Relationships influencing organisational culture in men's elite football clubs in Norway

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A B S T R A C T

This paper examines the relationships within and outside organisations that have the leverage to influence culture in the context of men's elite football clubs in Norway. Participants from three clubs held positions as Performance Director ($n=2$), sport psychology practitioner ($n = 3$), and physiotherapist ($n = 2$) and participated in semi-structured interviews focusing on the relationships, tensions, and dynamic organisational forces in their respective clubs. Using reflexive thematic analysis, we developed two overarching themes showing (1) Organisational cultures in time frames and (2) Relationships among stakeholders influencing organisational culture. Developing these themes indicated that an organisational culture is not only a point of arrival, but also a point of departure for future activities. Hence, those charged with organisational culture work must maintain awareness of the influence of a club's history and how it influences dynamic tensions with stakeholders within and outside clubs. It is also critical that cultural practitioners are mindful of players' and staffs' individual journeys, which influence how they self-organise into fluid and temporary subgroups. The findings can sharpen our understanding of working with culture in elite football by emphasising other sources of culture besides leaders' attempts at controlling or steering it in their preferred way. Using the findings provided in this study can help practitioners recognise organisational tensions or slippage towards cultural problems before they lead to traumatic organisational crises.

Culture is a central concept for understanding how people work and live together in groups. Applied to organisations, culture can take on the following definition:

> Talking about organizational culture seems to mean talking about the importance for people of symbolism – of rituals, myths, stories, and legends – and about the interpretation of events, ideas, and experiences that are influenced and shaped by the groups within which they live (Frost et al., 1985, p. 17, p. 17)

Hence, examining organisational culture often implies a particular way of life for a group of people, and this way of life is based on a system of shared (not uniform but negotiated) understandings. Therefore, there are likely plenty of benefits related to understanding organisational culture for people in sports organisations (e.g., for support staff, players, coaches, or management). Such expertise includes the ability to uncover key sport stakeholders' perspectives (McDougall et al., 2020), adeptly navigate complex and politicised organisational systems (Feddersen, Morris, Storm, et al., 2021) and cultural matrices (Nesti, 2010), potentially shape culturally informed change (Henriksen, 2015), and competently design, implement, and deliver group/organisational-level initiatives (McDougall et al., 2020). Consequently, in the past decade of sport research, interest has surged in organisational culture, with several sport researchers recognising that this expertise is an essential component of modern sport practitioners' competencies (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011; Henriksen, 2015; McDougall et al., 2020; Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018). Despite growing recognition about the importance of organisational culture, some persistent disagreements remain among organisational culture researchers. We believe these tensions create exciting opportunities for advancement.

A persistent disagreement is whether to treat organisational culture as integrated, differentiated or fragmented (Meyerson & Martin, 1987). In the organisational domain, this disagreement dates back to key

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debates in the 1980s (e.g., Frost et al., 1985; Meyerson & Martin, 1987) about the very nature of organisational culture. Following on from this, Doherty and Chelladurai (1999) suggested that it is an: "'ecological fallacy' to assume that every individual possesses all the characteristics of his or her cultural group" (p. 283). In a recent paper, McDougall et al. (2020) pointed out that the established critiques of this integration perspective, that run along ontological, epistemological, and empirical grounds, remain. Yet, most current research in sport seems unaware of, or does not engage with, this historical backdrop. Instead, many researchers often favour a framework in which culture is clearly understood and focusses on perceptions that are thought to exemplify the whole culture (for reviews, see Feddersen, Morris, Ronkainen, et al., 2021; Henriksen & Stambulova, 2023; Maitland et al., 2015; Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018). However, most other research fields continue to actively debate how to approach culture, outlining how superficial and narrow understandings of organisational culture are problematic to both research and practice (Alvesson, 2017; Alvesson & Svenningsson, 2008). There is some recognition of the challenges related to superficial analyses in sports, where Agergaard and Sørensen (2010) suggested that focusing on uniformity, could be connected to a desire to downplay differences, which can lead to hegemony and the marginalisation of alternative interpretations of organisational life. Taken together, both the historical and current debates show that it is critical that researchers focusing on sports organisations also examine rationales and influences leading to diversity and fragmentation alongside attention to uniformity.

A further debate concerns the role of leaders. Theories emphasising that a "good" organisational culture which is shared by all has created the foundation for wide-ranging assumptions about leaders' (e.g., coaches, managers and Performance Directors) influence (Schein, 2010). These assumptions suggest that it is primarily the leader who can create top-down integration of a uniform organisational culture (Cruickshank et al., 2014; Henriksen, 2015; Storm & Svendsen, 2022). Once collective values and assumptions are detected and aggregated, a sense of the culture (singular, uniform) emerges, which is then suggested to be susceptible to transformation through expert intervention and manipulation by competent leaders. These advancements have shown that leaders can have a key role in shaping cultural processes (Feddersen, Morris, Storm, et al., 2021; Storm, 2020). Nevertheless, recent research from sports has shown that ambiguity (not uniformity) is common in sports (Gibson & Groom, 2018a; McDougall et al., 2020), that power relations among individuals shape the organisational culture in sport organisations (Feddersen, Morris, Storm, et al., 2021; Feddersen, Morris, Ronkainen et al., 2021), and that society and national culture also have a significant influence (Feddersen, Morris, Abrahamsen, et al., 2021; Skille et al., 2020; Skille, Chroni, & Ani, 2018). When such factors are considered, cultural complexities increase. New questions regarding leaders' roles arise making it critical to consider alternatives to top-down integration of a uniform culture. Instead, there can be recognition that many individuals, groups, and wider systems may influence culture: Therefore, leaders may have to pivot to facilitating or supporting such processes rather than controlling or creating them.

