



Creating an environment for thriving: An ethnographic exploration of a British decentralised Olympic and Paralympic Sport Organisation

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Organisational sport psychology
Performance
Qualitative inquiry
Thriving
Well-being

ABSTRACT

Objectives: The aims of this study were to explore the features of the athletic environment that influence thriving within a British Olympic and Paralympic sport organisation and to understand the interconnectedness of these factors across a range of individuals and contexts. These aims were pursued within a decentralised organisation that was undergoing a leader-led cultural change strategy.

Method: To develop an understanding of the environmental factors that facilitate athlete thriving, a 16-month ethnography was conducted. Data analysis consisted of reflexive thematic analysis of observational notes, reflexive diaries, and interview transcripts. The findings are presented in an ethnographic tale.

Results: Alongside the complexities of implementing a culture change strategy across a decentralised organisation, the ethnographic tale details three key features of the athletic environment targeted by senior leadership to successfully influence the athletes' ability to thrive within their silos. Underpinning these factors are three interconnected themes of understanding, openness, and trust.

Conclusions: This study demonstrates how empowering devolved leadership was impactful for organisational culture by reducing the homogeneity of leader-centric change initiatives. Further, harnessing an organisation-wide commitment to promoting relationships founded on understanding, openness, and trust can create athletic environments that facilitate thriving. Therefore, while a decentralised structure may present challenges for promoting a duty of care, it is possible to create an environment that supports athletes to thrive.

Elite sport environments are increasingly characterised as complex, turbulent, and volatile (Wagstaff, 2016), with a diverse range of social agents (e.g., coaches, support staff) intersecting to support the development, preparation, and performance of elite athletes (Arnold et al., 2019). Unfortunately, recent media coverage has demonstrated how an unrelenting pressure to succeed can result in a win-at-all costs mentality whereby sporting success is prioritised above all else, including at the expense of athlete welfare (Grey-Thompson, 2017; Phelps et al., 2017). In response, there have been calls for a fundamental shift in how elite sport organisations in the UK prepare and develop athletes to compete at the highest levels of international competition (Kavanagh et al., 2021), with scholars advocating for the safeguarding of athlete well-being to be considered paramount (Arnold & Fletcher, 2021; Giles et al., 2020). While a substantial body of work has explored the creation of optimal

psychosocial sporting environments (see for reviews, Fransen et al., 2016; Harwood et al., 2015), scholars have predominantly focused their efforts on facilitating performance or well-being. A recent line of inquiry that may meet this perceived gap is that of thriving. Broadly defined as “the joint experience of development and success” (Brown, Arnold, Fletcher et al., 2017, p. 168), thriving in sport has been characterised by the simultaneous display of high-level subjective performance and the experience of well-being (e.g., Brown, Arnold et al., 2021; Brown, Arnold, Standage et al., 2017). Understanding how to maximise both outcomes within elite sport environments could offer researchers and practitioners mechanisms to promote athlete thriving and ultimately contribute to a new duty of care within these environments.

Thriving in sport has emerged as a unique concept in the past decade (see, for a review, Brown, Passaportis et al., 2021), with scholars

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2022.102247>

Received 17 December 2021; Received in revised form 10 June 2022; Accepted 20 June 2022

Available online 22 June 2022

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highlighting personal and contextual enablers and process variables that may facilitate and explain thriving in individuals (e.g., [Brown, Arnold, et al., 2021](#); [Davis et al., 2021](#)). While empirical knowledge of the personal qualities that enable individuals to thrive is beneficial, understanding how environments may facilitate thriving could be of greater theoretical and applied relevance. Indeed, [Spreitzer et al. \(2005\)](#) argue that more substantial contributions to knowledge and practice can be gained from exploring the contexts that enable thriving. Similarly, [Ryan and Deci \(2017\)](#) suggest thriving is grounded on the proximal social contexts within which individuals have direct interpersonal contacts (e.g., peers, organisations), and these contacts are embedded within more encompassing and pervasive social systems (i.e., cultural, economic, and political). The relevance of these social contexts is further evident within the thriving in sport literature, wherein sport performers' qualitative accounts repeatedly emphasise the significance of supportive interpersonal relationships in their experience of thriving ([Brown et al., 2018](#)), with the depth and sincerity of these connections proving to be important. For example, professional footballers who forged relationships with coaches and teammates increased their ability to thrive when joining a new professional team ([Harris et al., 2012](#)). Moreover, [McHenry et al. \(2020\)](#) found elite figure skaters credited honest and open relationships with coaches as significantly impacting their sporting performance and well-being. Similarly, [Brown and Arnold \(2019\)](#) found that rugby union players' perceived ability to thrive was enhanced by operating in environments that were engineered to enhance interpersonal relationships. To elaborate, players desired integrated, inclusive, and trusting environments that provided opportunities to create strong bonds between teammates and coaching staff and foster meaningful reciprocal connections to their sporting organisation.

The argument for focusing on environmental determinants to promote athlete well-being and performance is not unique to thriving, as previous studies support the need to consider the athlete and their circumstances. Indeed, organisational sport psychology scholars have argued that athletes are not individuals operating within a vacuum (see for e.g., [Wagstaff, 2019](#)), while there is ample research demonstrating the importance of the coach-athlete relationship to athlete functioning (see for e.g., [Jowett, 2017](#)). Further, [Martindale et al. \(2007\)](#) argue for an integrated, holistic, and systematic approach to athlete development that incorporates the complex array of factors that combine to impact athletes' performance and well-being. These interdependent factors range from organisational-level considerations to choices made by coaches, and highlight the systematic, integrated, and interdisciplinary nature of the athletes' psychosocial environments ([Martindale et al., 2005](#); [Martindale et al., 2007](#)). [Stambulova et al. \(2021\)](#) broaden this perspective, suggesting those wishing to promote athletic development must incorporate the athlete's whole environment. These environments comprise, amongst other factors, an athlete's immediate surroundings, their interrelations within these surroundings, and the culture of their team or organisation ([Henriksen et al., 2010](#)). In respect to thriving, the social contexts have been shown as integral, yet much of the research to date has predominantly investigated thriving from the perspective of athletes alone, with little attention given to the other stakeholders within the sporting environment (see, for a notable exception, [Brown et al., 2018](#)). While athletes' perspectives are undoubtedly important, it is necessary to expand the stakeholder perspectives garnered to better explore the complex, fluid, and dynamic processes that likely influence thriving within elite sport environments. For example, [Dorsch et al. \(2020\)](#) outlined how several different subsystems (i.e., family, team and environmental) have the potential to impact athletes' behaviours, attitudes, experiences, and even outcomes. Further, formal sport organisations have been found to provide support at numerous hierarchical levels that can foster cohesion and a sense of belonging among members ([Dorsch et al., 2020](#)). Thus, facilitating thriving at an environmental level has intuitive value for a range of stakeholders in sport but has, until recently, received little attention.

