

## **The Emergence and Perpetuation of a Destructive Culture in an Elite Sport in the United Kingdom**

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## DESTRUCTIVE CULTURE IN SPORT

**1 The Emergence and Perpetuation of a Destructive Culture in an Elite****2 Sport in the United Kingdom**

3 Recent inquiries into elite sports in the United Kingdom has unearthed examples  
4 of destructive cultures. Yet, earlier research left destructive cultures overlooked.

5 The purpose of this article is to (1) outline the process of how a destructive  
6 organisational culture emerges and perpetuates in one Olympic sport in the

7 United Kingdom, and (2) the features that regulate the process. We combined

8 Action Research and Grounded Theory in a 16-month longitudinal study. The

9 primary data collection strategies were ethnography and ten focus groups, with

10 athletes, coaches, parents, and the national governing body (NGB). Twenty-six

11 individual interviews with stakeholders supplemented these. A destructive culture

12 emerged during radical changes, and antagonism in the power relations between

13 the NGB and stakeholders characterised this process. Denial of responsibility and

14 social weighting neutralised the stigma of perpetuating antagonism. In

15 conclusion, sports organisations should be vigilant of how ignoring and denying

16 antagonism could lead to a destructive culture.

17 Keywords: culture; destructive conflict; elite sports; organisational psychology;  
18 sports management

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## DESTRUCTIVE CULTURE IN SPORT

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20 The Emergence and Perpetuation of a Destructive Culture in an Elite Sport in the  
21 United Kingdom

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22 Organisational culture used to be an avenue for researching covert power relations and  
23 backstage politics. It also used to provide thick analyses of organisational life (Alvesson  
13 24 2017). It is a field that is very much alive in contemporary research. Yet, it is also a very  
25 divisive field of inquiry (Mcdougall et al. 2017; Alvesson 2017). In academia, it serves  
26 as a vehicle for interest in the symbolic dimensions of organisational life and processes  
27 of meaning-making. And for practitioners, culture serves as a toolkit for creating  
28 commitment and transforming underperforming or destructive cultures (Cruickshank  
29 and Collins 2012).

30 The normative approach to understanding organisational culture in sports has  
29 31 been to conceptualise it through a performance enhancement lens (cf. Maitland, Hills,  
32 and Rhind 2015; Cruickshank, Collins, and Minten 2014, 2015). It has been identified  
33 as having a significant influence on talent development (see Henriksen and Stambulova  
36 34 2017; Henriksen, Stambulova, and Roessler 2010a, 2011, 2010b), developing a high-  
35 performance culture (see Henriksen 2015), performance outcomes at the Olympic  
36 Games (see Gould et al. 2002; Greenleaf, Gould, and Dieffenbach 2001), and  
37 performance leadership (see Fletcher and Arnold 2011).

38 A recent review by Wagstaff and Burton-Wylie (2018) observe that upwards of  
39 seventy per cent of sport research studies culture through an integration lens. Using the  
40 integration paradigm centres on the functionality of a culture (cf. Fletcher and Arnold  
52 41 2011; Henriksen 2015; Cruickshank, Collins, and Minten 2013). Culture is thus an  
42 integration mechanism that teaches new members an agreed upon set of appropriate  
43 behaviours (Schein 2010). Success or a high-performing culture is, therefore,  
59 44 characterised by a unified and robust culture (Henriksen 2015). Schein (2010) details

## DESTRUCTIVE CULTURE IN SPORT

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45 that this paradigm assumes that a leader's values are a master blueprint for an  
46 organisation's culture. In doing so, it delivers culture as a variable that can be  
47 manipulated at the discretion of a charismatic leader.

48         Nevertheless, recent management research (e.g. Alvesson 2017; Helin et al.  
49 2014) has criticised this line of inquiry. This frustration is because only focusing on  
50 what is shared tends to exacerbate much of the profound cultural understanding.  
51 Alvesson (2017) highlights that organisational practitioners are often let down by the  
52 inadequacies of this superficial understanding. Reducing culture to a consensus-based  
53 system (see Wagstaff and Burton-Wylie 2018) does tend to deny ambiguity and  
54 inconsistencies (Mannion and Davies 2016). This superficial line of inquiry has even  
55 led some researchers to comment on organisational culture as a field which is  
56 'intellectually dead' (see Alvesson 2017; Wagstaff and Burton-Wylie 2018).

57         We propose to dive underneath the surface of organisational culture (see  
58 Alvesson 2017; Helin et al. 2014) and consider the backstage processes. In denying  
59 ambiguity, research in sport has tended to overlook the harmful characteristics of  
60 organisational cultures. One reason might be that the integration perspective only  
61 considers shared aspects (Maitland, Hills, and Rhind 2015). Yet, athletes are often  
62 commodified in win-at-all-costs cultures (Mountjoy 2018). Current research has  
63 considered organisational culture as a source of strain for athletes (Arnold, Fletcher, and  
64 Daniels 2013); underpinning unsuccessful talent development environments (Henriksen,  
65 Larsen, and Christensen 2014); and cultures that deny, ignore, and accept abuse  
66 (Mountjoy 2018). This latter consideration came in the wake of the Nassar abuse  
67 scandal (Daniels 2017). Other global examples of destructive cultures include a culture  
68 of not counting the [human] costs in Australian cricket (The Ethics Centre 2018), and  
69 allegations of a culture of bullying in the United Kingdom (Grey-Thompson 2017).

## DESTRUCTIVE CULTURE IN SPORT

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70 Some might dismiss these as extreme cases. Yet, the Culture Health Check carried out  
71 by UK Sport (2018) stated that there is a ‘need to address unacceptable behaviour in the  
72 High Performance System’ (p. 14). These applied concerns shed light on the  
73 controversy of how athletes and those who work in sports are treated (Grey-Thompson  
74 2017).