1. Locating organisational culture and relationships in the current study

The intersections of these debates reveal a significant gap in the literature and thus the need to explore what other forces may be in play within organisational cultures. Particularly, what other sport stakeholders influence the shaping and facilitating of organisational culture. In an effort to reconcile the disagreements outlined above and provide an interpretation of the researchers understanding of organisational culture, we focus on the textures of organisational life, what is socially significant and why allows for attention to relational processes (Feddersen et al., 2023). Building on the definition given at the beginning,

culture is not static, but in a state of flux and meaning is created and re-created continuously (McDougall et al., 2020). With this in mind, we adopt the view that change is constant, operating on a continuum from tacit adaptations to explicit transformations. Therefore, culture is not merely a point of arrival, such as the end point, or culmination ending in a "new culture" resulting from leader-inspired vision and actions. It is also a point of departure, which means culture is not static but shapes and is shaped by all future processes (e.g., interpreting future events). This also means that we must consider the possibility that an organisation's history may have an important influence on their future process. To this end, longitudinal organisational culture research has previously highlighted the role of history in creating a sense of adversity to change (Feddersen, Morris, Storm, et al., 2021).

As mentioned earlier, it can be viewed as problematic to focus only on the influence of leaders, managers and other people at the top of organisational hierarchies when studying organisational culture because culture is influenced at all levels inside and outside an organisation (Feddersen, Morris, Abrahamsen, et al., 2021). Few studies have substantially considered how organisational culture shapes and is shaped by relationships within these organisations, however. Examining relationships within organisational culture through a relational lens requires acknowledging that relationships are also prone to adaptations. Therefore, fluid boundaries influence relationships (rather than being 'closed' or 'cultural bubbles'), which co-evolve with other systems (e.g., alongside other departments within an organisation or in wider social systems such as the industry, market or society; Braithwaite et al., 2018; Greenhalgh & Papoutsi, 2019). Relationships can be thought of as being shaped by various identity markers (e.g., race, gender and socioeconomic status; Krane & Waldron, 2020; Newman et al., 2021), ambiguity (Gibson & Groom, 2018a), micro-politics (Gibson & Groom, 2018b), power and hierarchies among people and organisations (Brown et al., 2010; Feddersen, Morris, Storm, et al., 2021; Feddersen, Morris, Abrahamsen, et al., 2021). Critiques of existing literature in this field suggest that we should examine the importance, influence, and impact that stakeholders (other than the leader) have within organisations. Thus exploring how reciprocal relationships influence organisational culture is crucial as it has the potential to provide a novel contribution to the sport psychology field in how practitioners charged with organisational culture may navigate among relationships, tensions, and complexities within and outside their organisations.

2. Contextualising the use of Norwegian football clubs

Professional football clubs are a promising context for exploring organisational culture and the relationships that shape it. International research has emphasised the multi-cultural, multi-national, and multi-lingual complexities of football clubs (Champ, Nesti, et al., 2020; Champ, Ronkainen et al., 2020; Gilmore et al., 2018; Maderer et al., 2014; Relvas et al., 2010; Szymanski et al., 2019). Similarly, in Norway, Jakobsen et al. (2009) suggested that professional teams have followed a comparable trend and increased their number of foreign players and staff. Yet, despite this change, there used to be a belief that there was an intensification in the relationship between clubs and their local context (Gammelsæter, 2009; Jakobsen et al., 2009). However, in recent years, these relationships have come under pressure by the commodification of Norwegian football, which is challenging Norwegian ideals and norms (e.g., egalitarian society, Norwegian law specifies no specialisation before age 13; Gammelsæter et al., 2023). All of these features likely create great opportunity for exploring the relationships that influence organisational culture.

To this end, building more research-based knowledge on how relationships within and outside an organisation influence culture could help practitioners attain deeper cultural understanding and better respond to tacit adaptations or explicit transformations as they happen. Accordingly, we set out to explore relationships that might influence organisational culture over time by examining men's elite football clubs

in Norway.

3. Methods

This study adopted a social constructivist approach to examine relationships that might influence organisational culture through participants' perspectives and personal experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Nicholls, 2009), in which we probed how multiple realities and interpretations of events intersect and diverge. Therefore, we were not looking for only uniform perspectives, but rather co-constructing a nuanced overview of similarities and contrasts (Bradshaw et al., 2017; Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

3.1. Data collection

As researchers, we were obliged to follow the Norwegian Personal Data Act provisions (2018, § 1, 8) and, therefore, obtained approval for the processing of personal data from Norwegian Centre for Research Data (SIKT; project number: 766764). Consequently, we aimed to safeguard participants' anonymity and adhere to Iphofen's (2013) ethics statement for social science research and the virtue of doing good for the participants.