It is important to recognise the variations inherent in elite sport

settings when considering the environmental factors that promote thriving and to design studies that can elucidate the idiosyncrasies within them ([Brown & Arnold, 2019](#)). There are likely to be considerable differences dependant on the level of competition, the sport or sporting code, and whether the organisation has a centralised or decentralised structure. For the current study, the scope of inquiry was focused on a British decentralised Olympic and Paralympic sport organisation, with the aims of exploring the athletic environmental factors that influence thriving and understanding the interconnectedness of these factors across a range of individuals and contexts. Understanding the interplay of thriving within complex organisation structures may benefit both research and practice and help to address imbalances that persist between athlete performance and well-being.

1. Methodology and methods

1.1. Philosophical assumptions and methodology

The current study design was underpinned by ontological relativism, and, in line with this ontology, we held a social constructionism epistemological approach. Researchers approaching the field with this stance do not enter a study as a 'blank slate' but acknowledge the influence their presuppositions and preconceptions may have on the social phenomena they study ([Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019](#)), while acknowledging the historical and cultural specificity of implicit knowledge and assume that knowledge and power relations are interconnected ([Burr, 2003](#)). These philosophical underpinnings allow exploration of experiences of diverse individuals operating within complex organisational structures. Given these philosophical groundings, ethnography was selected as the most appropriate method to pursue the study aims, as it involves the researcher being immersed in a social setting where they frequently observe the everyday behaviours that characterise that setting ([Bryman, 2012](#)). This allows researchers to navigate politically sensitive and often inaccessible and messy real-world environments more deftly ([Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019](#)), fully capturing the subtleties and nuances of the elite sport setting (see e.g., [Cavallerio et al., 2016](#)). As such, the researcher listens to and engages in conversations, conducts formal and informal interviews, collects documentation about the group, and develops an understanding of the culture of the group and people's behaviour, all of which are situated within the context of that culture ([Bryman, 2012](#)). The result is a detailed written portrait of a particular setting; that is, an ethnography is a form of data presentation ([Bryman, 2012](#); [Krane & Baird, 2005](#)), and not only a method of doing research.

1.2. Organisation, sport, and participants

Following the 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games, there was a period of fundamental change in the governance of Olympic and Paralympic sport in the United Kingdom. This change was driven in part by the nation's high-performance sports agency, UK Sport, who launched a series of new campaigns (e.g., Cultural Health Check) with the purpose of instilling a "sustainable winning culture" within the sport organisations they fund ([UK Sport, 2018](#)). Within this change, the English Institute of Sport's performance psychology team launched Project Thrive which aimed to "facilitate the creation of psychologically underpinned and sustainable high-performance environments that develop the person as well as the performer to thrive" ([EIS, 2018](#)). Accordingly, many national governing bodies were committed to implementing new standards for athlete welfare, including policies and practices that safeguard well-being in the pursuit of athletic success ([EIS, 2018](#)). Against this backdrop, the 5th author (a member of the EIS) identified one such Olympic and Paralympic organisation where senior leadership were currently implementing a strategy to change their culture following their Culture Health Check and Walk the Floor Reviews. While the feedback from UK Sport had been largely positive, several

concerns were raised that leadership wished to address. Namely, they aimed to foster greater support for sport science input, enhance athlete agency, move away from entrenched traditional practices, address perceived unfairness in behavioural standards, and promote a sense of cohesion. To achieve this, the organisation was implementing a psychologically informed cultural change strategy (CCS) with the aim of uniting the organisation behind shared values, beliefs, and expectations. Ultimately, the senior leadership team (Performance Director, Chief Executive Officer, and Head of Culture) wished to use this strategy to create a high-performance athletic environment that fostered performance excellence by facilitating athlete thriving. As such, the organisation was open to conducting research as a means of engaging external experts to monitor the effectiveness of their change strategy. This presented the research team with an opportunity to study how an elite sport organisation attempted to create an environment for thriving as they built towards the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

The organisation is a national governing body for an individual sport where athletes compete alone, often directly against their teammates. The organisation consists of separate Olympic and Paralympic programmes and has a largely decentralised structure, with several “silos” (i.e., disciplines, and in turn, campaign teams with different coaches and training groups) conducting their own training camps held over a two or four-day period once a month. Outside formal camps the athletes train independently at public facilities. Thus, the organisation’s ability to influence the athletes’ environment is restricted to formal training and competition settings. Other than the senior leadership team who oversee both programs and two sport psychologists who work across two silos, many staff work only within their silo. Historically, the Olympic and Paralympic silos have achieved consistent Olympic and Paralympic sporting success, with a combined total of over 70 medals, with several current Olympic and Paralympic medallists and multiple World Champion athletes on their programmes.

