Taking stock of organizational psychology in sport: An introduction to the special issue

Chris Wagstaff, University of Portsmouth

Welcome to this special issue of *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology* dedicated to Organizational Sport Psychology. In this introduction, my goal is to provide some background to organizational sport psychology to "take stock" of the emergence and key lines of inquiry of this domain, before outlining the contributions contained within the issue. Further, this special issue concludes with an editorial epilogue in which I offer a commentary on these articles and some general reflections on organizational sport psychology.

Organizational sport psychology is a subfield of sport psychology which is dedicated to better understanding individual behavior and social processes in sport organizations to promote organizational functioning. That is, the focus of organizational sport psychology is to develop knowledge that supports the development of optimally functioning sport organizations though the enhancement of day-to-day experiences for those that operate within their sphere of influence (cf. Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; Wagstaff, 2017a). This knowledge can be used in a variety of ways through interventions at the individual, group, or organizational level, and thus, organizational sport psychology reflects a broad church for academic study and an increasingly necessary aspect of practitioner competency (see Sly, Mellalieu, & Wagstaff, in press). To clarify, the potential focus on individuals or groups within organizational sport psychology may strike some readers as odd, but groups and organizations don't behave, *people* do. Hence, to understand group and organizational level phenomena one must often understand how a given process or concept influences and is influenced by the individual. This consideration of individual level processes helps to put the *psychology* in organizational sport psychology and distinguish this subfield from sport sociology and management, which also include the study of sport environments. Nevertheless, and in taking this wordplay further, it is also important to

emphasize the *organizational* in organizational sport psychology! Hence, researchers and

practitioners might also seek to understand how macro organizational processes and concepts in

sport influence *individual* behavior, as well as seeking to illuminate macro processes within

organizations in their own right. A broad church indeed.

When describing the emergence of organizational psychology in sport scholars (see, e.g.,

Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; Wagstaff & Larner, 2015; Wagstaff, 2017b) have frequently referred

to an oft-quoted passage from Hardy, Jones and Gould's (1996) seminal sport psychology text;

borrowing from Shaw's (1981) work on social environments, Hardy et al. concluded their book by

noting that "elite athletes do not live in a vacuum; they function within a highly complex social

and organizational environment, which exerts major influences on them and their

performances" (pp. 239-240). Allied with Hardy et al.'s vacuum analogy of the environments in

which elite sport performers prepare and perform, there are many dangers of what I would label a

"myth of individualism" (Wagstaff, 2017a, p. 3). That is, the fallacy that has prevailed in society –

and sport cultures – that sporting success or failure is largely determined by a combination of

individual effort and ability, or in team sports, the sum of the individual parts. Surely, if a sport

organization can acquire and select the best athletes, their team will win? Not always, and certainly

not over the course of lengthy performance cycles (e.g., quadrennial championships, cups, and

Olympiads). The power of this myth of individualism lies in its promotion of a social fixation on

talent and eliding of the salience of a wealth of interpersonal, group, and organizational factors that

impact performance and wellbeing. This is not to say that elite sport performers do not require

talent, or that this cannot be nurtured and supplemented with individual effort; indeed, such factors

are pivotal for initial success and might be largely responsible for fugacious or underdog triumphs.

Nevertheless, *sustained* success and wellbeing –

the experience of thriving – in elite sport is predicated on looking beyond a perspective that individualism or related ephemeral factors (e.g., talent, deliberate practice, religious dogma, effort, luck, physical prowess, individual psychological strength) alone can result in ongoing success. To elaborate, recurrent success in elite sport is not dependent on the talent (i.e., embodied competence) of individual performers, but how effectively these individuals build and maintain working relationships with a systematic collective of social agents (e.g., coaches, managers, other performers, support staff, administrators, agents), supports (e.g., scientific, medical, and technological expertise), networks (e.g., personal social support) and bodies (e.g., sport organizations, commercial sponsors) to optimize day-to-day engagement and productivity in preparation for and performance at major competitions (see Wagstaff, Fletcher, & Hanton, 2012a).

