the findings in empirical models based on the integration of AR and GT (cf. Dick, 2007). The main function of these models was to translate the findings into a manageable model to provide an overview of the stages of a change of culture (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Feddersen, Morris, Littlewood, and Richardson (2020) focused on the stages of a change of culture and the organisational outcome, the second study showed how the macroculture influenced organisations in British Olympic sports, and the current study focused on the power relations. The findings in both studies show that the empirical model can be modified to fit the specific purpose and focus.

Special consideration was paid to the possible modifiability of the model to make it open to extension as a result of future research (cf. Weed, 2017). In the current paper, we have used terminology from the wider literature (e.g. Foucault, 1979; French & Raven, 1959) to make it more widely applicable. All types of power relations were developed from the ground up. Yet, we found it helpful to link our findings to the wider literature. We suggest that the empirical model might be

suitable for the study of culture change in sport. It can be modified to fit other contexts (i.e. the structural conditions) and help researchers deal with the large amounts of data expected during a longitudinal study (i.e., it helps group data into preconditions and change of culture stages).

## Discussion

The study contributes to the field of organisational culture in sport by examining the power relations that regulate change. Longitudinal designs are often recommended, particularly in relation to studying change, but are rarely used given the time commitment from both the researchers and participants. We found that the power relations within the organisation were influenced by outside structural conditions (e.g. norms, policy, and funding), thus extending the findings to sports governance. The current study could, therefore, be relevant to both sports managers and sport psychologists. Systemic (e.g. policy, funding, formal authority) and Informational Power (e.g. expertise, coercion, reward) regulated the change of culture. Organisational practitioners (e.g. talent managers, performance directors) can use these findings to inform how they implement cultural change in sports. Understanding the systemic and informational power relations within an elite sports organisation could help organisational practitioners navigate challenges and conflict. The study is also an argument for practitioners to understand a given site beyond its people before or as a part of an intervention.

### Power Relations as the Key Social Process in a Change of Culture

The findings in the present study support Alvesson (2017) and Helin et al. 's (2014) suggestion that power might be a critical social process that occurs during organisational change. The articles from this study indicate that power might be ever-present behind the scenes where it manifested in conflicts and power plays (Feddersen, Morris, Littlewood, et al., 2020). Morgan (2006b) suggests that the path an organisation might take usually hinges on power relations between the actors involved. Likewise, Cruickshank, Collins, and Minten (2014) argue that power

could have a critical role in driving culture change. Our findings support an understanding of power as a social relation. Foucault (1979) uses the image of a capillary network to explain how power reaches from one individual to another. Here, power circulates throughout an organisation (Hargreaves, 1986). However, we also found that the scope of power was influenced by legitimacy, which allowed us to subdivide power relations into systemic and informational power.

First, the current study extends Feddersen et al., (2020) by examining how systemic power influenced the change process in NGB-1. Exercising systemic power might include the authority to mandate change and determine appropriate avenues for change (cf. Dowling et al., 2018). In the current study, we found that the systemic features (i.e. policies, regulations, formal hierarchies available through organisational documents) gave the Talent Team a higher degree of legitimacy. Morgan (2006b) argues that legitimacy stabilises power relations. Stable power might allow individuals or organisations a 'right to rule' (Morgan, 2006b) or decision-making power (Parent, Naraine, & Hoye, 2018) if the systemic features are acknowledged by others.

Systemic power might, therefore, be used to direct change agendas as an instrument of domination (Morgan, 2006a). Scraton (2016) suggests that formalised systemic power can act as an instrument of suppression and strip organisations and individuals of influence and rights. In sport, an absolute feature of the systemic funding relationship in British sports is suggested by Grix and Phillpots (2011): 'most National Governing Bodies of sport (NGBs) are hidebound to their paymasters' (p. 9). We also found that UK Sport and Sport England influenced the studied sport at several points by dictating appropriate avenues for change. The interorganisational connection between NGBs on one side and Sport England and UK Sport on the other is what Frisby (2005) calls an entrenched power relationship. Here, it is critical that NGBs can trust those in positions of power.

However, we also found that some individuals in the sport had little trust in UK Sport and Sport England due to the perceived severe funding cuts. A fallout of the mistrust was that some violated norms and regulations because they perceived it to be in their interest to do so (e.g. to have their athletes selected for youth national teams, win youth medals) to keep receiving funding. Mitchell, Crosset, and Barr (1999) argue that some may violate rules because it is in their short-term interest. Sports managers need to consider strategies for encouraging behaviours that support the agreed-on policies. The influence of UK Sport and Sport England can be viewed through Morgan's (2006a) instrument of domination metaphor. Based on our findings and those of Babiak, Thibault, and Willem (2018), we suggest that future research could benefit from examining the changing interorganisational relationships. One avenue to do so could be to examine mechanisms of power plays (Morgan, 2006b) or power imbalances (Babiak et al., 2018) between NGBs and organisations such as UK Sport.