During initial discussions with key gatekeepers (i.e., Head of Culture [HOC], Performance Director), relevant ethical issues were explained (i.e., confidentiality, anonymity, participant volition) and consent to collaborate and conduct the study was gained. Subsequently, institutional ethical approval was obtained for the study and senior leadership granted me (first author) unrestricted access and arrangements were made with the HOC for me to approach each silo in turn and address the members. I held meetings at training camps where the study was outlined and both staff and athletes were asked to participate. All personnel who were present at these meetings were given information sheets outlining the study and asked to provide written informed consent. All participants agreed, specifically, 18 athletes aged between 18 and 46 years (6 female [F], 12 male [M]), five male coaches, three sport psychologists (2F, 1M), two physiotherapists (1F, 1M), two male programme managers, one male coach development officer, and one male pathway manager. The athletes’ competition levels ranged from elite Olympic ($n = 6$) and Paralympic ($n = 5$) programme athletes to Podium Potential (i.e., development) athletes ($n = 7$). There were four elite programme coaches and one Podium potential coach. For a duration of 16 months (January 2019 to April 2020) I was immersed within the organisation, gaining an in-depth understanding of its culture and inner workings.

1.3. Researcher positioning and field relations

As a white, middle-class male in my 30s, I shared a common cultural background with the leadership, coaches, support staff, and athletes of the organisation which allowed me to successfully negotiate insider status and adopt a position of overt participant observer (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). To ensure I fully embodied this position I actively worked to occupy a place of sameness along the ‘hyphen of sameness-difference’ (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013) by involving myself in as many activities as possible (e.g., carrying equipment, helping clean up, being part of team meals). Throughout my manoeuvring within the

research context, I kept a reflexive journal to facilitate critical reflection on my role as a researcher and explore how my positioning may be influencing the research process. These behaviours helped me to remain critically reflexive and self-aware of my own values, beliefs, personal history, thoughts, and actions, to avoid overfamiliarity in the field (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). To promote fairness, criticality, voice-inclusion, and balance, my co-authors acted as critical friends by drawing on their experience to challenge my interpretations of observations and encourage me to scrutinise my reflections and conclusions through regular supervision throughout data collection and analysis. The second author is an established researcher in thriving in sport and performance contexts while the third author is an experienced qualitative researcher, a prominent author in organisational sport psychology, and has extensive experience as a sport psychology practitioner. The fourth author has extensive experience in researching organisational stress processes, performance environments and cultures, and thriving. The fifth author is an experienced sport psychology practitioner and at the time, was a senior member of the EIS Performance Psychology team.

1.4. Data collection

I began my research journey with two broad aims: 1) to understand the environmental and contextual factors that influence the formation of an environment for thriving within an elite sport organisation; and 2) to explore the interconnectedness of these factors and how they differ across individuals and contexts. As I progressed, I narrowed my focus to explore key formative ideas that were developed from initial data collection and analysis (e.g., information sharing, athlete-and-coach-centred approach; cf. Silk, 2005). The predominant form of data collection was participant observation, which provided the context within which to situate the interactions I witnessed and the opportunity to continuously reflect upon and refine the initial ideas and threads being constructed as important. I started as a passive observer, guided by senior leadership on which settings to observe but later took a more proactive approach to ensure I had a complete picture of the different sights, settings, and groups that made up the organisation. This involved ensuring I observed each silo both during training and competition. To elaborate, observations were conducted with all four individual silos at training camps, regional competitions, management strategy sessions and Olympic and Paralympic readiness camps. Observations generally consisted of two days of immersion within a silo at a time. Over 16 months I was able to observe transactions between athletes and coaches, athletes and support staff, support staff and coaches, and interactions between teammates. Additionally, I observed the interplay between members of the senior leadership team and between leadership and the coaching and support staff. Through the development of field relations, I was able to earn a greater level of acceptance and was invited to stay in the same accommodation as the teams and to join them for meals and socialising. This allowed me the opportunity to witness episodes that took place away from public domains. Observations totalled an estimated 380 hours and were recorded daily in a journal and later developed into detailed stories in a research log. The finished log consisted of 105 pages of double-sided text.

My observations were supplemented with informal interviews and conversations with key participants. Initially, these were purposefully sampled for context building, providing additional information to firm my understanding of the sport and the organisation. After a period of six-months I felt I had a robust understanding of these areas and so began to use opportunistic unstructured informal interviews to delve deeper into this world and to understand how the participants navigated and made sense of their situations. Interactions ranged from one to 40 min and took place whenever and wherever the opportunity arose (e.g., cafeteria, hotel lobby, driving to get lunch) and explored the broad formative threads that were being constructed (e.g., athlete autonomy, team ethos, silo-specific sub-cultures). As my thoughts developed and became more robust, I was able to combine these threads into semantic themes that

captured what I had witnessed at the surface-level. This enabled me to transition into formal semi-structured interviews ($n = 12$) and focus groups ($n = 4$) to explore meaning at a more implicit level through corroboration, elaboration, or discussion of an individual's perceptions, feelings, and reasoning behind behaviour. Interview and focus group questions explored the semantic themes to provide insight into the environmental factors that influence thriving. For example, questions included: "Do you think your training environment has changed at all since the last Olympic Games?" "What are the most important factors of your environment?" "How do these factors influence your well-being?" and, "Have these changes influenced your performance?" Nineteen individuals were formally interviewed: athletes ($n = 8$); coaches ($n = 4$); physiotherapists ($n = 2$); sport psychologists ($n = 2$); programme managers ($n = 2$); and a coach development officer. These interviews ranged from 45 to 95 min, were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and resulted in 147 pages of double-spaced text.

1.5. Data analysis and representation

Data analysis began before fieldwork started and continuing into the write-up of the manuscript (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019), and involved two related, but different approaches drawn from Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis. The first was a reflexive and iterative inductive approach focused on looking for patterns and processes across the data that could make sense of the initial ideas and hunches being formed. Meaning was explored from what was explicit or manifest at the surface level and organised into semantic threads that could be further explored (e.g., subgroup identities, fragmentation). This approach was used to analyse observations, reflexive diaries, and informal interviews during data collection and produced four semantic themes that captured senior leadership's approach to creating change within their organisation (i.e., *empowering devolved leadership*, *athlete-coach relationship*, *cohesion and team ethos*, and *differentiated athlete support*). To illustrate, *empowering devolved leadership* contains several lower-order codes (e.g., *differentiated engagement*, *subgroup identities*) that encapsulate the delegation of responsibility to individual silo leaders.