75 Many wishes these phenomena did not exist. Yet, the sports sector is under more  
76 scrutiny than ever before. Earlier research has neglected destructive cultures by denying  
77 ambiguity. But, authors have also highlighted a common thread referring to the  
78 organisational culture of the organisations involved and the potential institutional  
79 culpability (see McCradden and Cusimano 2018; Grey-Thompson 2017; Daniels 2017).  
80 It is, therefore, prompt to consider the less desirable aspects of organisational culture.  
81 Especially those cultures that have destructive features to them (Grey-Thompson 2017;  
82 Mountjoy 2018).

### 83 *Researching Destructive Organisational Culture Processes*

84 This article is a part of a more extensive longitudinal study into a change of culture in  
85 one sport in the United Kingdom. Building on Alvesson (2017), we seek to illuminate  
86 cultural processes as-they-happen. Building on Mannion and Davies (2016) we define  
87 culture as a dynamic process of negotiating values and beliefs that, for a time, provides  
88 problems and solutions to a defined group. This definition frames this study by taking  
89 the position that organisations are cultures. Doing so treats organisational culture as a  
90 metaphor of organisation. Meyerson and Martin (1987) explains that this view  
91 emphasises inconsistencies and disagreements rather than consensus. Moreover, this  
92 position stresses ‘the importance of various subunits including groups and individuals’  
93 (Meyerson and Martin 1987, 630). An organisation is simply an arbitrary boundary

## DESTRUCTIVE CULTURE IN SPORT

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94 around a collection of subcultures. The unique features of organisational culture are,  
95 therefore, how subcultures meet in negotiating values and beliefs (Meyerson and Martin  
6 96 1987). Moreover, how this process can influence diversity, ambiguity, and conflict in  
97 progressive and/or destructive ways.

13 98 Subcultures are groups within an organisational culture. These can have  
99 overlapping, at variance, or ambivalent features with those of the broader culture  
100 (Mannion and Davies 2016). Accordingly, subcultures might represent *orthogonal*  
101 *subcultures* that tacitly accepts another subculture (Mannion and Davies 2016).  
102 Subcultures might be *counter subcultures* representing disagreements leading to conflict  
103 or antagonism. Alternatively, *enhancing subcultures*. These might appear as a response  
104 to changes that are more fervent to their dynamic process of negotiating culture. Thus  
29 105 amplifying and supporting other subcultures (Mannion and Davies 2016).

106 The unique contribution of this article is that we illuminate the cultural process  
107 of the emergence and perpetuation of a destructive culture. Researching destructive  
36 108 cultures is a chasm in academic research. So, we need a lens through which we can start  
109 to understand what constitutes a destructive culture. We propose that legitimacy may be  
110 a favourable lens. Pfarrer, DeCelles, Smith, and Taylor (2008) suggest that legitimacy is  
111 a general perception of an individual's or organisation's actions as appropriate within a  
112 socially constructed system. Since organisations can have different perceptions of what  
113 is socially desirable behaviours based on their characteristics, legitimacy originates in a  
114 relationship between broader societal norms and the culture in the organisation (cf.  
52 115 Pfarrer et al. 2008). A destructive culture violates legitimacy through enacting  
116 behaviours violating broader societal norms and standards of conduct (Pfarrer et al.  
117 2008). Examples are a culture enacting behaviours such as fear, intimidation, and  
59 118 bullying (Phelps et al. 2017; King 2012) and a culture where athletes are commodified;

## DESTRUCTIVE CULTURE IN SPORT

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119 power relationships are abused; and this abuse is denied, ignored, and even the norm  
120 (Mountjoy 2018; McCradden and Cusimano 2018). Also, Grey-Thompson (2017)  
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121 illustrates the relationship between broader social norms and culture by explaining:  
122 ‘[s]port cannot think of itself as special or different and able to behave outside what are  
123 considered acceptable behaviour patterns’ (p. 4). Researching destructive cultures  
124 against this backdrop is a critical addition to the literature. The purpose of this article is  
125 to (1) outline the process of how a destructive organisational culture emerges and  
126 perpetuates in one Olympic sport in the United Kingdom, and (2) the features that  
127 regulate the process.

**Methodology**

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129 This study adopts an approach integrating Action Research (AR) and Grounded Theory  
130 Methodology (GT) (Dick 2007; Teram, Schachter, and Stalker 2005). AR focuses on  
131 change and collaboration with participants on finding solutions to unwanted conditions  
132 (see Gergen 2015). And GT focuses on unravelling process-as-it-happens (see Corbin  
133 and Strauss 2015). Integrating these allows us to understand the participative reality of  
40  
134 change processes (Dick 2007; Heron and Reason 2006). Henceforth, we will adopt the  
135 term Grounded Action to describe this integrated method. We continue by outlining the  
136 data collection strategies before showing the entanglements of the on-going iterative  
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137 analysis and rigour. The rigour of this study is underpinned by the epistemology of the  
138 Participatory Inquiry Paradigm (see Heron and Reason 1997). This paradigm sets the  
139 tone for how we engaged participants in the research. Besides how the iterative analysis  
140 helped to unravel process along the way.



## DESTRUCTIVE CULTURE IN SPORT

141 *Data Collection Strategies*

142 In adopting a participatory approach, we chose ethnographic observations as the  
143 primary data collection approach and focus group interviews as the secondary strategy.

144 We did so to bring collaboration and dialogue to the forefront of the study (Heron and  
145 Reason 2006). We supplemented these two approaches with semi-structured interviews  
146 and analysis of documents.

147 *Ethnographic observations.*

148 The first author was embedded in a National Governing Body (NGB) as a critical friend  
149 (e.g. providing a mirror, asking provocative questions, and providing helpful critiques)  
150 for sixteen months. This role included extensive fieldwork to illuminate events as they  
151 unfolded (Krane and Baird 2005; Costa and Kallick 1993). These events happened at  
152 the department, inter-department, and organisational meetings at the offices of the NGB,  
153 Youth National Team camps, Coach Development courses, competitions, public events,  
154 and staff outings. Extensive field notes were expressed in memos and diagrams, which  
155 is in line with core GT elements (see Holt 2016).