In addition to the importance of dispelling the myth of individualism for sporting success, another important factor in the emergence of organizational sport psychology is the need to view sport organizations as more than systematized collectives aimed at promoting success. Sport organizations are increasingly being held accountable for their role in developing and maintaining cultures that promote a duty of care and wellbeing for all individuals within their sphere of influence, and as agents of change toward social responsibility, diversity and justice. Hence, one value of organizational sport psychology lies in its provision of a home for the examination and facilitation of factors that debunk the erroneous belief that talent alone prevails, and that sport environments are places of development, work, and change requiring the support of people fulfilling a range of roles with requisite rights, needs and expectations. It is through the promotion of such values that I believe sport psychologists can enable individuals, groups and organizations in sport to thrive.

In line with the growing acknowledgement of the importance of organizational issues in elite sport, several recent publications have summarized the emergence, application and potential futures for this domain. Specifically, in 2009 an article by David Fletcher and I (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009) reviewed the nascent body of research concerned with the emergence of organizational issues in elite sport. Specifically, we reviewed six lines of inquiry pointing to the salience of these issues: factors affecting Olympic performance; organizational stress; perceptions of roles; organizational success factors; performance environments in elite sport; and organizational citizenship behavior. Wagstaff, Fletcher and Hanton (2012b) reviewed the literature relating to the *positive* aspects of organizational psychology research in sport. Within their review, Wagstaff et al. defined and delimited relevant concepts, including organizational psychology and positive organizing, with a particular emphasis on extant research relating to organizational functioning in sport (i.e., positive environments, positive behaviors, and positive outcomes) and a call for attention to be paid to topics such as culture, climate and change, in addition to those aligned with positive organizational behavior and scholarship (see Wagstaff et al., 2012b). Wagstaff and Larner (2015) then provided a review of the recent developments in the literature relating to organizational psychology in sport. In doing so, they delimited and demystified organizational psychology from similar metamorphoses of industrial and organizational psychology. Most recently, a first edited collection of lines of inquiry within organizational sport psychology was published (Wagstaff, 2017a), and provided a four-category organizing structure to align extant and potential future lines of inquiry within the field. This organizing structure for research and application was based on four complementary areas: emotions and attitudes (e.g., Hings, Wagstaff, Anderson, Gilmore, & Thelwell, 2018; Wagstaff et al., 2012b; Wagstaff, Hanton, & Fletcher, 2013; Wagstaff & Hanton, 2017); stress and

wellbeing (e.g., Arnold & Fletcher, 2012; Arnold, Fletcher, & Daniels, 2013; Arnold, Wagstaff, Steadman, & Pratt, 2017; Fletcher, Hanton, & Mellalieu, 2006; Larner, Wagstaff, Corbett, & Thelwell, 2017); organizational behavior (e.g., Aoyagi, Cox, & McGuire, 2008; Arthur, Wagstaff, & Hardy, 2017; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011); and high performance environments (e.g., Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017; Jones, Gittens, & Hardy, 2009; Martin, Eys, & Spink, 2017; Pain, Harwood, & Mullen, 2012). Collectively, this work has contributed to a burgeoning body of research examining organizational life in sport and showcased the salience and utility of organizational sport psychology as a field of research and practice.

To segue from the past to the present, I'd now like to introduce the articles in this issue. As I do so, I am reminded of the breadth of foci in these articles from scholars around the world which present diverse work using interview, questionnaire, systematic review, intervention, and case study designs.

Arnold and colleagues present a study in which they explored the organizational stressors encountered by the "team behind the team" (viz., those operating in sport science and management roles) in elite sport and the consequences these can have. In doing so, the authors report data from interviews with an impressive sample of forty support personnel working in elite sport. Such work goes someway to illuminating the educational needs of support staff, help prepare practitioners for working in such environments, and raise awareness among sport organizations regarding their duty of care to employees.

Tamminen, Sabiston and Crocker offer a novel examination of organizational stressors as "background variables" that may impact athletes' perceptions of support and appraisals of competitive stressors. They report data from a prospective sample of varsity athletes regarding their perceptions of available esteem support, organizational stressors, competitive appraisals,

and performance satisfaction. The inclusion of social support and novel consideration of

organizational stressors as a mechanistic rather than an independent variable offers much to this

line of inquiry, while also highlighting important considerations for the differential role of

organizational stressors for athletes' sport experiences.