The second analytical process involved a deductive approach that explored meaning across the entire data set (i.e., observational data, reflexive diary, interview transcripts) at a deeper, more implicit level and aimed to unpack the expressed realities and to single out the themes in the stories people tell (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The first step involved systematically engaging with the entire data set through a deductive process of coding around connections to previously identified themes (e.g., *relationships*) and theoretical ideas (i.e., *agency*, *support*, *person vs performer*). The next step involved grouping similar codes into themes and labelling them to be indicative of the participants' experiences. This process was reflexive and iterative, and the refining of themes persisted into the write-up and presentation of the data. The final product produced three themes related to the creation of environments for thriving: *understanding*, *openness*, and *trust*. The co-authors acted as critical friends throughout all stages of analysis (Smith & McGannon, 2018), challenging my interpretations and questioning the importance or prominence of certain themes. Given the length of the analysis process, it was important to keep epistemological and ontological coherence and to remain aligned to my research philosophies (Smith & McGannon, 2018). As such, I was conscious that what I referred to as data was a co-constructed account of the participants' constructions of what they had witnessed and experienced (Geertz, 1973). Additionally, I did not take individual segments of data as reflective of organisational cultural features, rather they were interpreted as part of a wider body of data that was situated within the context of the study (Heracleous, 2001).

Following analysis the semantic and latent themes were combined in a first-person ethnographic tale, where findings are told using the participants' own words with quotations, combined with interactions and situations documented in my notes and researcher reflections (e.g.,

Cavallerio et al., 2016). Care was taken when constructing the tale to change all identifiable information and to use pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants, sport, and organisation. Presenting the findings in a coherent and concise form entailed selecting the most appropriate and interesting stories to share. Indeed, there were numerous stories that could have been presented, each illuminating a unique aspect of the complex life within the organisation. While this subjectivity is an integral part of ethnographic research, one should aspire to ensure quality in any research and so a relativist non-foundational perspective was employed to judge the quality of this project (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). From this perspective, a person's interests are inextricable from their social reality and as such, there is no universal fixed criteria with which to judge the goodness of research (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). In place of such criteria, Sparkes and Douglas (2007) offer guidelines to assist readers in judging the quality of a study, and it is against these guidelines that this research should be evaluated. Specifically, the product of any constructive process needs to be plausible and coherent to provide the reader with a meaningful picture of the experience and it needs to credibly represent different perspectives (Sparkes & Douglas, 2007). The story should display empathy and respect and portray all participants in an ethically informed manner while attempting to provide a novel contribution to the literature that advances understanding of how organisational environments influence thriving. The authors should present their findings in a way that allows the reader to resonate with the experiences and to be affected emotionally and intellectually. Lastly, the story must invite dialogue and reflection by raising awareness of the phenomena under investigation (Sparkes & Douglas, 2007). Readers are encouraged to consider these points when reading the ethnographic tale presented below.

2. Results

The following ethnographic tale is presented in the first-person (first author) and begins by illustrating the importance of empowering individuals via devolved leadership when attempting to undertake leader-led culture change within a complex and decentralised elite sport organisation. To address our first aim, I then present three key environmental and contextual factors that senior leaders targeted to construct athletic environments that facilitated athlete thriving. Namely, promoting an athlete-and-coach-centred approach, the creation of a cohesive team ethos, and creating differentiated athlete support teams. Incorporated within this, I show how these factors were underpinned by three interconnected threads of understanding, openness, and trust. Throughout the tale, I demonstrate the importance of acknowledging individual differences and the presence of diverse and varied subgroups, thus addressing our second aim of understanding how environments for thriving may differ across individuals and contexts.

2.1. Empowering devolved leadership

The first entry in my reflexive journal captures the scepticism I felt following my initial meeting with senior leaders. Their ambitious culture change strategy (CCS) was developed with the aim of creating "One [organisation]" by uniting four decentralised silos (three Olympic silos [1, 2, and 3] and one Paralympic silo [4]) into a more cohesive "team", and to develop "exceptional people producing exceptional performances". I queried the feasibility of leadership being able to unify four unique and isolated silos and "instil" common values and behaviours across such a diverse and decentralised organisation. Undoubtedly, my own experiences of leader-led culture change initiatives involving 'cookie cutter slogans' plastered on changing room walls influenced my perceptions. Additionally, my understanding of culture change literature placed issues relating to subgroups, fragmentation, and hegemony in the forefront of my mind.

Early on, I observed differences in presenting behaviours I felt were related to the nature of the task in each silo. To elaborate, the task of

performing the sport in silos 3 and 4 is slow, technical, and methodical, while in silos 1 and 2 it is fast and reactive. Sam (coach, silo 3) explained that I could think of the athletes in their silo as “scientists, architects or accountants constantly analysing intricate details and making minor corrections, while the athletes in [1 and 2] are volatile, they’re your artists, musicians, and rock stars.”. Athletes from silo 3 reinforced and also adopted these idiosyncrasies, describing themselves in line with generic personality typologies; as “introverts” compared to the “extroverts” they believed the other silos to be. This delineation into subgroups was entrenched throughout the organisation, with Jo (sport psychologist 1) suggesting silo 3’s ‘disposition’ resulted in an embracement of sport science support. In contrast, silo 1 showed less deference, with Ashley (head coach) known to dismiss months of preparation done by support staff. A top-down, one-size-fits-all attempt to unify such complex and differing group dynamics and identities seemed a challenging endeavour.

Equally concerning were notable inconsistencies in acceptance of the CCS between silos. It was apparent that the CCS had not ‘landed’ uniformly across the organisation, leading to fragmentation along the subgroup lines. To elaborate, the “scientists” in silos 3 and 4 appeared less enthusiastic and embracing of the intended changes than the “rock stars” in silo 1. I had even noted dissension at my first visit with silo 3 when, following my introductory briefing, one athlete sarcastically commented that I would not find a team environment within the organisation. Another flexed their biceps and mockingly repeated the slogan “unity brings strength”, poking fun at one of the values-based slogans developed and launched as part of the CCS. Athletes in silo 4 were less caustic, and instead collectively displayed a general lack of awareness of the CCS and could not recall any specific details despite having attended its “launch event”. A sentiment Sam (coach, silo 3) shared with me over lunch, “I know the answer is ‘oh yeah, I have been told to do this, that and we’re making strides’, but I can’t honestly remember being told about any specifics that I would say come from that cultural change activity”. Meanwhile, Cam (coach, silo 4) was more aware of the CCS, but still displayed resistance, mentioning “if I haven’t taken the time to fully investigate it and think about how I can apply it then it certainly hasn’t reached these guys [support staff] and definitely won’t have reached the athletes”.