3.1.1. Rationale for participants and sampling

To examine relationships, we first searched current organisational culture literature for who might be involved with cultural work (cf. Maitland et al., 2015; McDougall et al., 2020; Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018). Hereafter, we decided to focus on participants who were viewed as being in both traditional or perceived leadership and follower positions and involved in shaping organisational culture. Finally, we focused on Performance Directors (i.e., formal leaders), sport psychology practitioners and medical staff (i.e., often described as informal leaders or department heads, yet formally followers to a Performance Director).

Purposeful sampling was initially utilized to recruit for the study. Three sport psychology practitioners were contacted through existing professional relationships, and they all agreed to participate in the study. Snowball sampling was then utilized as current study participants were able to connect the primary investigator with other relevant individuals e.g., Performance Directors or medical personnel). Prior to each interview beginning, written consent was obtained from study participants. A verbal consent process continued throughout the interviews at multiple checkpoints and again before submitting the final report. Participants were made aware of their ability to withdraw from the study at any time.

3.1.2. Participants

Seven participants represented three different Norwegian *Eliteserien* clubs. The participants comprised three sport psychology practitioners (n=3), two Performance Directors (n = 2), and two physiotherapists (n = 2). Preserving anonymity was challenging in the present study, given that very few people are in the roles interviewed, and there are only 16 clubs in the top men's football league. When the participants were invited in spring 2022, six of the 16 clubs in *Eliteserien* had a person with the title of sport psychology practitioner (5) or personal developer (1) associated with the first team. Thus, we removed gender, nationality, club affiliation and age and waited a year to submit the present paper to allow for turnover and changes within the clubs. Club names were changed to Flagship FC, South Beach United, and Windy City FC.

3.1.3. Designing the semi-structured interviews

Previous studies on culture in elite football have indicated that it can be challenging to address people's attempts at impression management and their desire to present themselves in a favourable light (Champ, Nesti, et al., 2020; Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018). Thus, we agreed that data collection should happen one-to-one because pressure from focus groups or fieldwork might limit self-disclosure. We acknowledge

that this is a trade-off because culture and relationships are, fundamentally, group processes. Nonetheless, we used the approach to probe how individuals experience dynamic relationships' influence.

We used semi-structured interviews to examine the participants' experiences, thoughts and perceptions on potential relationships influence on their clubs' organisational culture. In accordance with social constructivism, the formulation of open questions was critical so that interviewees could discuss what held importance and significance to them. Furthermore, the primary investigator also conducted a pilot interview to assess the questions' wording, examine ways of keeping the conversations flowing and allow the interviewees to talk as freely as possible.

The present study's interview guide was developed based on previous literature on relationships and organisational culture (full guide available as supplementary file; e.g., Alvesson, 2013; Feddersen, Morris, Abrahamsen, et al., 2021). It had five sections (1) Pre-interview (e.g., ensuring sufficient information was given and informed consent), (2) introduction: to the participant (e.g., could you tell me about yourself and your history with the club?), (3) introduction to the club (e.g., could you tell me about your club and organisation? How do people know they are here and not another club?), (4) culture (e.g., who might influence culture besides you?), and (5) outro (e.g., probing unasked questions).

3.1.4. Conducting the interviews

The primary investigator conducted all interviews, which took place between March and November 2022 (average duration: 50 min). Two interviews were conducted in-person and five via a digital meeting platform due to time scarcity for the participants and geographical constraints (Janghorban et al., 2014). All interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone and transcribed verbatim, including laughter, hesitation, and pauses to avoid losing information that could prove to be relevant in the later analysis. Also, the primary investigator's reflection notes (e.g., descriptions of mood, immediate impressions, and personal reflections from the interview) were written on the same day as each interview because they can be a valuable context for later analysis among the authors. Also, three interviewees spoke a language other than Norwegian reflecting the internationalisation of football in Norway (cf. Jakobsen et al., 2009). Two of these interviews were carried out in Norwegian and the participants' first languages (i.e., Scandinavian) and one in English (participant's second language). All interviews were transcribed in Norwegian, and quotations were later translated into English in collaboration with the last author.

3.2. Analysis

The analysis was an inductive-deductive reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). We believe it was favourable to compare our inductive analyse with recent research on relationships within and among sport organisations (cf. Feddersen, Morris, Storm, et al., 2021; Feddersen, Morris, Abrahamsen, et al., 2021). We did so to better interpret how relationships within and outside football clubs might influence the dynamic process of organisational culture. The primary investigator became familiar with the material (Step 1) during transcription while reading the transcripts and listening to the recordings. During this step, the primary investigator also conducted initial rudimentary coding by taking notes on the content of the participants' stories. In generating initial codes (Step 2), these rudimentary codes were supplemented by a systematic coding process in which the primary investigator went through each interview and coding to see how the interviewees described their experiences whilst simultaneously interpreting the experiences. In this way, both semantic (e.g., explicit, or clear) and latent (e.g., interpretive) codes were developed (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The themes (Steps 3 and 4) were developed from codes and represent an overview of the patterns of shared and contrasting opinions and experiences. At this stage, the primary investigator presented the themes to the last author, and we discussed each theme's

essence (Step 5) to ensure clarity in answering the research question. This stage also entailed using theory to interpret the inductive coding. Being an iterative and non-linear process, the analysis entailed moving back and forth between themes and raw data. This process led to several changes, for example, we changed the theme *The Shadows of History*. It initially was called *Past Greatness Casts Shadows*, but while discussing themes, we agreed that it entailed more than just greatness (e.g., it included loss and the community's historic involvement). Last, we re-worded the themes for clarity in the translation whilst writing the present paper (Step 6).