Second, informational power existed as a tacit capacity, which was negotiated in the relationships among individuals and groups. We found five subtypes of informational power: (1) reward, (2) coercive, (3) expert, (4) mobilising, and (5) referent power. These different subtypes often manifested in conjunction with other subtypes. Feddersen et al., (2020) introduced how informational power might underpin antagonist behaviours to counter proposed changes. In the current study, we probe the power relations of counter subunits and found of individuals created coalitions through mobilising power in conjunction with coercive to counter the systemic power of the NGB. Morgan (2006b) argues that mobilising or initiating coalitions among 'less powerful actors' can serve as an instrument to oppose instruments of domination. Creating coalitions through mobilising power could allow counter subunits to delegitimise systemic change agendas by waging conflict (Foucault, 2001).

In line with Morgan (2006b), we also found that one source of power was how both NGB-1 and individuals in the sport persuaded others to support them and their interests. Arnold, Fletcher, and Hobson (2018) found that so-called 'dark leaders' drew their power off people through manipulation. Our findings supported findings of how both coercive and reward power could be used to create networks of subservient followers. Both Foucault (1979) and Scraton (2016) suggest that persuading others in such a way can lead to authoritarian leadership of subordinates. Given these findings, research is needed into how some individual might leverage their power to create subservient followers and what the psychological impact of this may be.

Nevertheless, we also found examples of what Morgan (2006b) calls democratic practices. Decentralising the sport from London engaged subunits in participation with NGB-1, which allowed subunits to have more balanced power relations. NGB-1 sought to share less important aspects of the daily work with the community by decentralising some official activities. These examples support Alvesson and Svenningsson's (2008) suggestion that power facilitates changes in organisational culture.

The findings of the present study suggested that the power relations were characterised by conflict when different interests collided. On one side, we found that the NGB sought to use their systemic power to dictate changes. However, they were met by mobilising groups of individuals seeking to delegitimise their formal authority. Morgan (2006a) argues that conflict is ever-present in organisational life and that they may arise if a dominant group seeks to further their own self-interest. Likewise, Gibson and Groom (2018) argue that conflict might arise when contradictory beliefs collide. The NGB, in this study, was described as a 'regime' as the conflict grew. The reason given was that some individuals in the sport perceived the NGB as trying to dominate others to pursue selfish interests. Morgan (2011) suggests that domination can lead to power imbalances and images of exploited groups. An example of the dark side of power imbalances in sport is

described by Mountjoy (2019), who argues that it can lead to a sports culture that commodifies athletes. Further, the accounts of unacceptable behaviours in British sports (Grey-Thompson, 2017) also cited the influence of exploitative relationships as a critical influence leading to bullying.

### **Applied Implications**

Organisations wanting to drive and implement a change of culture should be aware of the dynamic relationship between systemic and informational power. Our findings suggested that systemic power might not be enough to drive change. Instead, gaining 'sufficient power' could be related to mobilising capacity for action (see Amis, Slack, & Hinings, 2004; Skille & Chroni, 2018; Steen-Johnsen & Hanstad, 2008). Amis, Slack, and Hinings (2004) suggest that the relationship between power relations and capacity for action involves protecting or realising interests or particular values. The influence of capacity could, therefore, be how individuals or subunit mobilise others to support the change agenda (Steen-Johnsen & Hanstad, 2008).

Sports researchers have identified 'cultural architects' who might be influential in shaping a culture (cf. Cruickshank et al., 2014; Eubank, Nesti, & Cruickshank, 2014). Similarly, research in global economic orders (cf. Larsen & Ellersgaard, 2017; Subacchi, 2008) describes the influence of 'power brokers', and how they might be individuals who can engage others through power relations. Identifying power brokers using the subtypes of informational power could, therefore, be critical for sports managers because it might help identify the individuals who can engage others to shape a culture.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

The strengths of the present study are that it expands on previous organisational culture research by studying change along the way. A novel methodological influence of the current study was that it both collected data longitudinally and analysed the data longitudinally. Doing so gives



us real-time insights into how power relations were at the centre of change in an Olympic sport. The limitations of this study could be in connection with the threats of AR (cf. Kock, 2004): uncontrollability, contingency, and subjectivity. The contingency threat means that the body of data can become broad and shallow, like in research where the researcher retains all control (Kock, 2004). In the current study, we compensated for the threats of AR by employing 'the Grounded Theory Antidote' (Kock, 2004, p. 270). We took the necessary steps to introduce GT coding into the reconnaissance and each action cycle. Using GT in this study allowed us to probe deeper into the data to uncover how power and conflict influenced the process. Some may also argue that uncontrollability is a limitation of the current study. However, in adopting a participative epistemology (Heron & Reason, 2006), we had to honour the inputs from the participants beyond merely delivering data. The key to rigour in this study is thus that we employed all methodological elements in a coherent way vis-à-vis the epistemology.

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