My time within silo 1 produced a disparate experience. I had been briefed by senior leadership that while silo 1 was the most successful silo in terms of medals, it had a reputation as being “difficult and challenging” with other silos voicing concerns in the Cultural Health Check about differences in acceptable behaviour. Silo 1 was seen to “get away with a lot more”. Nevertheless, I found this silo exhibited a firm ‘buy-in’ to the CCS with coaches and staff readily referring to changes resulting from the strategy, offering unprompted iterations of: “if you had been here before, things would have looked very different”. Examples were shared: athletes involved in the structuring of camps; camp timetables released in advance; formal post-camp feedback mechanisms for athletes were now in place; and senior athletes were encouraged to mentor and coach academy athletes. When asked about their experiences of change within silo 1, Jamie (coach, silo 1) replied “for my money [organisation] has developed a culture, there has definitely been an introduction of a way of working that has informed a culture that is getting stronger all the time”, crediting the HOC and performance director with these changes. The CCS felt omnipresent here, so much so that I was concerned members were making assumptions about my purpose, viewing me as an extension of senior leadership. Thus, I felt I was being told what they thought I wanted to hear. I attributed this ‘collusion’ to senior leadership explicitly driving change within this silo, and so members had a firm grasp of the CCS. While the CCS seemed to have been successful within silo 1, the change felt hegemonic, with the “rock stars” encouraged to be more like the “scientists”. Certainly, implementing a homogeneous, organisation-wide culture and set of values would be easier for the senior leadership team if all silos were alike.

I fed back my findings to the HOC who dismissed the importance of an “introvert-extrovert” dichotomy and silo subgroupings. I was assured that while senior leadership had launched a uniform CCS across the organisation, they had purposefully allowed the strategy to be interpreted by leaders at silo-level, mentioning “we want people to live the values in a way that is meaningful to them, but they can articulate how they will live them”. This resulted in the differentiated levels of engagement I had observed, with leaders of silos 3 and 4 determining that their environments were already aligned to the values of the CCS. Perhaps due to the overt organisation-wide perceptions of being “difficult”, coaches from silo 1 perceived a need to change and had adapted accordingly, explicitly communicating the new values and culture to their members. Toni (sport psychologist 2, silo 4) later confirmed how their silo had been evaluated in line with the CCS, but rather than recommending change, leadership had reassured them that silo 4 was already “taking care of their culture”. The Performance Director had praised silo 4 several times, saying “you’ve got a good working team here”. This differentiation of the leader-led strategy at silo-level created change within the silos, with silos 3 and 4 became close-knit units that valued teamwork, support, and open communication. Therefore, despite remaining culturally fragmented, the organisation now consisted of four cohesive silos that displayed indicators of thriving, and leadership had made significant progress towards realising their aim of developing “exceptional people producing exceptional performances”. The rest of this narrative explores the ways that leadership were influential in creating environments within the silos that fostered these indicators of thriving (i.e., high levels of performance and well-being).

2.2. The thriving environment

When I first saw the athletes training, I was struck by the solitary nature of their performance. Sam (coach, silo 3) explained, “there’s no impact or dynamism, it’s not an element of our sport, but the mental challenge is a huge element of performing”. These sport-specific “mental challenges” were recognised across the organisation, with coaches and support staff speaking to the importance of developing athletes to be able to “thrive” on these demands. Intrigued by the notion of developing “thriving athletes”, I endeavoured to discover what was needed to promote this. Through my time within the organisation three key focal points related to developing the psychosocial athletic environments were identified that influenced the athletes’ ability to thrive within their silos. Namely, the importance of the coach-athlete relationship, a cohesive team ethos within each silo, and differentiated athlete support networks. Underpinning all three areas are common, interconnected threads of understanding, openness, and trust.

2.2.1. The coach-athlete relationship

The coach-athlete relationship appeared deeply embedded within the culture of the sport, with all members recognising the “make or break” nature of the dyad. Key to coaches positively and consistently influencing athlete well-being and performance, I was told, was an athlete-and-coach-centred approach that facilitates personal disclosure. The coaches made a purposeful effort to understand the athletes as individuals and to have an awareness of their wider-life contexts. By doing so, coaches could form collaborative, open, and understanding relationships that encouraged sharing and empathy. Jamie (coach, silo 1) described the need for understanding: “working with people in a high-pressure environment, you need to know what makes them tick and to recognise when the wheels are starting to come off and what to do in that situation”. This understanding allowed coaches to shape the environment to be able to get the best out of each athlete. For example, Sam (coach, silo 3) mentioned instigating interactions designed to demonstrate acceptable behaviours to newer athletes, whereby Sam would deliberately create situations with more established athletes that demonstrate a relaxed and open exchange. Sometimes this would be light banter, sometimes it would involve discussing how to solve a

problem, “it’s not instructional, it’s coaching”. Jamie’s (coach, silo 1) approach was similar, “the coach adapts their approaches, their challenges, their support to get the best out of [athletes], but to do that I need to know [them] first”. Encouraging openness and understanding also enabled the coaches to create environments where they could be flexible and shift along a continuum to promote well-being and performance depending on the situation at hand. This empathetic accuracy was not always a comfortable experience for the athletes as Jay (coach, silo 1) illustrated when talking about how they were able to help an athlete overcome a slump in performance at recent World Cup event to eventually win a bronze medal: “I said ‘you are the reigning World Champion, I don’t care if it’s difficult you’ve got to do it, if it’s impossible you’ve still got to try!’ You need to be direct because they [athletes] can be lost.”