3.3. Rigour

We adopt a social constructivist approach to research rigour, and the markers of rigour we believe are particularly important for the current study are transparency and thorough description of methods, and familiarity through transferable findings (Whyte, 1993). We suggest that the steps in reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019) can be viewed as patterns in a kaleidoscope. Whilst the section above presents a neat overview, the patterns of going back and forth between data and themes change more quickly in practice than in print. For example, the first and last authors met 2–3 times per month for the duration of the research. At these meetings, the primary investigator presented data, thoughts from the interviews (before starting 'formal' coding), and later her iterative analysis and writing. The last author was in the role of supervisor and acted as a sparring partner to challenge the first author's closeness to the data and participants. This role can be viewed as a "critical friend" (Costa & Kallick, 1993), which in practice entailed supporting the primary investigator in challenging consensual common sense among the participants and analyse how it came about rather than what it was (Edwards et al., 1995). To present the inner workings of relationships in organisational culture, we use ideas of resonance as an aspiration for readers to gain a sense of familiarity with the world in which the participants live (Whyte, 1993). We cannot show all the data, hence we had to make a judgement about which quotations to use when communicating our findings. This was a joint effort among all co-authors, where all quotations from the initial written report were translated and later discussed. We cannot cover all of these in the current paper, hence we chose the quotations we believe are best suited to show our analysis (similar to Whyte, 1993).

4. Results

First, we examine a key argument that the participants expressed, i. e., that *Organisational Cultures exist in Time Frames*. This theme has two subthemes: (i) The Shadows of History and (ii) Individual Journey of Players and Staff through Football Clubs. The first theme shows the influence of time, process, and change by demonstrating the influence of long-term changes (e.g., history) and more short-lived and abrupt changes to individuals' journeys in football. Second, we outline *Relationships among Stakeholders Influencing Organisational Culture* and two subthemes: (1) In Sync with Our City: Distal Relationships Influencing Organisational Culture and (2) Cliques and Fluid Subgroups in Football Clubs. The second theme and two subthemes outline the influence of more distal relationships outside the club (e.g., between the city and club) and proximal micro-level relationships inside the club (e.g., among staff and players). Our interpretation is that relationships within and outside the clubs were influenced by club history and individual journey. Hence, we will demonstrate how time and relationships influence, support, or add resistance to changes and adaptations.

4.1. Organisational cultures in time frames

This theme indicates that organisational cultures are fundamentally situated within time frames, i.e., past, present, and future. These time frames differ at different levels. That is, in interpreting the data, we found that societal, organisational (i.e., club history) and individual time frames influence change, resistance, and preservation in organisational culture.

4.1.1. The shadows of history

This subtheme illustrates how history and past results can influence football clubs' culture today. Our findings on the shadows of history allow us to begin conceptualising organisational history's influence on culture. We found that past performance influenced and placed expectations on the participants' clubs and their current members. For example, Flagship FC's sport psychology practitioner explained how the club's history and past achievements influenced the culture:

It is (a) culture that has had a period of 9–10 years where they won everything. And that is still in the back of people's heads. It is what you measure yourself against as a player and as a manager today. And they had a period [some years ago] where we also won. We lost two or three football matches in two years. And then you miss some of that greatness. You almost lose who you really are.

Flagship FC's Performance Director agreed:

[T]here is a constant discussion about the winning culture when you haven't won for a while, whether it has disappeared from the [fabric of the club]. … The expectation is that [our club] should be at the top, that it should perform and that [football] should be played in a certain way.

The quotes demonstrate how past achievements were perceived as a yardstick for how members (e.g., players and coaches) measure themselves. That is, the winning consciousness acted as a point of departure for all future endeavours. Hence, when faced with challenges, the 'particular way' that football was played during successful years became a salient blueprint for future success. Our analysis indicates that history can function as something to strive for, but it also constrains how organisational culture adapts and flows over time.

Reflecting on this, all participants explained that it is necessary to view organisational culture as being situated in a time frame due to the potential influence of their clubs' histories: 'That's what I mean by a club with greatness. And it still stands, but sometimes stands more like a shadow. It casts long shadows over those who must be here today. This is a big challenge' (Flagship FC Sport Psychology Practitioner). South Beach United's Performance Director explained it similarly:

We were very clear about our strategy, that direction, in [recent years] where we made very big progress, where we took medals, [was] in Europe and so on. We were warned against this here when we were in Europe. All the clubs we met said: 'Congratulations, you're doing fantastic, but you're going to go into a tough period now next year, and the years after that ….' And we have been through that phase a bit now.

Notably, findings from these two clubs hinted at the importance of understanding pressure and expectations' influence both inside (i.e., staff and players comparing themselves) and outside (i.e., fans and media comparing current achievements) of the club.

As a contrast, in Windy City FC, it was not felt that history had cast similar shadows over the club. Windy City FC had undergone a quick rise from the second division to placing in the top of Eliteserien. And when asked about this and their history, the sport psychology practitioner explained: "People were surprised about our players. But we have always believed they could be there [at the top]." There was no history to slow anything down. Or none that was spoken of. Hence, the relatively limited history of high achievement led to a sense of freedom from expectations and pressures to do things in a certain way. Thus, Windy City FC was free to develop with less resistance and fewer expectations of preserving what used to be.