156 *Focus group interviews.*

157 The first-author carried out ten focus groups lasting from 40 – 130 minutes (Table 1).  
158 These aimed at engaging participants in dialogue to explore the different narratives and  
159 being sensitive to the interpersonal communication to highlight subcultural  
160 understandings (Kitzinger 1995). The first focus group was with the Talent Team (see  
161 **Reconnaissance**). This discussion aimed at identifying essential stakeholders and critical  
162 areas of inquiry (e.g. what do I need to know to understand your sport? What is the  
163 history of your sport?). Doing so grouped other participants (Parents of Athletes,

## DESTRUCTIVE CULTURE IN SPORT

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164 Coaches, Athletes aged 18-23; Table 1) to identify key areas for the ethnography (e.g.  
6 165 what should I notice about your sport?).

166 *Semi-structured interviews.*

167 This study also included twenty-six semi-structured individual interviews (35-75 min;  
168 Brinkmann and Kvale 2018). These probed perceptions of the elite sports context, the  
169 emergence of antagonism, and how inside and outside factors influenced the process.  
170 The Talent Team and the first-author developed the interview guides from field notes,  
171 open coding, and data from the focus groups (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018). We  
24 172 identified participants via theoretical sampling (see procedure).

173 *Documents.*

174 We collected documents and web pages to garner contextual depth of the NGB and the  
175 community of the sport. Documents included training programmes, official papers  
176 describing the mission and structure of the NGB, and public communication documents.

177 ***Procedure, Analysis, and Rigor***

178 Five NGBs were contacted via email in May 2017 after obtaining ethical approval. The  
179 first-author held phone meetings with three respondents. We agreed with one NGB to  
180 take part. So, the present study was carried out from July 2017 – November 2018. In  
48 181 understanding organisations as cultures (see Meyerson and Martin 1987), we define the  
182 organisational culture under study as an organisation consisting of an NGB of a multi-  
183 event sport, and the community within the sport. This sport is a longstanding part of the  
184 Summer Olympic Games. The organisation was also comprised of approximately 15000  
55 185 members carrying out the sport in clubs or with personal coaches. The NGB and

## DESTRUCTIVE CULTURE IN SPORT

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186 individuals are anonymous. Yet, we strive to provide a vivid description of the context  
187 in the findings section.

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188         Meyerson and Martin (1987) also emphasise the salience of influences from  
189 outside the organisation. We will therefore also consider the **governance relevant to**  
190 **talent development in the UK. This context includes a plurality of support agencies (see**  
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191 **Grix and Phillpots 2011). Including the English Institute of Sport (EIS) that provides**  
192 **sport science and medical support services; the Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme**  
193 **(TASS), which is a partnership between talented athletes, education institutions, and**  
194 **NGBs supporting dual-career athletes; and UK Coaching, which supports coach**  
195 **development. Rather than having a dispersed funding system through a plurality of**  
196 **agencies, it is concentrated around two organisations, Sport England and UK Sport (cf.**  
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197 **Houlihan & Green, 2009). Grix and Phillpots (2011) explain that the influence of this is**  
198 **that: ‘most National Governing Bodies of sport (NGBs) are hidebound to their**  
199 **paymasters’ (p. 9).**

### 200 *Grounded Action Cycles*

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201 Figure 1 summarises the participatory Grounded Action process. The procedure  
202 included a reconnaissance phase and four double-cycles of an implementation and  
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203 monitoring phase, and a reflection and review phase.

204 [Please insert Figure 1 near here]

### 205 *Reconnaissance*

206 The reconnaissance lasted from July 2017 – November 2017. It aimed to establish an  
207 understanding of the context with the view to identify later collaboration (Gilbourne &  
208 Richardson, 2005). The first step was to negotiate consent for the longitudinal study  
209 (Iphofen 2013). Following this, we established a research group to integrate a group of

## DESTRUCTIVE CULTURE IN SPORT

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210 participants as co-researchers throughout the study (Kildedal and Laursen 2014). We  
211 label this group the *Talent Team*. It consisted of the Talent Manager, the Head of Coach  
212 Development, the Talent Administrator, and the first author. During this process, we  
213 agreed that the first-author should act as a critical friend in the Talent Team to provide a  
214 mirror (Costa and Kallick 1993; Duus et al. 2014). The Assistant Talent Manager and  
215 the Head Talent Coach were recruited into the group in September 2017. This group  
216 oversaw talent development and the senior elite programme. Our ambition was to move  
217 participants from being passive vessels to engage them into dialogue on what was  
218 meaningful in their context (Sbaraini et al. 2011).

219       The first author began open coding as soon as the first data was collected. This  
220 process focused on describing the preconditions and agreeing on a meaningful future  
221 state (Holt 2016). Memo-writing as well as introducing the conditional/consequential  
222 matrix and the paradigm aided the process (Kelle 2007; Corbin and Strauss 2015). All  
223 concepts were discussed in the Talent Team. We identified anomalies during this  
224 collaborative process. Anomalies included athletes in underserved areas (Theoretical  
225 sampling 1) and how external stakeholders influenced the outside conditions. These  
226 stakeholders included other NGBs, and the following Governing Sports Organisations  
227 (GSO): UK Sport, Sport England, UK Coaching, EIS, TASS, and a University Sports  
228 Programme (Theoretical sampling 2; Table 1). Each participant in Theoretical sampling  
229 2 took part in two individual Skype interviews. We allowed for at least two months  
230 between the first and second interview to increase the contextual depth and help to  
231 explore the fluid nuances of culture change (Culver 2012; Maitland, Hills, and Rhind  
232 2015). Using Skype eased geographical constraints and the hectic schedules of upper-  
233 echelon employees (Deakin and Wakefield 2014; Janghorban, Roudsari, and Taghipour  
234 2014; Table 1).

## DESTRUCTIVE CULTURE IN SPORT

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235           The Talent Team and Management (i.e. upper-echelon staff) formulated a goal  
236 of a change of culture in the sport. This change was understood as a transformation of  
6 237 the prevailing culture in response to a growing deficiency (Mannion and Davies 2016).