Randall, Nielsen and Houdmont offer a timely consideration of the value of process

evaluation for stressor reduction research in sport organizations. That is, the authors provide an

overview of typical stressor reduction intervention design and implementation processes, and how

and why the contexts in which they occur impact their effect. They conclude with advice and

practical recommendations for sport psychologists who implement stressor reduction interventions.

Slater and Barker present their work on the efficacy of a leadership intervention

underpinned by social identity principals in elite disability sport. Reporting the findings of a

workshop program delivered over a 2-year period, the authors showcase changes in social

identification leadership displayed by staff, and hours of practice completed away from training

camps when compared to baseline. That no significant change in mobilization of effort was

observed does not detract from the broader knowledge development emanating from this study.

Molan, Kelly, Arnold and Matthews systematically review the research on performance

management across elite sport and other performance domains (i.e., business, performing arts,

high-risk professions). This work extends the historical tradition of *JASP* publishing work which

compares and contrasts elite sport with other performance domains (see Weinberg & McDermott,

2002) and serves to highlight several implications for practitioners in elite sport.

Gledhill and Harwood present a research note reporting the findings of a study that

explored female football players' perceptions of their talent development environments in the

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

United Kingdom using the Talent Development Environment Questionnaire. In doing so, the authors were able to identify athletes' most and least positive perceptions of their environment. These data provide several applied considerations for sport psychologists regarding the provision of support in: (a) planning for football-specific development and career progression, (b) communication with key social agents, and (c) holistic player development and well-being.

Finally, Martin and Eys present a case study investigating the selection process of a high-performance military team and explore the potential implications for sport through an organizational psychology perspective. Using an instrumental case study design, the authors showcase a range of strategies used in the recruitment, selection, and socialization of candidates. Moreover, they describe these processes in relation to candidate and veteran perceptions and contextualize them with regards to candidate motivation for membership and the broader environment.

These articles wonderfully reflect the diverse lines of inquiry, social agent groups, and methodologies used in the field of organizational sport psychology. Yet, the consistent thread of this work is the researchers' commitment to improving the day-to-day experiences of individuals that operate within these organizations.

References

Aoyagi, M. W., Cox, R. H., & McGuire, R. T. (2008). Organizational citizenship behavior in

sport: Relationships with leadership, team cohesion, and athlete satisfaction. *Journal of*

Applied Sport Psychology, 20(1), 25–41.

Arnold, R., & Fletcher, D. (2012). A research synthesis and taxonomic classification of the

organizational stressors encountered by sport performers. *Journal of Sport & Exercise*

Psychology, 34(3), 397–429.

Arnold, R., Fletcher, D., & Daniels, K. (2013). Development and validation of the organizational

stressor indicator for sport performers (OSI-SP). *Journal of Sport & Exercise*

Psychology, 35(2), 180–196.

Arnold, R., Wagstaff, C. R. D., Steadman, L., & Pratt, Y. (2017). The organisational stressors

encountered by athletes with a disability. *Journal of Sports Sciences, 35*(12), 1187–1196.

Arthur, C. A., Wagstaff, C. R. D., & Hardy, L. (2017). Leadership in sport organizations. In C.

R. D. Wagstaff (Ed.), *The organizational psychology of sport: Key issues and practical*

applications (pp. 153–175). Abingdon: Routledge.

Fletcher, D., & Arnold, R. (2011). A qualitative study of performance leadership and

management in elite sport. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 23*(2), 223–242.

Fletcher, D., Hanton, S., & Mellalieu, S. D. (2006). An organizational stress review: Conceptual

and theoretical issues in competitive sport. In S. Hanton & S. D. Mellalieu (Eds.),

Literature reviews in sport psychology (pp. 321–373). Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science.

Fletcher, D., & Wagstaff, C. R. D. (2009). Organizational psychology in elite sport: Its

emergence, application and future. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 10*(4), 427-434.

Gilmore, S., Wagstaff, C. R. D., & Smith, J. (2018). Sports psychology in the English Premier League: 'It feels precarious and is precarious'. *Work, Employment and Society, 32*(2), 426–435.