Through our analysis, we have shown that organisational history can be thought of as an institutionalised sense of the organisation's memory

in which interpretations of the past influence structures (e.g., hierarchies and policies), working practices (e.g., playing style), and relationships within and outside the organisation. Taken together, we suggest that history can influence organisational culture significantly through expectations, pressures, and priorities. These interpretations should be compared with our findings regarding the relationship between a club and its context (e.g., city or region). Consequently, the negotiations among stakeholders within and outside football clubs continuously influence how the cultural process unfolds.

4.1.2. Individual journeys of players and staff through football clubs

Whilst the subtheme relating to club history operates within a long-term time frame, *Individual Journeys* are significantly more short-lived and dynamic. They refer to how players and staff move through professional football clubs. The findings coalescing around this subtheme suggest that these time frames influence relationships within the club in several ways, as South Beach United's Performance Director noted:

> The cultural differences in a squad like that are obvious. Now there are 26 of us who are at 26 different places in our journeys. And we have [to] account for those who are satisfied with ending their career in [South Beach United] and that someone has somehow settled down there, versus those who will use [South Beach United] as a springboard. It seems to always be based on the athlete's wishes for their own career, regardless of whether it is to move on or stay.

This quote demonstrates how career stage, age, playing level, private relationships and ambitions influence how players relate to one another and to the club. Our analysis indicates that it is critical to view these features as fluid despite tendencies to view them as somewhat static or stable. An argument for a fluid view that our participants highlighted related to the possibility of injury, sudden transfers or whether or not players were in the preferred line up, as described in the following quote: 'There can be injuries; it can be a match that has taken place, or it can be that something outside of sports happens. There are always issues to deal with every day' (Flagship FC Performance Director). South Beach United's Sport Psychology Practitioner agreed:

> We have new coaches, [and] there are opportunities for those who have not been in the starting 11 before to get into the starting 11. We also know that when the start of the season approaches, we have 11 who are satisfied and 15 who are not satisfied or not so satisfied. (…) So right now, with the change of the coach, there is often optimism for most people and then reality creeps up gradually.

These quotes along with several other comments made by our participants demonstrate how coaches' individual time frames can elicit optimism in some players and anxiety in others. Viewing organisational culture with this in mind necessitates being mindful of changes that people, and events provoke. Combining individual time frames with the longer-term history also can help demonstrate how the shadows of history can explain why established players or staff might be resistant to changes, i.e., the club's history might not affect players who use the club as a steppingstone in the same way.

Our analysis showed that the individual also has a personal history besides their sporting career, which can influence their own expectations and needs. If players have settled down with partners, they may not have as much willingness to move to a different club or adjust to new practices. Some may be comfortable with how they feel and how things work and, thus, not have as much need for development and changes as others (e.g., players, coaches, and support staff) in the club. We return to the consequences of these findings in the discussion.

4.2. Relationships among stakeholders influencing organisational culture

Moving on to relationships influenced by time frames entails viewing both distal relationships (e.g., with the city or region) and more proximal relationships (e.g., intra-club relationships among players and staff). Our analysis shows that it is critical not to view the world within or beyond the club (or athletic environment) as homogenous, as this fails to appreciate the dynamic tensions at play.

4.2.1. In Sync with our city: Distal Relationships Influencing Organisational Culture

Our analysis indicates that a critical relationship might exist between the city (including fans, media, and other stakeholders) and how it influences football clubs' organisational culture. In this study, 'city' can also be viewed as a metaphor for the region in which the club is located, as Flagship FC's Performance Director noted: 'A football club like [us] … is quite a well-known brand here in the city and even perhaps one of the biggest in Norway.' All the interviewees explained it as a mutual relationship, i.e., how important the city was to the club and vice versa. To this end, Flagship FC's Sport Psychology Practitioner described the club's connection to the city as follows:

> In the city, [Flagship FC] is not just a football club; it is the closest to the most famous thing the city has. (…) [Thus], that is what the city is built on, [this] cultural flagship, but it is also an ideological flagship. They are very clear in values. [Flagship FC] is, after all, a club with a very strong value base and a very strong anchoring in the city and the area.

Similarly, South Beach United's physiotherapist emphasised the feeling of being close to the city in the following way:

> It is a club that is very much based on traditions and their roots. And volunteers work here and for me; it's absolutely fantastic. They are trying to bind the city and the club. Sometimes we think of traditions as not wanting to change, but here, it works well. I think traditions are the most important value I see here.

The quotes illustrate the importance of being 'in contact with our city,' a feature that South Beach United's Performance Director viewed as making the city part of the culture:

> The culture is somewhat in relation to the place we are from, or the club is in. As long as our audience sees that we play against a good team and we do our best, then it is accepted in the city. We have to make sure that we stand out as a team that works hard and that does our best every single time. Then we can get away with most things. There was a period when we felt that we were not quite in tune with our city after the European Games and subsequent seasons.

These views from South Beach United and Flagship FC's employees demonstrate how city expectations and conventions might influence the opportunities for action football clubs have in terms of how they operate and develop. However, the participants from Windy City FC did not describe the city as important to the team's culture. For one, the club's sport psychology practitioner explained that the limited history of results in Eliteserien created a freedom from expectations and allowed them to develop, less guided by norms and conventions.