238 *Implementation and Monitoring Phase*

239 The implementation and monitoring phase shifted the focus from describing the  
240 prevailing context to describing the culture processes. The iterative process held this  
17 241 critical shift together. And the Talent Team engaged in constant comparison (see Weed  
242 2017) of new data and concepts to the understanding of the preconditions. Doing so  
243 helped expand and create analytical diversity (Smith and McGannon 2018). The  
24 244 practical approach was to discuss the data and analysis at monthly meetings. Constant  
245 comparison was also used to check that all insights were grounded in all parts of the  
246 analysis (Weed 2017). The shift helped analyse *how* a destructive culture emerged by  
247 probing under the surface of organisational life (Alvesson 2017).

37 248 *Reflection and Review Phase*

249 The last phase of the cycle entailed reflecting on and reviewing the emerging concepts.  
250 Here, we assessed the structural, process, and contextual fit (Mannion and Davies  
44 251 2016). Engaging the researcher and the Talent Team in thinking theoretically helped  
252 open unique cultural nuances and insights. Both in the patterns of the process as well as  
253 between and within each phase of the study (Holt 2016). The iterative analysis showed  
254 that counter subcultures were crucial. Thus, we invited three individuals to take part in  
51 255 individual interviews to probe the findings from the fieldwork. One agreed to take part  
256 given the sensitive nature of engaging in disagreements and antagonism (Theoretical  
257 Sampling 3; Table 1).

## DESTRUCTIVE CULTURE IN SPORT

258 ***Terminating the research enterprise.***

259 Interrogating for theoretical saturation was a critical task for the Talent Team. It  
260 happened as a collaborative judgment on the clear relationships between the concepts  
261 and categories from the analysis. Moreover, whether collecting new data would be  
262 counterproductive (Holt 2016). We carried out two meetings with parents of athletes in  
263 September 2018; three individual interviews in September, October, and November  
264 2018; and one Focus Group with the Talent Team in November 2018 as a part of this  
265 process (Table 1). The last step was one meeting with three participants from  
266 Theoretical Sampling 2 (i.e. two Talent Leads and one GSO representative) in  
267 November 2018. Doing so aimed to engage more participants in the interrogation and  
268 assess the fit and relevance of the findings. The first author's direct engagement with  
269 the NGB ended in November 2018.

270 **Findings**

271 We propose a framework (see Figure 2) which outlines the *Process of the Emergence*  
272 *and Perpetuation of a Destructive Culture*. *Preconditions* and Ongoing structural  
273 conditions underpinned the dynamic process. Figure 2 shows the process of changing  
274 stages of culture. These stages included a *Challenge to survival* and *Emergence of a*  
275 *destructive culture*. Finally, our analysis suggested an *Organisational outcome*:  
276 *Perpetuation of a destructive culture*. The overlapping circles denote the core concept  
277 of ongoing power relations and subprocesses of legitimising and rationalising the stigma  
278 of destructive behaviours. **Power relations denote an interdependent capacity saturating**  
279 **the relationships between organisations (e.g. GSOs), subcultures, and individuals. It**  
280 **includes *Systemic power* and *Informational power*, which we will introduce in the**  
281 **sections below.**

## DESTRUCTIVE CULTURE IN SPORT

282 ***Entanglement of Preconditions and Ongoing Structural Conditions***

283 The prevailing conditions were an entanglement of *Preconditions* and the *Ongoing*  
284 *Inside* and *Outside Structural Conditions*. The iterative nature of the analysis enabled  
285 this finding since this approach was a new tool for understanding the alternative logic of  
286 the processual enactment of culture.

287 *Preconditions*

288 We found that the sport was loosely coupled to the external context. This was the case  
289 since most subcultures in the sport argued that their sport was ‘special’ and ‘not like  
290 other sports’ (see Figure 2). Most participants also explained how they perceived  
291 GSOs—particularly Sport England and UK Sport—as the source of earlier hardships.  
292 Recent funding changes (December 2016) had necessitated retrenchment to core  
293 services (i.e. membership, coach education, safeguarding, and competitions).

294 The NGB had reduced staff as they took immediate actions to ensure short-term  
295 survival and financial stability. Reducing the scope also required a restructuring of the  
296 talent and senior elite performance programmes. These went from full-time professional  
297 to volunteer-based services. This occurred with no NGB oversight. Instead, non-NGB  
298 individuals set up unofficial talent and senior elite initiatives.

299 The NGB hired new staff (i.e. the Talent Team) after receiving ring-fenced  
300 funding for talent development from Sport England in April 2017. The funding was  
301 awarded on a two-year basis with the possibility of a two-year extension in April 2019  
302 provided the NGB met certain targets. Yet, the new staff’s lack of specialised  
303 knowledge of the sport delegitimised their systemic power with subcultures. In  
304 general, the preconditions described how the changes increased uncertainty and a  
305 fragile symbiosis between subcultures.

## DESTRUCTIVE CULTURE IN SPORT

### 306 *Ongoing structural conditions*

307 The ongoing outside structural conditions included recent global events (e.g. bullying  
308 allegations and destructive culture) in sports. These events influenced the political will  
309 towards letting sports carry on without oversight. Loose coupling between this sport and  
310 outside structural conditions worked as a buffer. The primary coupling was through  
311 formal funding relationships with Sport England and UK Sport. However, the  
312 perception of these organisations as the root of many previous problems devalued their  
313 systemic power with the community. Buffering limited the influence of changing  
314 societal norms, values, and beliefs; economic and social resources; and the evolving  
315 dependency between GSOs and NGBs (see Figure 2).

316 The inside structural conditions were an evolving process anchored in the  
317 history of the sport. This history included antagonism from athletes, coaches, and  
318 subcultures. This antagonism had previously led to legal cases contesting decisions  
319 made by the NGB and to athletes changing nationality. It had also led to the failings of  
320 two former short-lived (sixteen months and fourteen months) talent programmes. Many  
321 stakeholders also criticised the previous performance programmes for favouritism,  
322 nepotism, and superimposing incompatible working practices on this sport (e.g.  
323 perceived Eastern European authoritarianism).