Coaches throughout the organisation shared similar stories of “pushing”, “giving a real bollocking to”, or “lighting a fire under” an athlete to influence performance. While empathetic accuracy and adaptability are not new concepts, the coaches were careful to acknowledge that to influence performance successfully these tough interactions were predicated on safety being firmly established within the coach-athlete dyad. This safety was built through understanding, openness, and trust, so that over time the athletes come to “know actually that you do have their best interests at heart, that you want the best for them, you want them to succeed and that’s why you react” (Jamie, coach silo 1). Importantly, the coaches realised such ‘tough love’ tactics are not without risk: “I always think, I could say the wrong thing to somebody really easily at a major event and see them nosedive and I wouldn’t like that” (Jamie, coach silo 1). These ‘harsher’ coaching behaviours were familiar to me, having been on the receiving end of them throughout my career as a sport performer. What I had less experience of was the notion of a safe and trusting lens through which to view them. Thus, I endeavoured to hear the ‘other sides’ of these stories. Interestingly, the athletes held similar views and credited the level of trust in the coach-athlete relationship as “key” to them achieving their performance potential, especially “when things get tough”. Alex (athlete, silo 3) told me if the relationship didn’t work then things were “doomed from the start because that’s the one person that’s going to be there when sh*t hits the fan”. Essential to Alex’s belief that their coach could pull them through tough times was their shared understanding: “The coach needs to know me as well, that’s key, know when they can and can’t push my buttons, when to get in my face and do something ... but also when I need praise”.

Gaining the necessary understanding and trust within the dyad was not a quick process. Senior leadership identified the importance of the coach-athlete relationship to their goal of developing “exceptional people producing exceptional performances” and recognised that time was essential to this. Throughout their ambitious CCS, leadership never imposed restrictive timelines, as the HOC told me, “there are obvious limits to what we can achieve this [Olympic and Paralympic] cycle ... and we know that the [silos] couldn’t have moved any quicker.”

2.2.2. Cohesion and team ethos

The senior leadership team empowered coaches and managers to take responsibility for creating and maintaining a “team ethos” within their silos. Admittedly, the notion of creating teams within an individual sport was an area of the CCS I doubted would be successful as there was competition between athletes not only for places on the team, but once in competition they needed to beat their teammates to succeed. While my initial observations seemed to support my views, by the end of my time within the organisation this had changed significantly. I witnessed athletes sharing training tips, trying each other’s equipment, organising “road trips” to competitions, and discussing new techniques and technologies all to improve collective performance. During a focus group, athletes from silo 3 spoke about how the new cohesive environments had raised performance levels to new heights and created an air of expectation that continued to push the athletes to achieve: “yeah you

scored high, alright you still lost a few points, that culture has evolved from that because it’s expected now that you perform because we’ve got the setup.” (Alex, athlete, silo 3). Sam (coach, silo 3) explained how they created this “team feeling” and enhanced performance by facilitating broad information sharing: “it’s creating that environment where it would never surprise me that athlete A was watching athlete B and C and saying, ‘you’re struggling with this, have you tried this potential solution?’” Developing such environments reduced athletes’ perceived pressure to produce results and alleviated many anxieties they had hitherto experienced. Alex mentioned that it “wasn’t this way before, it was just you come in and you perform or you’re out, that’s it!” Robin (athlete, silo 4) stated: “They [leadership] want you to perform, but they’ve taken that [fear] away and want you to be the best you can be and if the medals come, they come and so, it actually allows you to be your best.”

The “team” environments now positively influenced athlete’s general well-being, motivation, and task enjoyment. For example, Dylan (athlete, silo 3) mentioned: “The culture of helping, you need good relationships and respect for each other otherwise with all the competition if you haven’t got that light-hearted side as well, it’s a bit toxic.” Importantly, it was a commitment to openness and trust that allowed for smoother interactions and a greater sense of relatedness between athletes. Sasha (athlete, silo 4) explained in a focus group: “People understand each other a lot more than they did before, people are allowed to build that understanding and that relationship with each other”. Nevertheless, some coaches disagreed with prioritising cohesion above more technical aspects of coaching. Jay (coach silo 1) felt some of the CCS elements were taken from team sports and thus did not fit their training environment. He added that increasing technological resources and support available to athletes would be more beneficial: “there are other [support] practitioners to put in place, that’s what I want to do”.

2.2.3. Differentiated athlete support

The importance of open communication and collaborative relationships extended to the support staff teams. While not part of the CCS, leadership had restructured these networks so each high-performance programme athlete had their own “Close Support Team (CST)” that provided sport science support. These ‘teams’ were handpicked by the athletes and comprised a coach, a sport psychologist, and any other individuals the athletes felt would significantly impact their well-being and performance. The athletes had agency in defining who they want around them, what roles these people perform, and: “how they want the mood and the behaviours to be at that time and in that environment [competition]” (Cam, coach silo 4). This ensured athletes were supported by a team that understood them as individuals. Sam (coach silo 3) mentioned the benefit this level of understanding brought to the coach-athlete relationships as there were now additional staff “keeping their antennae tuned in to the athletes”. These “antennae” created more mechanisms for feedback and provided input on subtle cues the coaches may miss in their coaching interactions. Sam told me that depth of understanding was “key to getting the best out of the athlete and for the [CST] to be as effective as they can be”. All members of the CST worked towards a collective understand and a common language. Jamie (coach silo 1) explained this was vital as it meant coaches, CST, and athletes could all work together, “It can’t be psych[ologists] doing one thing, we do another and then an athlete in the middle, we have to be a team, we each have to understand what the other is doing”.