The collective findings from all the clubs demonstrate the importance of understanding how a football club is situated in the wider context (e.g., city and regional context) and how the club is influenced by its history. The following quote illustrates how the media catalyse this relationship and how it can influence relationships within the club:

> There is a lot of media, so you are constantly being fed what people think. Also, maybe not everyone thinks like that, but newspapers and now with social media, players are fed negativity when things go badly. … [It's] pressure on us, the club – questions like what has happened to the culture, the players. And then that firing mechanism gets at the players, coaches, managers. That someone thinks 'we need new players' or that the players think 'the coaches are not good enough' and then it is dangerous (Flagship FC Performance Director).

Accordingly, our results indicate that participants believed that poor

results could strain a club's relationships with the wider sport industry, potentially resulting in decreased match attendance by supporters and the loss of sponsors who may choose to dissociate from the club. This may elicit consequences for the club's finances. The same applies if the club gives in to pressure and expectations to buy new players. In addition to affecting club finances, this can affect individual journeys of players and staff.

4.2.2. Cliques and Fluid Subgroups in Football Clubs

This subtheme presents evidence that suggests subgroups in organisational cultures are emerging continuously through dynamic interactions between individuals and groups. During our discussions amid the analysis, we often returned to a lava lamp metaphor, in which we interpreted the findings as indicating that subgroups can change form, size (e.g., increase, decrease, maintain) and path in the same way that the liquid in a lava lamp changes. These features create a sense of self-organising properties in which individuals can move between different subgroups or belong to several subgroups simultaneously. In linking our findings on self-organising properties and dynamic interactions, we found that the interactions among players and staff within the club might be influenced by several markers, e.g., shared history, national culture, ethnicity, religion, life stage, first language, partnership status and potentially other identity markers (e.g., sexuality, hobbies, and race). The diversity of individuals in the participating clubs highlighted the presence of overlapping subgroups (e.g., based on position, age, and religion). Within South Beach United, different experiences with the club and team culture came to light through different cliques:

> When it comes to things like that within the group, [saying that] we are a multicultural team, there will always be cliques, but that is not necessarily negative, I think. Many people think that it is scary that we are not a unit, [but] that is how we are built, that is how society is screwed together, so we are drawn to those who are alike (…). You see during Ramadan, for example, those who are fasting will automatically group. I think it's beautiful to look at. They often group naturally. (…) I want to see who finds each other during a camp, who hangs on to the elders to learn from them. (…) Many people are afraid of those cliques, but I think that then we are working against something that is against nature (South Beach United Sport Psychology Practitioner).

The quote demonstrates a common finding indicating that groups can arise spontaneously for a time based on something that brings individuals together (e.g., fasting during Ramadan) then it disbands, and the individuals find new groupings. This indicates that subgroups can have temporary shared values that bring them together for a time.

Whilst individuals can come together to form a subgroup along shared values, we also found that they still will engage in continual negotiations (implicit or explicit) about the meanings of these values, norms, rituals, or assumptions. It can be helpful to view negotiations along a continuum from more stable to more fluid. Thus, shared within-group features likely influence dynamic interactions among groups, creating a sense of resistance to flow. One example came from Flagship FC's sport psychology practitioner who explained his experiences with shared history and its potential influence on this fluidity:

> (…) Those who have been at the club for many years, people who have played there themselves, who have been coaches themselves or have been away and will return again – you have many people in the organisation who have been there for many years. And that means that there is a stronger connection.

Shared history can be interpreted as a sense of stability or tendency towards a uniform set of values and basic assumptions. However, our findings indicate that interpreting this as collective values (shared by everyone in the organisation) would be wishful thinking. The following quote illustrates perceived uniform cultures' ambiguity:

> It is often said that when you enter the football locker room, everything else falls away. You enter another world. It doesn't matter if you've had a fight with your wife, kids, girlfriend, or if someone has died. … When you go through that door, it's a different focus. You're in training, with other people, you kind of have to let go of that and plug in … But then something can happen [in life outside the club], then it is up to the others [players and staff] to think about how they will handle it, how they can lift each other up (Flagship FC Performance Director).

The argument made in the quote illustrates the ambiguity of expecting a uniform and shared interpretation of organisational life within football clubs. Whilst there might be an assumption of leaving private life at the door, the reality is different.

Furthermore, the presence of a multinational and multicultural team of players and staff also challenges uniformity. This presence means that the people in the club continuously adapt their cultural experiences and values to others' cultural experiences and values. South Beach United's physiotherapist described it this way: 'It's very interesting to have all the cultural clashes, but I think everyone enjoys it and tries to adapt to each other.' In this way, they adapt to each other through a dynamic process. These findings suggest that working with organisational culture is less about maintaining imagined uniformity and more about facilitating the continuous self-organisation of individuals within the organisation. The counterargument to uniformity then becomes how players and staff (even with a long-shared history) bring distinct experiences and identity markers (e.g., civil status, age, and family history) into their personal interpretations of culture. Accordingly, it might be impossible to predict emergent properties arising from the interactions.