### 324 *Stages of a Destructive Culture*

325 The Preconditions and Ongoing structural conditions influenced the stages of an  
326 emerging destructive culture.

### 327 *A challenge to Survival or Social Position*

328 Systemic power relations influenced this stage. First, Sport England engaged in  
329 employing their formal authority through imposing targets and deliverables. Here,



## DESTRUCTIVE CULTURE IN SPORT

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330 described by a Talent Team member:

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331 I just came from a meeting with Sport England. We have all these  
332 targets that we basically have to live up to. But I don't know if they are  
333 fit for the new programme because we basically just inherited them  
334 from the old one. So, I am trying to change them. But it's a bit hard.  
13  
335 (Field Notes, October 2017)

336 Being hidebound to funding, the Talent Team experienced that Sport England  
337 used their systemic power to prescribe changes. This relationship was explained by a  
338 participant from another GSO: 'They are being pushed. You know governing bodies are  
339 being pushed by UK Coaching, by Sport England. To make sure they have these things  
340 in place...' (Lead Officer, GSO). These prescribed changes included changing  
341 normative coaching practices and more oversight of how the NGB spent their funding.  
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342 GSOs shared a consensus that funding and the NGBs relationship with them  
343 could provide the Talent Team with a *set of armour* when negotiating changes within  
344 the sport. However, the Talent Team experienced funding as an offer they were  
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345 compelled to accommodate to receive funding. Instead, the resource rigidity led to the  
346 Talent Team experiencing ambiguity between external funding restrictions and internal  
347 pressures challenging their social position.

348 The Talent Team limited coaches from carrying out normative practices in their  
349 efforts to comply with funding conditions. They asserted their formal authority by  
350 terminating coaches who did not readily integrate. However, most subcultures perceived  
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351 this as a threat to the sport's essence and as a challenge to subcultural survival. A  
352 notable observation was that sudden radical changes worsened the symbiosis. The  
353 knock-on effect was that subcultures were destabilised further. The following is a quote  
354 from an interview with a coach who openly engaged in antagonist behaviour. Here, he  
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## DESTRUCTIVE CULTURE IN SPORT

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355 addresses his experience of this ambiguity:

6 356 And after I explain to [Talent Manager] how it works in a sports life, that

357 the coach setup the programme. Doesn't matter what coach. Football

358 coach, rugby coach, [any] coach. [The coach] sets up the programme and

13 359 the one who is responsible for the whole thing like the manager, needs to

360 do everything to make the programme happen. (Member of Counter

361 Subculture)

362 Our analysis of systemic power indicated that it denotes a perception of an

363 organisation, a group or an individual's right to prescribe adaptive change or create

364 conditions that might warrant adaptive changes. We found that it was an enduring and

365 impersonal system of control. Often enacted in routines, policies, hierarchies (e.g.

29 366 performance director, talent lead, head coach), or between organisations (e.g. Sport

367 England and an NGB). These features made it difficult to bypass.

368 *The Emergence of a Destructive Culture*

369 The ambiguity between the funding conditions and the internal pressures was the

40 370 starting point for a process where severe antagonism infected the negotiation of culture.

371 The radical changes imposed by the Talent Team led to a sense of loss of position and

372 resource, and to behaviours to counter their perceived loss. Early signs of a destructive

47 373 culture were mostly individual behaviours exhibiting open antagonism. Left unchecked

374 these behaviours spread within and across subcultures and magnified in severity and

375 scope:

376 ... a lot of feedback from the community, and to start with, quite

56 377 aggressive kind of assaults on us. "You just don't know what you're

378 doing. This is rubbish. What's going on?" When we hadn't even started,

379 which made the start quite challenging (TT2)

## DESTRUCTIVE CULTURE IN SPORT

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380 Antagonism turned more hostile to counter the Talent Team's perceived abuse  
381 of systemic power. We found that the beneficiaries of antagonism were mainly the  
6 382 transgressors. Moreover, defying the Talent Team increased the transgressors'  
383 informational power as well as weakened the Talent Team's systemic power.

13 384 Antagonism increased as adverse behaviours spread to other subcultures and  
385 apprehension faded. Achieving more informational power in the culture allowed  
386 individuals to draw favourable inferences from their work. Influential transgressors or  
387 subcultures engaged in informational power to mobilise and briefly amplify their power  
388 through manipulating or coercing individuals or groups into supporting them:

389 I was away on competition last week alone with 12 [athletes]. None of  
390 them had ever been to the talent camps. So, the talking went into that.

29 391 Why they hadn't been. They just went: "[Community Leader] tells us  
392 not to go, so we don't bother" (Excerpt from Field Notes, December  
393 2017).

36 394 At this stage, the power relations were characterised by how individuals  
395 challenged the systemic power of the NGB. Informational power was an interdependent  
396 capacity existing between individuals, groups, and organisations. It differentiates from  
397 systemic power by being relatively discrete (e.g. rarely formalised by organisational  
398 charts or policies). This feature gives it the appearance of being brief and short-term.  
399 Informational power existed tacitly between individuals. It was not a possession to be  
400 wielded. Instead, informational powers appeared in interactions to produce movement  
401 and change.

52  
402 ***Organisational Outcome – Perpetuation of a Destructive Culture***

403 The significant difference between this outcome and the earlier stages was that  
404 antagonism and behaviours in violation of societal norms were common in the

## DESTRUCTIVE CULTURE IN SPORT

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405 organisational culture. Open antagonism, deception, and manipulation were routinised  
406 responses to communications from the NGB, as evidenced by this quote from a coach:

407 I can help to attract the better juniors and bring in some of the top-  
408 ranked seniors. This will provide these juniors with an excellent  
409 experience, which will draw them into the system. I can tell you now  
410 that as things stand the best [athletes] won't attend in September. And  
411 you'll be left with a choice of omitting them from team selection,  
412 damaging the results and alienating the [event] community. Or backing  
413 down and picking them anyway. (Excerpt from Field Notes, July 2018)

414 We also found that the loose coupling between this sport and other sports  
415 channelled ambiguity to the borders. This loose coupling fed an *Impression of a cultural*  
416 *'bubble'*. Upholding this cultural bubble was critical since idiosyncratic beliefs of what  
417 was acceptable (e.g. antagonism and manipulation) buffered outside influences further.  
418 Subcultures came to see antagonism as acceptable and as successful responses to their  
419 problems.