These differentiated support teams positively impacted the athletes’ performance and well-being, with Andy (athlete, silo 4) appreciating the “flexibility and understanding in it [CST], for not every athlete is the same”. This allowed for individual preferences to be accounted for and worked into training regimes, as Kris (athlete, silo 3) explained: “that understanding within the [CST] allows us to train in the way that’s going to maximise our own performance ... the way that is best suited to us”. The restructuring of the support systems also provided role clarity for staff, which positively contributed to the relationships formed between

the athletes and their support staff. During a focus group Sasha (athlete, silo 4) mentioned how support staff “are actually allowed to do their jobs now, they’re allowed to do what they’re best at and it allows us to get the most out of them and it allows them to get the most out of us”. Robin (athlete, silo 4) added “if they are all able to work together the knowledge and their ability to benefit us multiplies significantly, that magnifies the impact that they have on our performance”.

While the restructuring of the CST resulted in several beneficial changes and improvements to the support staff structures, it failed to address one persistent underlying issue experienced by athletes and coaches. One area of contention centred on the access to physiotherapy support, with athletes desiring increased contact time with physiotherapy staff. Due to a lack of resources, certain support staff had been reduced. During one of my earlier visits, Robin (athlete, silo 4), a veteran of three ‘cycles’ lamented the decreased access to physiotherapy support under the new structures, saying “there are areas where we’ve lost some really good support”. Sam (coach, silo 3) also felt strongly about the lack of physiotherapists available to the athletes, telling me “we don’t get enough physio[therapy] support, period! That’s a source of huge frustration for me because I firmly believe of all the sport sciences, physio [therapy] is probably one of, if not the most important”. Sam’s views had been expressed to leadership on numerous occasions, but Sam perceived a belief by leadership that psychology support was more important. While Sam thought physiotherapy was a greater need, he did appreciate the increased psychological support, stating that “if I get more psych[ology] support and no physio[therapy] support I’ll grab it because I know it will make a positive difference”.

Despite these frustrations, I found the negative impacts of such issues were somewhat offset by an acknowledgment that the senior leadership were “doing their best”. Kris (athlete, silo 4), for example, showed an awareness for the realities of funding in elite sport and that leadership were constrained by limited resources. They told me midway through my research that “[leadership] have a much more open-minded and understanding way of going at it than they did before, you can tell that they want it to be as good as it can they are just limited”. While the athletes and coaches expressed a desire for further improvement, they appreciated the changes made and understood it was not realistic to have every need met. Robin (athlete, silo 4) summed up a discussion we had around lack of support staff during one of my final visits by acknowledging: “Years ago we’d have needed a bolster and hammer to chop off the big, horrible lumps here, but all we’re doing now is polishing, we’re just after that glossy finish”.

3. Discussion

The aims of this study were to explore the environmental factors that influence thriving within a decentralised Olympic and Paralympic sport organisation, and to understand the interconnectedness of these factors across a range of individuals and contexts. These aims became entwined within the CCS the organisation was undertaking, making extrication of the two processes impossible. Therefore, we begin the discussion by deconstructing the senior leadership team’s attempts to change the culture within a decentralised organisation. Given the many challenges inherent within such an organisational structure, the success of the change strategy adds a new dimension to existing leader-led cultural change literature. Following that, we explore our first aim by discussing how an organisation committed to safeguarding athlete welfare while striving for performance excellence can implement changes that improve athlete well-being and sporting performance in tandem. By prioritising understanding, openness, and trust, organisations can create athletic environments that enable athletes to thrive. Interwoven within this discussion, we address our second aim by showcasing the need for organisations to differentiate their approach across individuals and contexts.

Despite facing the monumentally difficult task of initiating cultural change across four unique and distinct silos, senior leadership’s efforts

to create change appeared successful. While the CCS was intended to instil a homogenous set of shared values and guiding principles that would change the culture of the entire organisation, the practical implementation of the strategy was more nuanced. McDougall et al. (2020) suggested leader-centric culture change initiatives should not assume culture is a homogenous and homogenising phenomenon, as this ignores the variability, contestation, and ambiguity that is likely inherent in any group of diverse individuals (Martin, 2001; Ortner, 2005). Indeed, the diversity and complexity of the individual silos would likely have rendered leadership’s efforts at organisation-wide integration unsuccessful. The leaders in this organisation circumvented these potential pitfalls by empowering the devolved leadership structures within the individual silos and by facilitating differentiated levels of engagement with the recommended principles and behaviours. By anticipating these subgroup differences and adapting their strategy, the leaders gave sub-group members agency and ownership over their own change which allowed silos to maintain important practices, traditions, and customs essential to their identities (Geertz, 1973; McGuire et al., 2021). Similar approaches to creating and empowering devolved leadership structures have contributed to creating effective climates in centralised elite sport organisations (e.g., Hodge et al., 2014), while Cruickshank and Collins (2015) suggest that leader-led cultural change must involve important cultural architects as “buy-in” from these socially influential individuals is integral to implementing and driving change. Further, Martindale et al. (2005; 2012) argue that it is important for an organisation to develop guiding principles of practice, but to allow for these principles to be enacted differently within different contexts (see also Feddersen et al., 2021). The effectiveness of developing principles or values that are homogenous but differentially applied in practice as demonstrated in this study adds to the success of such approaches seen in culture change interventions across several elite sport contexts (Henriksen et al., 2010; 2011;).

Elite sport organisations are embedded within social and cultural contexts that include the wider national sporting culture (Henriksen et al., 2010). As mentioned previously, the sporting culture in the UK was characterised by scrutiny and evaluation of organisational practises due to instances of abuse and the detrimental treatment of athletes. This context was a driving factor behind senior leadership’s desire to create an environment for thriving within their organisation. Underpinning the steps taken to achieve this was an undertaking to promote understanding, openness, and trust. This was evident in the prioritisation of open and trusting relationships between coaches, support staff, and teammates, and highlights the integral role those proximal social contexts play in athlete thriving (Brown & Arnold, 2019). In respect to the coach-athlete relationship, senior leaders in the organisation recognised the importance of these relationships in enhancing athlete performance and well-being (e.g., allowing time for meaningful relationships to develop). Indeed, coach-athlete interactions have been identified as a context within which changes to athlete well-being and performance can be achieved, with the quality of these interpersonal connections being influential (Jowett, 2017). Senior leaders also encouraged an organisation-wide commitment to ensuring these unique dyadic relationships were meaningful, inclusive, and empowering, providing time and space for a coach-athlete-centred approach to form. Such an approach allows athletes and coaches to develop and grow alongside one another and for the relationship to become the medium that enhances their sport experience, performance, and well-being (Jowett, 2017). The formation of such strong relationships created conduits through which leadership could devolve the responsibility of promoting thriving to the coaches. This was vital given the decentralised organisational structure limited leadership’s direct involvement in the athletic environment. In turn, coaches embraced this responsibility and actively forged connections by manipulating social environments to demonstrate acceptable behaviours, model openness and trust, and develop understanding. This resulted in high levels of empathetic accuracy which has been previously suggested as fundamental for successful social

interactions (Lorimer & Jowett, 2009), and ensured athletes trusted the sincerity of the relationship and permitted coaches to safely use a broad range of motivational behaviours.