5. General discussion

We aimed to examine the relationships that might influence organisational culture over time by studying men's elite football clubs in Norway. The main findings demonstrate that distal and proximal relationships, and fluid subgroups, are influenced by time frames. These time frames include organisational history (i.e., longer, and more stable) and individual journeys (i.e., short-lived, and more unstable). Bringing the themes together demonstrates that organisational cultures might be more fluid and self-organising than previously acknowledged in sport literature. In the sections below, we discuss how our findings add new knowledge to our understanding of organisational culture, the transferability of findings to contexts beyond professional football and the implications for applied practice.

5.1. Organisational memory and relationships with the surrounding context

In the present study, we began to conceptualise organisational memory based on our participants' stories of past greatness. As an institutionalised form of memory, Walsh and Ungson (1991) argued that understanding how specific past events are interpreted can provide valuable insights for those tasked with organisational culture work. To this end, we propose that understanding an organisation's memory goes beyond mapping important past events. It necessitates understanding how these events are interpreted, by both past members who experienced them and current members who inherit their historical context. We found that being aware of organisational memory entails recognising that even though all members of an organisation have changed, institutional memory is preserved through remaining structures (e.g., hierarchies, working practices, and myths) and perceptions from people outside the organisation (e.g., fans, sponsors, and residents of the club's city).

Importantly, perceptions of those outside the club were found to be an important factor in shaping the organisational culture inside the club. These findings confirm those of Skille, Chroni, and Ani (2018), who

argued that the community's culture can impact sport organisations' culture. We also need to consider these findings with regard to how we view organisational cultures because drawing arbitrary lines around one aspect can limit our attentiveness to the relationship between internal and external processes (Feddersen, Morris, Abrahamsen, et al., 2021; Meyerson & Martin, 1987). The need for this consideration is further supported given that the findings demonstrate how stakeholders outside a football club challenged how things worked inside the club, and how pressure and expectations from external surroundings affected the football team and its members (e.g., players, support staff, and leaders) as well.

Given these findings, we suggest that organisational memory functions as an almost-magnetic force, serving to preserve a sense of status quo or create a tendency to return to past ways of doing things. Thus, it can be interpreted as a form of complex resistance (Abrahamson & Fombrun, 1994) that causes organisations to return to salient interpretations of the correct way of doing things (e.g., our participants mentioned perceptions regarding 'a right way to play football'). During times of adversity (e.g., a dip in performance levels), organisational memory may lead to rigidity in decision-making and hinder adaptability to evolving societal norms (e.g., behavioural norms and standards) or industry characteristics (e.g., innovation; (Feddersen, Morris, Abrahamsen, et al., 2021).

When wanting to 'change' an organisation's culture, the common suggestion in functionalist organisational culture research is that competent cultural leadership (Henriksen, 2015; Schein, 2010) can unfreeze unhelpful organisational practices and inspire members to learn new desirable behaviours. In relation to our findings, a functionalist approach could interpret that organisational memory can increase the saliency of a leader's reasons for change due to the desire to return to a past way of doing things and create the 'survival anxiety' necessary for cultural change (Henriksen, 2015, p. 143). However, critics argue that it is generally unhelpful to view change in cycles of denying ambiguity before adversity or challenges grows into a crises large enough for the leader to replace the old culture (e.g., Alvesson & Svenningsson, 2008; McDougall et al., 2020; Meyerson & Martin, 1987).

The reasoning for this critique is that a functionalist view often denies that change happens continuously (e.g., gradual adaptations), downplays ambiguity (e.g., alternative interpretations of events or organisational values potentially leading to minority stress) and ignores dysfunction (e.g., misconduct). Accordingly, we believe that an interpretation limiting recognition of organisational memory's influence to times of adversity restricts the ability to manoeuvre for those charged with organisational culture work. Instead, being aware of the influence of organisational memory helps draw attention to how salient interpretations of past events influence subgroups' adaptive responses within an organisation. The applied implication of this is that awareness of organisational memory can limit action paralysis so that challenges and potential issues can be addressed before they become traumatic to the organisation and its members. Drawing on Munoz et al. (2022), this could help cultural practitioners cultivate anti-fragile organisations that prosper when exposed to unpredictable challenges without going through a traumatic period. Yet, this needs further exploration and is one future line of inquiry that we recommend for sport researchers and practitioners.

5.2. Fluid subgroups in organisational cultures and individual journeys

We believe that it is helpful to discuss findings on fluid subgroups and individual journeys together. It can generate potentially important new knowledge that recognises the influence of an individual's journey on how a club's members interpret organisational culture. To this end, our findings indicate how players and staff move through professional football clubs (e.g., career stages, loans, and transfers). These journeys are influencing adaptive and, at times, self-organising, changes within the clubs. That is, drawing on Jackson's (2020) ideas regarding

community, we argue that our findings similarly indicate that cultural processes do not necessarily dissolve into unity. Instead, these ongoing processes within football teams lead to subgroups existing together, overlapping, and, at times, intermingling. Hence, capturing how athletes' diverse range of identity markers (e.g., language and religion) influence cultural processes in a sporting environment goes beyond merely viewing power relations (Feddersen, Morris, Storm, et al., 2021) or a total organisational culture of unity (Schein, 1990).