420 Moreover, most stakeholders within the sport carried out antagonistic behaviours  
421 as taken-for-granted. The paradox was that we found that individuals mentioned similar  
422 behaviours from other sports as unacceptable in the light of societal norms and general  
423 standards of conduct. Yet, they did not perceive themselves as antagonistic nor  
424 destructive. The stigma of antagonistic behaviours was shadowed by the subprocesses  
425 of legitimising and rationalising destructive behaviours.

#### 426 ***Rationalising Destructive Behaviours***

427 The subprocess of *Rationalising destructive behaviours* neutralised the stigma in the  
428 cultural bubble. Rationalising allowed individuals to carry out antagonistic behaviours

## DESTRUCTIVE CULTURE IN SPORT

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429 and distance themselves from a socially undesirable label. This worked through *Denial*  
430 *of responsibility, Malleability of euphemistic language, and Social weighting.*

431 *Denial of responsibility*

432 Our analysis showed that denial of responsibility worked as a rationalising strategy.  
433 Both on its own and in combination with all other strategies. The hierarchy in the NGB  
434 led lower-level employees to rationalise that it was not their responsibility to provide  
435 oversight. Furthermore, upper-level employees denied responsibility by appealing to  
436 higher loyalties (e.g. if I punish [individual] the event will terminate). Also, the  
437 insecurity of external funding led individuals to convince themselves that some  
438 behaviours were necessary ‘for the good of the sport’. And punishing powerful  
439 volunteers might further fragment or disengage the community.

440 *Malleability of euphemistic language*

441 The malleability of language was a strategy to create perpetual uncertainty. Most  
442 individuals in this sport used the malleability of language to neutralise stigma by  
443 packaging behaviours as appropriate or less severe. They also used euphemistic  
444 language to create uncertainty around professional titles (e.g. psychologist) such as  
445 ‘Talent’, ‘Director of Sport’, and ‘Performance Programme’. Doing so allowed  
446 individuals to challenge the formal authority of the Talent Team and performance  
447 pathway.

448 You know [community leader] calls himself Director of GB [event]?

449 They have basically set up a competing programme under the banner of  
450 a GB Senior Programme. And they can promise all these things. But we  
451 can’t. Because we have to live up to regulations. And [Sport England]  
452 targets (Excerpt from Field Notes, March 2018)

## DESTRUCTIVE CULTURE IN SPORT

453 *Social weighting*

454 Social weighting was the most popular way to neutralise stigma. It occurred daily  
455 through otherwise harmless comments, such as ‘He is a bit weird’ and ‘they are not  
456 trustworthy’. Most members of the sport aimed to establish doubt or uncertainty around  
457 other individuals. Doing so placed doubt at the core of negotiating culture.  
458 Intensification occurred when subcultures voiced distrust over the integrity of  
459 individuals who raised concern over open antagonism. Individuals reported that  
460 questioning their legitimacy delegitimised their concerns.

461 Moreover, some individuals felt pursued: ‘I feel like [individual] puts things in  
462 place to try to catch me out’ (NGB personnel). Individuals also made selective social  
463 comparisons (e.g. everybody knows the former performance director was [a tyrant]).  
464 Doing so made their behaviours seem insignificant or less socially undesirable.

465 *Legitimising destructive behaviours*

466 Legitimation denotes how antagonism (e.g. manipulation, threats, or bullying) was  
467 embedded in subcultures by ignoring and denying its occurrence. This subprocess  
468 worked in two ways. First, subcultures focused on establishing doubt around the Talent  
469 Team. The influence of this was that they experienced being distanced from the rest of  
470 the NGB. This distance decreased their systemic power and ability to assert it. This  
471 process was an institutional approach to social weighting.

472 [I] attribute most of the [fallout with NGB] to the problems that we’ve  
473 had with [conflict]. And that [the NGB] has given me absolutely no  
474 support. And saying that [they] would prefer to support the other  
475 person. Because they were the person who is in it for the long run.

476 (Excerpt from Field Notes)

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477 Second, some acts lead the NGB to make it critical to update whistleblowing

478 policies and ethical guidelines. They did so to send a signal to external stakeholders. In

479 updating policies, the NGB created an impression of handling the emergence of

480 antagonism. To the outside, individuals were held to the highest standards of integrity.

481 But antagonism was rationalised in the culture. Especially individuals holding high

482 informational power and low substitutability could carry out increasingly antagonistic

483 acts. The quote is evidence of how the NGB led destructive behaviours occur by

484 ignoring or confounding the nature of the behaviours:

485 [Management] wanted to make clear that it was not [destructive act], and

486 that the whole matter had been looked over by disciplinary committees

487 ... [Management] also acknowledged that [transgressor] had done

488 something wrong which could not be condoned. However, it was made it

489 clear that it was not the intention to fire or relieve [transgressor] from

490 post. (Field Notes, December 2017)

**Discussion**

492 The purpose of this study was to explore the process of how a destructive culture

493 emerges and perpetuates in one sport in the United Kingdom. We found that antagonism

494 and conflict in the power relations shaped the emergence of a destructive culture. Also,

495 stigma was removed via two subprocesses. First, rationalising included using the

496 malleability of euphemistic language to deny any responsibility and foster uncertainty.

497 Second, legitimising denotes how subcultures institutionalised destructive behaviours.

498 They did so by ignoring and denying the occurrence. We also found that changing

499 structural conditions had a profound influence. Changing funding conditions had a deep

500 influence creating ambiguity and uncertainty within the sport.