In addition to the coach-athlete relationship, senior leadership utilised individualised support teams as a conduit to promote thriving. Providing athletes agency to construct their own support networks resulted in these teams having higher-quality open relationships, which afforded athletes more avenues for personal disclosure and opportunities for regular and informal communication. These have been identified as important features of talent development environments, allowing for information sharing and the development of trust (Martindale et al., 2007). Further, the understanding created within these teams facilitated support staff and coaches to work together more efficiently and allowed for consistent and clearly defined aims and objectives that could be communicated through a shared language. Athletes were able to define their aims and preferences and felt confident in their team's ability to support them to reach their goals. Such clarity can provide realistic expectations for all involved and positively contribute to long-term athletic development and well-being (Martindale et al., 2007; 2012). Additionally, individualised support has been posited as an essential contributing factor to sustained athlete well-being within elite sport environments (Martindale et al., 2007; Stambulova et al., 2021), while coaches and support staff understanding athletes as an individual has been shown as an influential success factor in elite sport development pathways (Martindale et al., 2012).

Thriving was seemingly further facilitated through the creation of a strong team ethos. While the importance of positive team dynamics is widely recognised (Eys et al., 2019), this research shows that a team ethos does not need to be organisation-wide to effectively influence athlete thriving. Senior leaders in the organisation recognised the clearly delineated and persistent subgroups and delegated the development of the team ethos to the coaches within each silo. These coaches were able to achieve a collective ethos by following the senior leadership team's directive to encourage athletes to respect individuals and their processes, embrace the collective value that can be obtained from broad information sharing, and to problem-solve collectively. Such processes have been associated with high levels of cohesion, well-being, and performance in elite sport environments (Henriksen et al., 2010), and increased psychological safety and creativity in organisational settings (Hu et al., 2018). Thus, this collective action may have facilitated athlete thriving by enhancing performance outcomes while buffering against negative and detrimental effects caused by constant competition and individualisation. Leadership's prioritisation of understanding, openness, and trust, and their commitment to creating close and cohesive team environments was perceived by athletes as a commitment to enhancing athlete development and well-being and served to reduce perceptions of pressure to produce results. This may be interpreted as a commitment to developing athletes holistically, rather than focusing on performance outcomes (Stambulova et al., 2021).

This study provides a unique window into an elite sport organisation's attempt to change their culture and to promote thriving in athletes across training and competition environments. While the findings offer insights into the effectiveness of environmental and cultural change, the study is limited by the narrow conceptualisation of what constitutes an athlete's environment. The focus of change was targeted at the athlete's immediate athletic environment, with little attempts made to expand the change strategy beyond this. This may appear limiting and contradictory, given that leadership's approach to developing thriving athletes was based on taking a whole athlete view. Such a perspective is predicated on the assumption that all facets of an athlete's life (i.e., family, friends, school) influence their performance and well-being (Stambulova et al., 2021). Focusing on holistic talent development has been shown to be successful across all stages of an athlete's career (see e.g., Wylleman et al., 2013), but this involves a systems or ecological conceptualisation of the athlete's environment that incorporates both micro (e.g., athletic environment) and macro-level (e.g., cultural and societal)

influences (see Henriksen et al., 2010). Therefore, senior leaders in the present study may have achieved greater success in their endeavours if they had broadened their influence to incorporate the wider or whole environment (Stambulova et al., 2021). While this limitation is acknowledged, previous research has demonstrated thriving to be a context-specific and subjective experience, with the ability for athletes to thrive within one context, but not another (see e.g., Davis et al., 2021). The current study adds to this by suggesting that thriving may be facilitated by the immediate athletic context. Furthermore, the narrow focus on just the athletic environment must be contextualised alongside the specifics of the current organisation. With limited time and access to shape the athlete's environment, the leaders did not have the reach to drive change beyond the immediate athletic environment. Thus, rather than being a limiting factor, this study provides a view of the realities faced by decentralised organisations and offers insights into how leadership can overcome the challenges inherent in leader-led change initiatives (see e.g., Alverson et al., 2017) and still effectuate holistic environmental change that can develop athletes to thrive.

4. Conclusion

In this study, we aimed to explore the environmental factors that influence thriving within a decentralised Olympic and Paralympic sport organisation and to understand the interconnectedness of these factors across a range of individuals and contexts. We believe this study provides a novel contribution by considering the challenges facing decentralised organisations that wish to promote principles of practice that ultimately enable athletes to thrive. In addressing our first aim, we have highlighted how an organisation-wide commitment to prompting relationships founded on understanding, openness, and trust, can enable organisations to create psychosocial environments that facilitate thriving. Regarding our second aim, and based on these data, senior leaders should recognise the importance of empowering others via devolved leadership when attempting to implement these key principles of thriving. The devolution of responsibility to subgroup leaders circumvents difficulties of promoting a new duty of care within decentralised organisational structures and can reduce the homogeneity of leader-centric change initiatives. This delegation of responsibility might allow for the differential implementation of new principles and values to influence the extent to which individuals might share subgroup identities. Therefore, while a decentralised structure may present challenges for promoting a duty of care and culture work, these data can be interpreted as evidence that it is possible to create decentralised high-performance environments that enable athletes to thrive.

Declarations of competing interest

None.

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