Viewing subgroups as fluid and influenced by dynamic interactions based on various identity markers (e.g., religion, nationality, and individual journey) engages with ideas regarding the need to view organisational culture from multiple perspectives (cf. Alvesson, 2017; Meyerson & Martin, 1987). Notably, Schein (1990) remarked that organisations can include multiple subcultures (we have called them *subgroups* in this paper), but there likely will be a 'total organisational culture' (p. 111). Nonetheless, Meyerson and Martin (1987) argued that focusing on the total organisational culture is likely to limit ones awareness of ambiguity, alternative interpretations of events, and potential dysfunction. Instead, we have demonstrated that subgroups likely are dynamic (e.g., fluctuating in size), self-organising, and temporary, which adds important knowledge of features that can influence incremental change. This is in line with McDougall et al. (2020) and Mannion and Davies (2016), who noted that multiple subgroups exist in elite sports because of its their diversity. Hence, viewing a culture from a perspective of only uniform values, assumptions, or norms might be a disservice to practitioners and researchers, as it limits our ability to recognise subtle markers of dysfunction and sources of change. Thus, individual time frames are important internal dynamics that shape cultural processes in need of further exploration.

The applied implications of these findings are that practitioners charged with organisational work should recognise that the idea of sport organisations and their members always agreeing likely is an illusion (McDougall et al., 2020). These organisations' multinational and multicultural compositions indicate that it cannot be assumed that all members ascribe to a set of uniform values, norms, or basic assumptions. Furthermore, it cannot be assumed that all members hold the same interpretations of organisational life. Similarly, we suggest that downplaying (intentionally or not) ambiguity or differences creates fertile ground for dysfunction to go unnoticed. This is in line Feddersen et al. (2020), who argued that a destructive organisational culture emerged and was perpetuated by attempting to hide it. By combining these insights with the knowledge that subgroups are fluid and influenced by dynamic interactions and identity markers, practitioners charged with organisational work can play a more comprehensive role in facilitating cultural processes. This would entail focusing less on top-down leadership or delivering sessions aimed at discovering 'collective values' and more on facilitating communication, conflict management, bringing awareness to differences in interpretations, and encouraging openness to feedback. Namely, this is because it is unlikely that leaders can control or predict how subgroups interact and develop, and even less likely that they can predict how a subgroup will act in the future.

6. Suggestions for future research on organisational culture

In discussing our findings, we crossed disciplinary boundaries and drew knowledge from organisational, leadership and dynamics systems theory literature, as well as from seminal debates in the history of organisational culture scholarship, integrating it into our organisational culture research. We believe that doing so provided novel contributions of the different organisational forces at play and highlighted the importance of an inter-disciplinary approach to research. To this end, it seems important to learn from other fields because it is unlikely that we can develop the necessary insights to deal with many of the cultural problems in sport (e.g., duty of care, bullying, and misconduct) if we continue conducting cross-sectional studies using a narrow functionalist lens. Such studies likely will continue producing snapshots of culture,

with little insights into sport organisations' potential dysfunction.

Future research can build on our findings by examining how followers, beyond technical staff (e.g., scouts, logistics personnel, and kit managers), interpret organisational culture (Benson et al., 2016; Sparr, 2018). This research is sorely lacking due to a likely desire to focus on people closest to the limelight. Furthermore, although difficult and resource-intensive, researchers could also examine organisational memory or individual journeys' influence over time using longitudinal research designs. We acknowledge that many doctoral students and researchers are under increasing pressure to publish; therefore, conducting longitudinal research might seem overwhelming. Therefore, one practical alternative could be to conduct retrospective studies using timelines (Adriansen, 2012; Bagnoli, 2009) and life history interviews (Jackson & Russell, 2010).

Furthermore, publishing both positive and negative findings that acknowledge the presence of ambiguity, challenges, and dysfunction can be ethically challenging. First, research ethics highlight the importance of participants doing good and avoiding doing harm (Iphofen, 2013). And yet, providing critiques are necessary to uncover the hidden features of dysfunction and to protect athletes and those working in sports. Second, researchers may also be averse to publishing negative findings because they can alienate potential collaborators in the sporting industry. Nevertheless, while recognising that the sporting environment can both nourish or diminish an athlete's mental health (cf. Henriksen et al., 2020), we believe that we must collaborate on developing ways to provide these insights whilst protecting participants' anonymity and confidentiality.

7. Concluding thoughts

We believe that our findings add new knowledge on the influence of time frames and relationships' in organisational culture processes, illustrating that those conducting organisational culture research must move beyond leaders' interpretations of artefacts, values, and basic assumptions. Also, ignoring the influence of organisational memory, members' individual journeys and ever-emergent subgroups will ensure practitioners miss historical and cultural patterns crucial to taking action to tackle dysfunction (e.g., bullying, or other misconduct) or shape cultural processes that help organisations adapt to their challenges. Maintaining awareness of how time frames and relationships influence differing interpretations of artefacts, values, assumptions, norms, and rituals is difficult. Nevertheless, we believe that it provides a more comprehensive understanding of organisational culture and increased manoeuvrability when working to shape cultural processes. Accordingly, we argue that we can build on advances that researchers have made using a functionalist lens through increased awareness of the forces shaping culture, e.g., organisational values. With this increased awareness, practitioners can attain a sharper analysis of what is going on within organisations and enjoy better opportunities for proactive and strategic actions before a crisis strikes.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Martine Bjørnstad: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Alexia Tam:** Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing. **Michael McDougall:** Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing. **Niels Boysen Feddersen:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

We have no current interest conflicts.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2024.102604.

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