## DESTRUCTIVE CULTURE IN SPORT

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As suggested by Maitland, Hills, and Rhind (2015), we have identified the organisation as a culture to examine the cultural processes. Our findings further the understanding of culture as a dynamic succession of changing events. Here, culture is temporal and contested through everyday interactions (Maitland, Hills, and Rhind 2015; Alvesson 2017). Our findings show that capturing culture over time as successive events focus ambiguity and change. Doing so also gives us a deeper understanding of the logics behind process-as-it-happens (Helin et al. 2014).

Most earlier research viewed organisational cultures through an integration perspective and cross-sectional research (Maitland, Hills, and Rhind 2015). This view assumes an implicit understanding of culture as stasis in a relatively closed system. But it does not account for how culture could move with events. How things are is how they will remain. Many definitions may alert to some kind of ‘dynamic process’. Yet, asking the question: ‘what is culture?’ would most likely result in descriptive accounts. Gergen (2015) explains that describing or mirroring in research is subject to a receding span of application. Providing descriptions of values and beliefs in the search for the proposed ultimate source of culture—basic assumptions (see Schein 2010)—could, therefore, be limited in potential. Instead, the uptake of process in our study contributes to new ways of understanding covert organisational life (Alvesson 2017). Doing so underscores that culture is more than what is shared since it includes ambiguity and diversity (Mcdougall et al. 2017). And capturing findings along the way holds the Grounded Action method as suitable for theorising change processes.

Our findings draw attention to the dynamic succession of change. We find it appropriate to discuss our contribution through a lens of organisational change. Cruickshank, Collins, and Minten (2014, 2015), suggests that gaining an understanding of the context underpin driving culture change. Our findings support this idea. Yet, we



## DESTRUCTIVE CULTURE IN SPORT

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526 also found that the context relates to both preconditions and ongoing structural  
6 527 conditions. Carrying out one analysis of the context before a change process might not  
528 be sufficient for organisational practitioners (Helin et al. 2014).

529 In the light of our study, we suggests that we can have stronger confidence in  
530 their suggestion that a change process is underpinned by ongoing power relations or  
531 'power flows' (Cruickshank, Collins, and Minten 2014, 2015). But, our findings also  
532 suggest that the findings of Cruickshank, Collins, and Minten (2014, 2015) and Cole  
533 and Martin (2018) are limited since all three studies overemphasise a leader's ability to  
534 manage culture change proactively. Instead, we emphasise that power is relational.  
535 Culture change is thus subject to ambiguous and diffuse sources (e.g. funding or  
536 antagonism). Not just leader-led.

29 537 Mannion and Davies (2016) suggest that few large, complex organisations are  
538 characterised by a single dominant culture. Likewise, we found that the organisation  
539 was a boundary of multiple subcultures. The unique feature of this organisation was  
36 540 how subcultures negotiated culture. We can—based on these findings—have increased  
541 confidence in the robustness of Mannion and Davies (2016). The significance of this is  
542 that it leaves cultural leaders with fever levers to control culture and produce predicted  
543 results (Alvesson 2017).

544 The present study provides first insights into how a culture denies and ignores  
545 the emergence of less socially desirable behaviours. Mountjoy (2018) expresses the  
546 importance of safeguarding policies and procedures to protect those working and  
52 547 participating in sport. Contrary to her point, we found that updating safeguarding and  
548 whistleblowing policies were perceived as a tick-box exercise. Only serving as  
549 protecting the reputation of NGBs and sports in general and reassure the public that the  
59 550 sport adhered to societal norms and standards. The implication is that it serves as

## DESTRUCTIVE CULTURE IN SPORT

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551 outward communication and less as inward oversight. Thus, an ineffective approach to  
552 curb antagonism or unacceptable behaviours. Instead, our findings second the voice of  
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553 six-time Olympic medallist, Aly Raisman: ‘Their [USA Gymnastics] biggest priority  
554 from the beginning and still today, is their reputation’ (Mountjoy 2018, 2).

13  
555 Interestingly, the Duty of Care review (2017) recommends a greater emphasis  
556 on such policies. The psychological impact of this study, however, is that sports  
557 organisations should introduce wider measures to protect athletes and staff. Our  
558 findings reinforce that introducing a Sports Ombudsman to provide independent  
559 oversight and assurance that welfare is addressed should be an immediate priority  
560 (Grey-Thompson 2017). In fact, the Swedish Sports Confederation has already  
561 introduced a Sports Ombudsman in November 2018 to reinforce safe sport for children  
562 (Riksförbundet 2018).

29  
563 Finally, discrediting and creating uncertainty about individuals was at the core  
564 of rationalising and neutralising antagonism. Looking beyond sports, this type of social  
565 weighting involves impugning the legitimacy of those who would raise questions about  
36  
566 destructive working practices (Campbell and Göritz 2014; Ashforth and Anand 2003).  
567 Anand, Ashforth, and Joshi (2005) describe this as a type of rationalisation where the  
568 legitimacy of the individual/entity is made questionable. Thus, also their argument.

**Strengths and limitations**

569  
570 A strength of this study is that it unravels how a destructive culture emerges by studying  
571 processes along the way rather than in retrospect. Doing so reinforces integrating AR  
572 and GT as a suitable method. The limitations of this study might be that sharing control  
573 over the research enterprise might threaten the technical adequacy. Here, the first-author  
574 had to honour the inputs of the participants outside just delivering data. However, the  
575 epistemology of this study is explicitly participative. In turn, we recognise the possible

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bias of being dependent on people (Smith and McGannon 2018). This study employed all the core elements of GT. However, we did so in a new epistemology. Some researchers may interpret this as a limitation. On one side, Weed (2017) asserts that GT should only be used in one of the established epistemological variants (i.e. realist positivist, realist Interpretivist, or constructivist interpretivist). Yet, other studies have used GT in other epistemologies such as critical realism (Redman-Maclaren & Mills, 2015) and feminist constructivist (Allen 2011). The critical consideration here is that the method is employed coherently with the epistemological assumptions (Sparkes and Smith 2009). An example of how this is a strength in this study is the process of interrogating for theoretical saturation. We meet with many different stakeholders, both inside and outside the organisation, to discuss the findings as per the ethical approval of this study (Corbin and Strauss 2015). Future research could focus on scrutinising our findings of how destructive cultures emerge by employing different epistemological and methodological lenses.