Hardy, L. J., Jones, G., & Gould, D. (1996). *Understanding psychological preparation for sport: Theory and practice of elite performers*. John Wiley & Sons.

Henriksen, K., & Stambulova, N. (2017). Creating optimal environments for talent development: A holistic ecological approach. In J. Baker, S. Cobley, J. Schorer & N. Wattie (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of talent identification and development in sport* (pp. 271–284). Abingdon: Routledge.

Hings, R. F., Wagstaff, C. R. D., Anderson, V., Gilmore, S., & Thelwell, R. C. (2018). Professional challenges in elite sports medicine and science: Composite vignettes of practitioner emotional labor. *Psychology of Sport & Exercise, 35*, 66–73.

Jones, G., Gittins, M., & Hardy, L. (2009). Creating an environment where high performance is inevitable and sustainable: The high-performance environment model. *Annual Review of High Performance Coaching & Consulting, 10*, 139–149.

Larner, R. J., Wagstaff, C. R. D., Thelwell, R. C., & Corbett, J. (2017). A multistudy examination of organizational stressors, emotional labor, burnout, and turnover in sport organizations. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports, 27*(12), 2103-2115.

Martin, L. J., Eys, M. A., & Spink, K. S. (2017). The social environment in sport organizations. In C. R. D. Wagstaff (Ed.), *The organizational psychology of sport: Key issues and practical applications* (pp. 217–234). Abington: Routledge.

Pain, M. A., Harwood, C., & Mullen, R. (2012). Improving the performance environment of a

soccer team during a competitive season: An exploratory action research study. *The Sport*

Psychologist, 26(3), 390–411.

Shaw, M. E. (1981). *Group dynamics: The psychology of small group behavior*. New York:

McGraw-Hill.

Sly, D., Mellalieu, S. D., & Wagstaff, C. R. D. (in press). It's psychology Jim, but not as we

know it! The changing face of applied sport psychology practice. *Sport, Exercise,*

& Performance Psychology.

Wagstaff, C. R. D. (2017a). Organizational psychology in sport: An introduction. In Wagstaff, C.

R. D. (Ed.), *The organizational psychology of sport: Key issues and practical*

applications (pp. 1-7). Abingdon: Routledge.

Wagstaff, C. R. D. (Ed.). (2017b). *The organizational psychology of sport: Key issues and*

practical applications. Abingdon: Routledge.

Wagstaff, C. R. D., Fletcher, D., & Hanton, S. (2012a). Positive organizational psychology in

sport: An ethnography of organizational functioning in a national sport organization.

Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, *24*(1), 26-47. doi:10.1080/10413200.2011.589423

Wagstaff, C. R. D., Fletcher, D., & Hanton, S. (2012b). Positive organizational psychology in

sport. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, *5*(2), 87-103.

doi:10.1080/1750984X.2011.634920

Wagstaff, C. R. D., & Hanton, S. (2017). Emotions in sport organizations. In C. R. D. Wagstaff

(Ed.), *The organizational psychology of sport: Key issues and practical applications* (pp.

33–61). Abingdon: Routledge.

Wagstaff, C. R. D., Hanton, S., & Fletcher, D. (2013). Developing emotion abilities and

    regulation strategies in a sport organization: An action research intervention. *Psychology*

    of Sport & Exercise, 14(4), 476–487.

Wagstaff, C. R. D., & Larner, R. J. (2015). Organisational psychology in sport: Recent

    developments and a research agenda. In S. D. Mellalieu & S. Hanton (Eds.)

    Contemporary advances in sport psychology: A review (pp. 91-119). London: Routledge.

Wagstaff, C. R. D., Thelwell, R. C., & Gilmore, S. (2016). Sport medicine and sport science

    practitioners' experiences of organizational change. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine &*

    Science in Sport, 25(5), 685-698.

Weinberg, R., & McDermott, M. (2002). A comparative analysis of sport and business

    organizations: Factors perceived critical for organizational success. *Journal of Applied*

    Sport Psychology, 14(4), 282-298.

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60