**Concluding Thoughts**

The destructive culture in this study developed in a context of a fragile symbiosis. It was characterised by how individuals perpetuated doubt and uncertainty. They did so by packaging antagonistic behaviours in euphemistic language or denying its occurrence. First, ambiguity arose from conflict between systemic and informational power. One example of this was how the NGB felt compelled to follow funding conditions to impose change. However, subcultures combated this through manipulating and coercing others. Second, we suggest that the lack of oversight and supervision made the sport susceptible to the normalisation of antagonism. And later the normalisation of a destructive culture.

## DESTRUCTIVE CULTURE IN SPORT

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600 Protecting participants and the sport was a paramount consideration. We  
601 emphasise that we conducted the study at a specific period. And findings are not  
602 generalisable beyond the context of the study. Yet, the transferability of the findings is  
603 at the grace of the reader.

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DESTRUCTIVE CULTURE IN SPORT

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807 Table 1. Overview of participants

808 Figure 1. Grounded Action Cycles

809 Figure 2. Empirical model of the process of the emergence and perpetuation of  
810 destructive culture

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## DESTRUCTIVE CULTURE IN SPORT

Table 1.

Overview of participants.

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

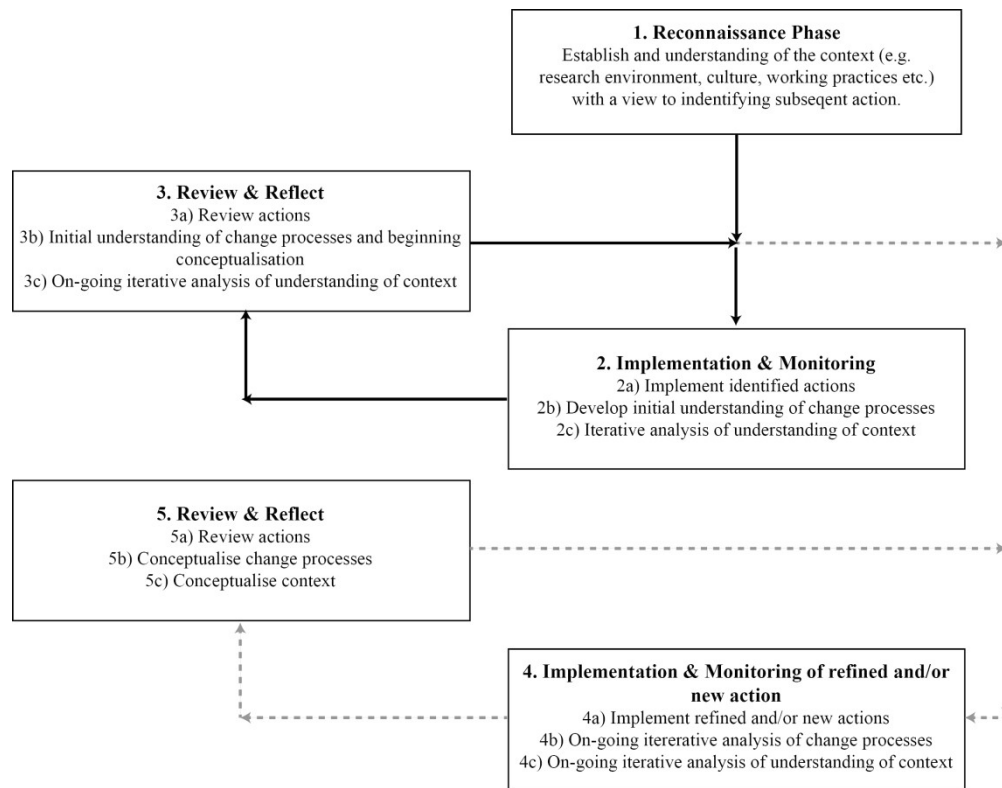


Figure 1. Grounded Action Cycles  
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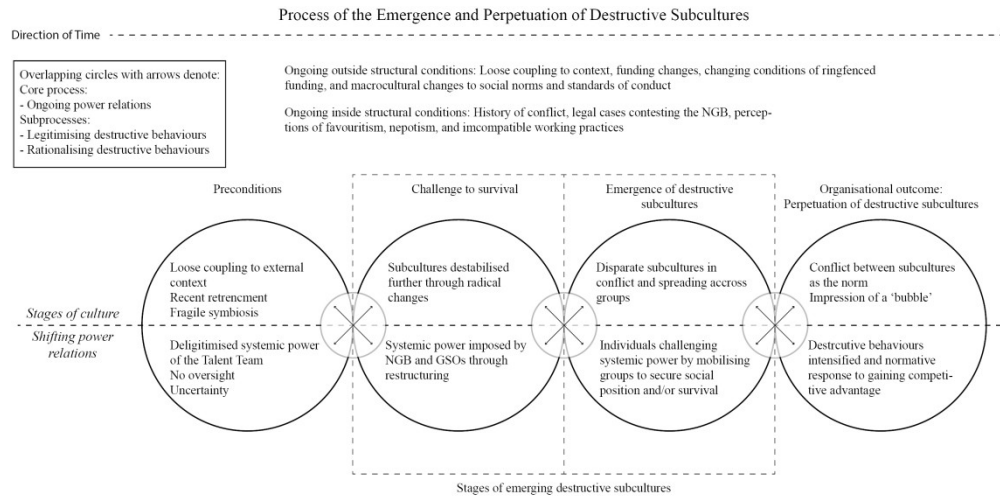


Figure 2. Empirical model of the process of the emergence and perpetuation of destructive subcultures

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